



**UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

***FRAMING STRATEGIES OF NEWS OUTLETS IN THE POST-2008  
GENERAL ELECTION***

**MUHAMMAD IZAWAN BIN BAHARIN**

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GENERAL ELECTION**

By

**MUHAMMAD IZAWAN BIN BAHARIN**

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra  
Malaysia, in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy**

**February 2021**

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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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February 2021

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The aftermath of the 2008 general election has shown a series of upheavals in the Malaysian political landscape from multi-culturalism to the demand for greater public participation. Hence, what are the relevance political changes that occurred during the period? Therefore, this study attempts to identify the framing strategies of the news outlets that offer different political tendencies. This study narrows the scope of the investigation by focusing on news coverage of the political manifesto. This study was conducted using the mixed-method involving the content analysis of the news articles and semi-structured interviews with the editors of Utusan Malaysia and Malaysiakini. The results revealed that Utusan Malaysia (N = 261) mainly applied the morality frame while the responsibility frame was dominant in Malaysiakini (N = 151). In other words, the pro-government media highlighted political issues with moral values whereas the news portal emphasized citizen engagement. Both news outlets also relied on thematic frames to address political issues. There is also a positive relationship between the human-interest frame and episodic frames in the reporting of Utusan Malaysia thus suggesting the possibility of the association between the frames. Most of the news in Utusan Malaysia relied on a negative tone, while a positive tone was dominant in Malaysiakini. The semi-structured interviews revealed that the agenda of the organization served as the guideline in presenting political news. The editors admitted they received political instructions but still strove to promote fair reporting within their capacity. Conclusively, this study is able to deepen the understanding of framing strategies and expand the existing knowledge by exploring the associations between frames. The combination of content analysis and semi-structured interviews further assisted the framing practices thoroughly. On a larger scale, the study provides a better understanding of the media agenda, strengths, and boundaries in fulfilling their role.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia  
sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

## **STRATEGI PEMBINGKAIAN SALURAN BERITA PASCA-PILIHAN RAYA UMUM 2008**

Oleh

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Lanskap politik Malaysia selepas Pilihan Raya Umum 2008 menunjukkan rentetan perubahan bermula daripada konsep penerapan politik kepelbagaian budaya hingga kepada tuntutan penyertaan rakyat yang lebih besar dalam penentuan dasar negara. Justeru, sejauh mana perubahan politik yang berlaku dalam tempoh tersebut. Sehubungan itu, kajian ini cuba mengenal pasti strategi pumbingkai saluran berita yang mempunyai kecenderungan politik yang berbeza. Ruang lingkup penyelidikan ini memberi fokus kepada liputan berita mengenai perkembangan, kejayaan, atau kegagalan manifesto politik. Kajian ini dilakukan dengan menggunakan kaedah campuran yang melibatkan analisis kandungan artikel berita dan wawancara separa berstruktur dengan editor Utusan Malaysia dan Malaysiakini. Kajian mendapati Utusan Malaysia ( $N = 261$ ) menumpukan bingkai moral manakala Malaysiakini ( $N = 151$ ) menumpukan bingkai tanggungjawab. Dengan kata lain, media pro-kerajaan mengetengahkan isu politik dengan nilai moral manakala portal berita mengutamakan penglibatan rakyat dalam perbahasan politik. Kedua-dua saluran berita itu bagaimanapun menumpukan bingkai tematik dalam liputan berita politik. Kajian juga menemui hubungan positif antara bingkai minat insani dengan bingkai episodik dalam laporan Utusan Malaysia sekali gus menunjukkan kemungkinan adanya hubungan antara bingkai tersebut. Sebahagian besar berita dalam Utusan Malaysia pula bergantung kepada nada negatif, sementara nada positif dominan dalam Malaysiakini. Menerusi wawancara separa berstruktur, kajian mendapati bahawa agenda organisasi menjadi garis panduan dalam penyampaian berita politik. Editor juga mengakui bahawa mereka mendapat arahan politik tetapi masih berusaha untuk membuat pelaporan yang seimbang dalam ruang lingkup kemampuan masing-masing. Kesimpulannya, kajian ini dapat memperdalam lagi pemahaman terhadap strategi pumbingkai serta memperluas pengetahuan dengan meneroka hubungan antara bingkai. Gabungan analisis kandungan dan wawancara separa berstruktur membantu pemahaman strategi pumbingkai

serta faktor yang mempengaruhinya secara menyeluruh. Melalui skala yang lebih besar, kajian ini memberikan pemahaman lebih baik mengenai agenda media, kekuatan dan keterbatasan mereka dalam memenuhi peranan masing-masing.



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This thesis was submitted to the Senate of the Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

1MDB	1Malaysia Development Berhad
BERNAMA	Malaysian National News Agency
BN	Barisan Nasional
DAP	Democratic Action Party
GST	Goods and Services Tax
ISA	Internal Security Act
JKEUPM	The Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects
OSA	Official Secret Act
PAS	Parti Islam SeMalaysia
PH	Pakatan Harapan
PKR	Parti Keadilan Rakyat
PPPA	The Printing Presses and Publications Act
PR	Pakatan Rakyat
RTM	Radio Televisyen Malaysia
SA	Sedition Act

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter serves to outline the problem of the present study on identifying the media frames, tone, and internal and external factors within the context of the frame-building process of news coverage on political issues in the post-2008 general election. It also sets forth the context, scope, and objectives that are to be attained by the researcher.

#### 1.1 Background of the Problem

Over the years, studies have discussed the symbiotic relationship between journalism and democracy, specifically on how these two elements connect and influence each other (McNair, 2000; Josephi, 2012; Hanitzsch & Vos, 2016). Through the media, journalists are capable of enhancing a democratic society not only by providing information and influence public opinion on an issue, but assisting the public by making it more rational. Regardless of whether journalism operates in an atmosphere that promotes fair and balanced reporting or in restrictive freedom of expression and censorship, the ethos of journalism is in line with democracy. The essential essence of journalism lies in the freedom of expression and its journalistic roles can be practiced within a country (Josephi, 2012). The practices of journalistic roles involve connecting both political life and daily life (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2016) and mobilizing changes in society (Huntington, 1965).

Scholars have given different explanations on the role of journalism based on historical, political, socio-cultural and, economic contexts across the countries. For example, in developed countries, the strength of journalism lies in its role to provide checks and balances function toward government actions (Stone & Banning, 1997; Hanusch & Uppal, 2015). The concept of development journalism on the other hand, is synonymous with the role of journalism in developing countries. For developing countries, journalism should be responsible for assisting the government. The journalists need to disseminate information regarding national policies to educate, inform, and mobilize citizens' changes in achieving economic development (Wong, 2004). These journalistic practices must emphasize the nation-building process as part of their responsibility to contribute to the development of the country.

Malaysia as a developing country also emphasizes this role. Journalism in Malaysia must play its part in the nation building-process, strengthening the relationships between different ethnicities and shaping conducive political culture (Etika Kewartawanan Malaysia, 2007; Suhana, 2012). This task is



important because there are diverse ethics, religions, customs, and beliefs in Malaysia. Therefore, the media roles are closely and tightly connected to government objectives. The journalists are expected to work together with the government to remain viable and survive in the business; at the same time fostering the spirit of understanding and strengthen unity among people (Faridah, Normah, Chang & Fauziah, 2011).

The media in Malaysia is also bound to comply with the Federal Constitution. The Federal Constitution under Article 10(1) gives every citizen the right to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and to form associations. However, according to Mohd Azizuddin (2008), the constitution also prohibits anyone from expressing any controversial views on the special rights of the Malays and other indigenous people (Bumiputera), Islam as the national religion, the rights of others (especially the Chinese and Indian) for citizenship, the position of the king, and the status of the Malay language as the national language, and other issues that could potentially be sensitive in the context of fragile race relations in this country. It is to avoid the spread of prejudice and religious bigotry. The constitution also prohibits speeches that support the forcible overthrow of the government. Political speech must be limited by the need for national stability and racial harmony.

Scholars however criticize the actions of the ruling elites who control the media either directly or indirectly to satisfy their political interests. The Barisan Nasional (BN)-led government has been accused of suppressing the freedom of the media throughout its ruling for over 60 years (Rajaratnam, 2009; Arina Anis, Samsudin, Fuziah Kartini, & Mohd Safar, 2012). The political elites claimed that the government needs to strategically control the media in ensuring racial harmony (Steele, 2009), however, it is more geared toward partisan media control where the voice of the opposition is denied or negatively framed. This is in order to give an advantage to the ruling party. Scholars claimed that the media control such as pro-government coverage, manipulation, biases toward different views, distorted information to the public, are jeopardizing the freedom of expression (Mohd Azizuddin, 2005; Mustafa, 2005; Abbott, 2011).

The moment of change in the Malaysian political landscape began on March 8, 2008. The 12<sup>th</sup> general election took everyone by surprise after the BN government lost its two-thirds majority in Parliament and, for the first time, lost control of five state governments – Selangor, Penang, Kedah, Perak, and Kelantan (Perak came back to BN in February 2009). The opposition coalition–Pakatan Rakyat (PR)–was also able to penetrate states such as Negeri Sembilan and Terengganu; the same pattern was subsequently witnessed in Johor and Malacca which were considered as BN's stronghold (Tunku Mohar, 2008; Steele, 2009).

As a turning point in the country's political development, much has been written about the result of the 12<sup>th</sup> general election on March 8, 2008. Observers generally have different opinions on the factors of voters' dissatisfaction as well as making various predictions about the final result, yet they agree on one thing— no one expected the result.

For instance, Lian and Appudurai (2011) considered the 2008 general election result as the starting point of Malaysia's political changes. This is due to the overwhelming swing in Chinese and Indian votes as well as the significant swing of Malay votes toward PR, due to the success of promoting multicultural credentials after the coalitions were able to compromise their respective agendas and jointly oppose BN. Saravanamuttu (2012) also believed that the 2008 general election has significantly altered the political parameters in Malaysia within four dimensions. Firstly, the outcome of the general election created a de facto two-coalition or two-party system in both the parliamentary and state levels of governance. Secondly, the comprehensive vote swing of all major ethnic communities away from the BN parties provided a historical rupture and a new path in Malaysian politics. Thirdly, the Sarawak state election and several by-elections results in the post-2008 electoral landscape show that the ruling coalition was unable to regain their political strength and there is evidence that suggested younger and new voters tend to favor the PR. Fourthly, the post-2008 general election created a legitimacy crisis for the non-Malay component parties in BN after losing their political support in the mixed constituencies seats.

Some scholars' views of the 2008 general election proved that the strength of social media can no longer be denied as it potentially enhances the democratization process and public deliberation due to the effective and wide distribution of information at a low cost (Mohd Azizuddin & Zengeni, 2010; Gong, 2011) besides building a stronger civil society movement (Mohd Azizuddin, 2009; Welsh, 2013). Fernando (2013) also argued that the issues involving bread and butter indirectly helped to consolidate support for the opposition parties. Furthermore, the opposition's manifesto that promised to lower fuel prices, provide free education, and other incentives was economically attractive even though their ability to implement such economic policies was practically questionable.

This study sets the boundaries to analyze the aspects of media framing, both print and online on a political issue in the post-2008 general election. The focus of this study is the news coverage on the development of a political manifesto both by BN and PR following the changes in the political scenario that had taken place. The role of media is important to connect the trust between the political actors and the people. Therefore, the media framing in the post-2008 general elections would provide essential insights into the roles of news outlets and the extent to which political parties influence the media reporting narrative.

This chapter introduces the topic of the study. It explains the role played by the media and online news in feeding information to the public and its influence towards vote choice. The chapter highlights the background of the study, statement of the research problem, research questions, research objectives, significant of the research, scope of the research, limitation, keywords definition and summary.

## 1.2 Problem Statement

Post-2008 general election has shown a series of upheavals that were occurring in the Malaysian political landscape driven by the changing notions of legitimate political authority. Moten (2009) suggested that Malaysia is gradually moving toward multi-culturalism while O'Shannassy (2013) concluded that it is the end of the concept of 'politics from above' and the start of the 'politics from below' with an emphasis on greater public participation and political deliberation process. The 2008 election results imply that the sources of legitimacy have shifted and thus, O'Shannassy (2013) saw that in order to adjust accordingly, the political parties need to be 1) more responsive to the people and engage in greater consultation; 2) more attuned to issues of public governance; and 3) ethnically neutral in promoting needs-based (rather than race-based) policies and programs.

The roles of media were among the important factors that influenced the 2008 general election outcomes. Fernando (2013) argued that the unilateral mainstream print and electronic media reporting during election campaigns gave the wrong signal to BN leaders that the situation is going well, when in fact the opposition parties were receiving more support. Another interesting argument was from Weiss (2009) which believed that the biased reporting of the mainstream media left many voters unaware that the opposition was well prepared for the election at that time, so these voters casted their protest votes against BN and did not expect so many to be dissatisfied with the current government. Based on these arguments, it is also important to note the electoral outcome does not only alter the political parameter in Malaysia but is potentially becoming the changing factor of the behavior of the mainstream print and electronic media.

Intriguingly, a study by Chai and Adnan (2011) regarding the framing of English-language newspapers in the 2008 election revealed that there were some changes in the newspaper coverage. They claimed that even though BN had still been in denial syndrome after the 2008 general election, the newspapers was seemingly unsure on whether to use the common frame to give meanings and interpretations fitting the election results. Ironically, some of the reports were less favorable toward BN, which might open a new dimension of the Malaysian media. In contrast, a study by Abbott (2011) on two Malay-language newspapers' coverage on political news outside the election period (in 2006) and on the 2008 general election displayed a strong bias toward BN.

Another study regarding media behavior during the 2008 general election was conducted by Rajaratnam (2009). She found that during the campaign period, the existence of a news portal (Malaysiakini) filled in the gap left by the mainstream media in the coverage of opposition favorably.

Based on these studies, it can be concluded that there are unilateral reports involving the mainstream media but this view has left a gap in observations of media behavior after the 2008 election. While voters demanded political legitimacy and the awareness of the importance of the 'voice from below' that emphasizes on greater public participation, there are pressing problems to be resolved: Has the media fallen into persistence or changed into politically relevant patterns in the post-2008 general election? Undeniable, there are many lists of substantial studies that have been conducted by Malaysian researchers to explain and understand how the media portrayed various issues and events between 2008 until 2013 (e.g.: Chang, Fauziah & Wan Amizah, 2010; Kho, Chew, Tan & Chang, 2011; Chang, Musa & Fauziah, 2012; Yuslinda & Hasmah, 2012; Chew, Fauziah, Faridah & Chang, 2012; Muhammad Raqib & Adnan, 2013; Chang, Nor Syazwani, Norliana & Kho, 2013), yet the analysis involving political development in the post-2008 general election is still lacking, despite the political changes becoming the starting point of the transition of government. Therefore, this study attempted to identify the framing strategies of the news outlets and the tone adopted by a pro-government newspaper (Utusan Malaysia) and news portal (Malaysiakini) in the post-2008 general election that triggered the transition in the Malaysian political transformation.

Taking into account the dynamics of the political climate after the 2008 general election which was full of onslaught between the ruling party and the increasingly strong and confident opposition party, this study narrowed the scope of the investigation by focusing on the development, success, or failure of each party's manifesto. The biases of mainstream media reporting on the opposition manifesto are said to have occurred during the 2008 general election campaign period (Moten, 2009), thus the question arises as to what form of media treatment caters to the development of political promises after the election following the change in the political structure. This study saw that there is a lack of past researches on the topic of the development of political manifesto when it is very important in determining the survival of political parties (Budge, 2015; Eder, Jenny, & Muller, 2017). Consequently, this study wanted to further examine the media coverage on the development of the manifesto after the election.

According to Entman (1993), framing is a process of making some aspects of perceived reality more salient to present a particular problem definition and the causal root of the problem, make a moral judgment, and propose solutions. Lecheler and de Vreese (2012) on the other hand, described framing as implying that one idea is more important than the others thus influencing the

formation of opinion. By repeating the frame over time in multiple texts, it can enhance the public understanding and memorization of the issue thus affecting their future decision (Entman, Matthes, & Pellicano, 2009). The process of framing consists of frame-building, frame-setting, and individual and societal level consequences of framing. Taking into consideration the importance of the frame-building stage that had been explained by de Vreese (2005), this is where the internal and external factors influence the structural qualities of news frames, and hence, the study intended to further conduct an expert interview with the editors. It is important to bridge the theoretical analyses with the reality of the newsrooms. Dorussen, Lenz, and Blavoukos (2005) argued that editors are able contribute inside information on the editorial policy-making process. Furthermore, editors play a direct role in setting the frame of the news. Hence, the information gathered from their viewpoints allow this study to perform a comprehensive analysis on the framing strategies of the news outlets, specifically the mainstream and news portals. By understanding the internal and external factors that influence the construction of the frame, it can strengthen the comprehension and answer the question of why a frame is used by certain media to describe an issue, which is largely unexplored in the study of Malaysian media.

In general, there are two standpoints to interpret the frame, firstly from the issue-specific perspectives and secondly, from the generic-frame measurements (de Vreese, 2005; Lecheler, 2010). An issue-specific approach allows the researcher to investigate the event or issue on a profound level and therefore, a distinctive nature and content of the frame are suggested only to the specific topics. Generic-frame in contrast transcends thematic limitations and the frame can be categorized into different topics, some even over time and different cultural contexts (de Vreese, 2005). This study applied the generic-frame measurements developed by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) which are conflict, human interest, economic consequences, morality and responsibility as well as the association of episodic and thematic frame (Iyengar, 1991). The basis of this argument is laid by Chong and Druckman (2007) and Borah (2011) who believed that equally strong frames can occur in the news. This equally strong frame is important as it can offer a diversity of frames in political coverage that encourage diversity in the public sphere (Porto, 2007). In other words, this is where the journalists include opposing views to voice out the marginalized opinions in their reports (Beattie & Milojevich, 2017). Referring to the various expectations by scholars in describing the 2008 election results - the beginning of consociational democracy to deliberative democracy (Mohd Azizuddin, 2009); electoral authoritarianism to liberalization and democratic electoral system (Ufen, 2009); single-party dominance to a two-party system (Case, 2010); and ethnic-based political system to a multicultural political system (Moten, 2009; Saravanamuttu, 2012), this study believes that there may have been potential changes in media reporting style on current political developments. The time frame after the 2008 election until the 2013 general election may provide an opportunity to see if the media had adopted a variety of frames to display the development of increasingly compelling political issues, hence, the findings are expected to fill a largely unexplored gap.

### 1.3 Research Questions

Based on the above research problem, research questions pertaining to the possible news frames on the political issues post-2008 general election were constructed:

- RQ1:** Which of the five generic frames is the most presence in the Utusan Malaysia political news articles?
- RQ2:** Which of the five generic frames is the most presence frame in the Malaysiakini political news articles?
- RQ3:** Which of the thematic and episodic frames is the most presence in the Utusan Malaysia political news articles?
- RQ4:** Which of the thematic and episodic frames is the most presence in the Malaysiakini political news articles?
- RQ5:** What are the changes between the five points of time of the five generic frames?
- RQ6:** What are the changes between the five points of time of thematic and episodic frames?
- RQ7:** What is the relationship between the presence of the five generic frames and the thematic and episodic frames for Utusan Malaysia?
- RQ8:** What is the tone of the frames employed in the Utusan Malaysia political news articles?
- RQ9:** What is the relationship between the presence of the five generic frames and the thematic and episodic frames for Malaysiakini?
- RQ10:** What is the tone of the frames employed in the Malaysiakini political news articles?
- RQ11:** What are the views of Utusan Malaysia and Malaysiakini editors on political news reporting?

### 1.4 Research Objectives

The general objective of this study is to identify the news frame in the frame-building process following the unpredictable electoral outcomes in 2008 that triggered the political transformation in Malaysia. For the specific objectives, they are:

- RO1:** To determine the most presence generic frame employed by Utusan Malaysia in their political news articles.
- RO2:** To determine the most presence generic frame employed by Malaysiakini in their political news articles.
- RO3:** To determine the most presence thematic and episodic frames of the Utusan Malaysia political news articles.
- RO4:** To determine the most presence thematic and episodic frames of the Malaysiakini political news articles.
- RO5:** To identify the changes between five points of time of the five generic frames.
- RO6:** To identify the changes between five points of time of thematic and episodic frames.
- RO7:** To identify the relationship between the presence of the five generic frames and the thematic and episodic frames for Utusan Malaysia.
- RO8:** To identify the tone used in the Utusan Malaysia political news articles.
- RO9:** To identify the relationship between the presence of the five generic frames and the thematic and episodic frames for Malaysiakini.
- RO10:** To identify the tone used in the Malaysiakini political news articles.
- RO11:** To explore the political news reporting trend from 2008 to 2013 from the perspectives of Utusan Malaysia and Malaysiakini editors.

### **1.5 Significance of the Study**

Theoretically, this study assessed the application of the co-occurrence of the generic frames proposed by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) and thematic and episodic frames in the realm of media political coverage within the Malaysian context. There is a gap in media studies after the 2008 general election, especially how have the media adapted to the political changes. Are there a variety of framing practices in the media, especially when they need to portray the advantages or disadvantages of political parties to open up space for debate among the people? As argued by Borah (2011), the use of multiple frames can cancel one another, demotivate or reinforce the existing value. Therefore, this empirical study would serve to fill the gap in the study of the framing process.

This study provided a deeper understanding by examining the tone used in the news articles and how framing varies across different media outlets when it

comes to polarising national policies. This study also assessed the role of development journalism through the news outlets, especially when it comes to the involvement of state governments under the control of the opposition through the promotion of new policies. This study would benefit future research in the communication discipline, particularly on the media content in delivering political messages.

From the methodological perspective, a mixed-methods approach was applied concerning the objectives of this study and the corresponding research questions. For this study, a quantitative approach, specifically content analysis, was applied to identify the dominant frame used in the news articles, which contributed useful and objective information on the framing strategies of the selected news outlets. According to Entman (1993), specific words in a single paragraph can perform one of the four framing functions; which are defining the problems, diagnosing the cause, make the moral judgment, and suggesting the remedies. Through a paragraph-by-paragraph approach, a particular context of a news article can be determined in the long run. Focusing on the achievement of the manifesto, the media may have put less emphasis on the subject after a certain period due to the dynamic state of the current political issues. The discussion of the manifesto may no longer appear in the first three paragraphs, but rather in the middle or last paragraph of a news article. Therefore, this method can provide another alternative to understand how the media deliver specific messages in the long run. In other words, this study enhanced the knowledge in content analysis, which can benefit future research that involves media analysis. Meanwhile, through a qualitative approach, this study was also able to fill the gap on the relationship between editorial agenda and framing building, which has remained largely unknown. This mixed-methods approach integrated the obtained findings; thus, allowing the possibility to compensate for the weakness of each approach respectively. Therefore, the combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods can lead to greater confidence in results, a better understanding of when divergent findings are explained, and a synthesis of theories and critical tests of competing theories (Hazri & Mohamad Zohir, 2015a).

In terms of policy contribution, this study provided a new dimension for the Malaysian media platform, especially regarding the New Malaysia after the 14<sup>th</sup> general election. During the reign of BN in Malaysia, studies have claimed the deformation of the traditional media function in reporting a fair and balanced coverage of political news due to the strict control by the government through laws, regulation, and ownership (Mustafa, 2005b; Mohd Azizuddin, 2014a). The BN's policy and action have been continuously covered in a positive light by the traditional media, which prompted the citizens to opt for independent news portal to acquire alternative views on the political issues that may be regarded as taboo by the traditional media (Steele, 2009; Winston, 2014).



In the era of New Malaysia, the findings of this study from the perspectives of editors themselves would greatly benefit media practitioners, decision-makers, and politicians on how to engage with the citizens. Editors play vital roles in the decision-making process of the media. Therefore, the findings of this study are expected to promote awareness across various media outlets and even leaders or politicians to make suitable changes to the different roles of media in promoting transparency, good governance, and morals for better and fair information on political issues. As argued by Arina Anis et al. (2012), a well-informed citizen would then be able to make a better decision for the country. The roles of media become even more significant due to the government's decision to empower youth in deciding the future of the country by lowering the legal voting age from 21 to 18.

This study would benefit the media practitioners, decision-makers, and politicians in their attempts to predict strategies for delivering information to the citizens. For the past few years, the traditional media faced credibility issues due to their pro-government stance (Sheridan, 2017). The credibility issue later became part of the downfall of circulation and reduced the amount of viewers of print and broadcast media; thus, affecting the revenue since the citizens are opting for online news instead. Moreover, even a veteran newsman and National Journalism Laureate, Kadir Jasin (2018), highlighted the need for the media to change the reporting style and gain the trust of citizens and consider self-esteem, ethics, and professionalism in journalism after the end of the media control during BN's government.

Besides that, this study also provided a platform for the media to gain a better understanding of the framing strategies applied. As the study explored the use of framing strategies by different media outlets with different goals, the obtained findings were expected to provide a better understanding on the journalistic roles in delivering information to the citizens. Integrity is an important element in journalism (Ahmad Murad, 2014). It may become an essential element for the traditional media to survive in an environment where the citizens have become more open with access to a variety of information due to the development of communication technology.

## **1.6 Scope and Limitations of the Study**

The study focused on two news outlets in Malaysia—Utusan Malaysia represents the pro-government media and Malaysiakini represents a news portal that is not subjected to government control. Although there are many other news outlets that represent pro-government (such as *Berita Harian*, *New Straits Times*, and *The Star*), *Utusan Malaysia* was selected because the newspaper was claimed to serve the interests of the ruling elite, particularly UMNO (O'Shannassy, 2013; Mustafa, 2014). Similarly, there are several other news portals, such as *The Malaysian Insider* and *Free Malaysia Today*.

However, Malaysiakini was selected due to its popularity as the most important alternative media in Malaysia (Steele, 2009; Lumsden, 2013).

To understand the pattern of news frames used by both news outlets during the transition of the political landscape in Malaysia, the study opted to focus on the media frames after the 12<sup>th</sup> general election in 2008 and before the 13<sup>th</sup> general election in 2013. Although the outcomes of the 12<sup>th</sup> general election were not as severe as the electoral result of the 13<sup>th</sup> general election, this study posed several considerations that contributed to the outcomes of the general election in 2008. Firstly, BN lost its two-thirds parliamentary majority after it recorded a 90.4% win of the parliamentary seats back in the general election in 2004 (Welsh, 2013). Secondly, one of the reasons for the majority votes against BN was due to the inability of the Prime Minister and BN Chairman, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, to deliver the promises made in 2004 (Rajaratnam, 2009). Thirdly, there was a transition of power to Najib Razak who was the Deputy Prime Minister back then. During this period, the media was widely used to persuade the citizens for their support toward the leadership of Najib (Yuslinda & Hasmah, 2011). Therefore, the focal points of media strategies to win over the voters' trust were deemed plausible from 2008 to 2013.

To determine the frames within the texts of news, this study separated the news articles into paragraphs during the coding procedure. Only paragraphs that mentioned directly or paraphrased the context of the manifestos of the general election in 2008 were chosen to represent the unit of analysis of this study. Apart from the paragraph-by-paragraph analysis, previous studies also listed several other methods, such as the inverted pyramid style that focuses on the first three paragraphs of the news articles that either directly or indirectly refers to the issue of interest (Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Camaj, 2010; Chew et al., 2012). Another identified method was the development of several questions by the researcher for the coder to answer after reading the news articles in measuring the extent, to which certain frames appear in the news articles (Gann, Toe, & December, 2005). Meanwhile, Fan (1988) and Roberts (1989) suggested that a paragraph count can be a solid procedure that elucidates the presence of frames within the media content (as cited in Shah, Watts, Dome, & Fan, 2002). Hence, to strengthen the findings of this study, expert interviews that specifically involved Tulsan Malaysia and Malaysiakini editors were conducted. The considered interview design was to build synergy and strength between both quantitative and qualitative methods. Furthermore, the mixed-methods approach was found to suit the need of understanding a phenomenon more comprehensively than using a single method only.

The study acknowledged several limitations. Firstly, the context of the sentences in the news articles may lose their meaning after being separated into paragraphs during the coding procedure. Nevertheless, this process was avoided due to the difficulties of categorizing the whole sentences into a single

dominant frame and tone. Secondly, the perception of the coders was another limitation faced by the study. Although the coders discussed the definition of each variable in detail, certain disagreements had taken place. Such a situation was also unavoidable due to the subjectivity of certain sentences, especially when it comes to interpreting text-involving cynical, skeptical, sarcastic, humorous, and rhetorical remarks. Thirdly, during the expert interview, editors were reluctant to give a straightforward answer for some of the questions; thus, hindering the study from exploring the media situation in a more in-depth manner. This may be attributed to their connection to the organizational policies or personal interests. Hence, their responses were rather rhetorical and subjective on certain topics.

Adding to that, it was deemed important to note that the number of news articles that mentioned political manifestos from 2009 to 2011 was lower compared to other phases. A possible explanation for this was the dynamic state of political issues. During the specified time frame, there were many important political issues, which subsequently became the media highlights, such as the introduction of new policies after the transition of power in 2008 (Yuslinda & Hasmah, 2011). This may cause inaccuracy when it comes to concluding whether there are significant differences between the media outlets.

Regardless of these limitations, there were baseline similarities between the current study and previous studies. These similarities lie in the definition of the frames discussed by the previous studies. For example, the definitions of the human-interest frame and episodic frame share the same meaning. Iyengar (1990) and Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) defined both types of frames according to individuals and certain groups in creating an emotional element in the news coverage. Apart from the human-interest frame, Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) also proposed conflict frame, economic consequences frame, morality frame, and responsibility frame, which exist with a thematic structure. The co-occurrence of the frames with a thematic structure takes place when there is no emotional reaction drawn from the news articles but has the potential to retain the strongest ability in persuading opinions, as compared to the episodic frame (Aarøe, 2011).

Although it may be better for this study to explore the general election in 2013, the study narrowed the scope of the study to the general election in 2008 given its unique political situation. There have been many assumptions on the outcomes of the 13<sup>th</sup> general election. However, understanding the changes after the 12<sup>th</sup> general election can give a clear picture of the factors that influence the political landscape in Malaysia.

## **1.7 Definition of Key Terms**

The core concept of this study consisted of the following elements:

### **1.7.1 News Outlet**

The news channels are classified into different topics, packages, and reporting style that are arguably adjusted for profit maximising purpose. Besides that, the news outlets also have different sizes of audience. The reporting style ranges from sensationalist and sober to serious based on their target audience (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Boukes et al., 2015).

### **1.7.2 News Frame**

Journalists have ample choices of frames to choose from in highlighting their reports. These choices of frames that assist in a way to tell and construct news can be analyzed as certain distinctive characteristics. Scholars have categorized these frames into issue-specific and generic frames. de Vreese (2005) described issue-specific frames are frames that are pertinent to specific topics or events, whereas generic frames go beyond thematic limitations and can be applied to different topics, events, and cultural contexts. It is a structural frame that is developed by scholars which can be replicated, can cope with large samples, and is able to detect differences in framing between different media (e.g., television vs. newspaper) and within media (e.g., highbrow news programs or newspapers vs. tabloid-style media) (Semetko and Valkenburg (2000).

### **1.7.3 Frames Tone**

Generally, the presentation of news stories can be in the form of a positive, negative, or neutral tone. The tone is believed to be able to influence the public into thinking in a certain way about a particular issue; either it is favorable, unfavorable, or neutral (Nijkrake, Gosselt, & Gutteling, 2015).

## 1.8 Chapter Summary

The central question of this study was related to the framing strategies of the news outlets and the tone of the news adopted by a pro-government newspaper and a news portal after the unpredictable electoral outcomes in 2008 that triggered the transition in the Malaysian political transformation. Generally, this research aimed to examine the frame-building process of news reports about political issues post-2008 general election. Specifically, the research findings will explain the dominant frames which have been portrayed by different media and internal and external factors that influenced the editorial decision.

The researcher has also rationalized the potential for significant contributions to communication studies by conducting this framing research through an emphasis on the identification of dominant frames and the possibility of the diverse use of frame applications. The scope of the study was determined to facilitate the implementation of the work. There are justifiable reasons for drawing boundaries to the scope of this framing study.

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