

# One Crisis, Different Frames: A Comparative Study of Newspapers' Coverage of Malaysian Airlines MH370

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## ABSTRACT

When Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370 vanished with 239 passengers on-board in March 2014, people worldwide thought that subsequent breaking news stories would produce answers to the whereabouts of the aircraft. But as minute-by-minute coverage turned into monthly updates, so did the endless waiting turn into frustration and anger among the victims' families, while local and international pressure mounted on Malaysian authorities to release definite information on the crisis. This study draws from framing theory to showcase how Malaysia's mainstream and alternative newspapers—*The Star* and *Malaysiakini*—differ in their framing of the crisis. Through quantitative and qualitative content analyses, this study investigates the different slants taken to the crisis in the two newspapers, as well as the frames employed in the coverage of the news. The study found that the mainstream newspaper defined the crisis in frames and slants that are supportive of the efforts of the Malaysian authorities in searching for the airplane, while the alternative newspaper used frames and slants that are critical of the authorities.

**Keywords:** Crisis reporting, MH370, News Frame, Framing, Malaysia

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## INTRODUCTION

*“This isn’t just about the 239 people on a Boeing 777. This is about the eight million people who get on a flight every day. Wives, husbands, family members off for holidays, workers who get on a plane and we don’t know what happened.”* This is part of a conversation between the family members of the victims on board the still missing flight MH370 and Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad in a meeting in March 2019 (Chain 2019). Although the defeat of the ruling Barisan Nasional by the opposition Pakatan Harapan during the 14<sup>th</sup> Malaysian General Election brought a glimmer of hope to the victims’ families and friends, providing concrete details regarding the tragedy is not an easy task as there are no fresh leads as to where and how the incident happened.

It has been more than six years after the incident and, at various times, speculations about what might have happened to MH370 include mid-air explosion, pilot suicide or even a hijacking (Sorensen 2014). Nevertheless, the only formal announcement that has so far been made was when the Malaysian officials declared that the flight’s last known location was somewhere above the Southern Indian Ocean, and all passengers and crew on board were presumed dead (BBC News Asia, January 30, 2015). The announcement immediately sparked outrage among distraught family members who were stunned over the Malaysian government’s decision to declare the passengers and crew dead without any tangible evidence.

A report from *New Straits Times* (November 28, 2018) that 27 pieces of aircraft debris were collected from various places around the world has not yet solved the problem. The news has raised more questions as the debris were found in different places around the world. Besides, only three wing fragments found on the Indian Ocean coast have been confirmed to belong to the MH370. Beh (2018) mentions in his report that most of the Chinese victims’ families are not satisfied with the outcome of the investigation and have demanded that the search and rescue continue until it has a conclusive finding.

Historically, the missing case of Flight MH370 was not the first aviation crisis in Malaysia as there were several similar incidents in the past. On 4 December 1977, domestic flight MH653 from Penang to Kuala Lumpur crashed at Tanjung Kupang, Johor, killing 93 passengers and 7 crew members. The American television channel Cable News Network (CNN) stated in its report that the Boeing 737-200 aircraft was hijacked on approach to Kuala Lumpur and subsequently redirected to Singapore. It further stated that despite the cockpit voice recordings that captured everything-- from the breach of the cockpit to the shotgun blast that killed the pilot and co-pilot—the Malaysian government never made any official confirmation of the hijack even though the authorities were notified of the pilot’s distress call (Boykoff and Mohsin, March 31, 2014). This incident established an important precedent to Malaysian authorities’ handling of aviation crises.

This study is significant because MH370 is considered one of the greatest aviation crises in Malaysian history. Given the number of people involved and diverse nationalities of the passengers on board the missing airplane, the crisis presented Malaysia with new challenges in crisis management that can make or mar the image of the country. Besides, most of the studies of MH370 to date have focused on aspects of crisis communication and crisis management (Junaidi, Mohd. Sahandri and Mazura 2014; Peiter 2014; Kalthom et. al. 2014; and Lee and Han 2014). While most of the content analyses of MH370 news coverage (Park, Bier, and Palenchar 2016; Bier, Park and Palenchar 2017) focuses instead on types of news frames, this study focuses on how the

Malaysian mainstream and alternative newspapers utilized the four framing functions in reporting the crisis. Therefore, this study will help fill the gap in literature, and deepen the understanding of how mainstream print newspapers and online newspapers differ in their framing of crises.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

RO1: To compare the slant of news featured in *The Star* and *Malaysiakini*.

RO2: To investigate the four framing functions utilised by *The Star* and *Malaysiakini*.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Framing of Crises

Many framing studies have focused on how news sources influence news frames, with some studies (Snow 2004; Hyunyoung 2007) exploring the link between framing and ideology. For instance, in the study of how the NATO Air Strikes on Kosovo were framed across different countries, the American media was found to have shown support towards NATO's action throughout media texts that often framed the air strikes as a humanistic aid to Albanians in stopping the ethnic cleansing initiated by Serbians. On the other hand, the Chinese media employed a very different media frame by portraying the incident as a form of interference in Yugoslavia's sovereignty and territory (Yang 2003). The contrasting frames utilized by two different countries imply that media framing contains certain ideological parameters.

Schaefer (2003) found that local or national frames affected the way African and U.S. newspapers frame the 1988 Kenya and Tanzania Embassy bombing. Additionally, Ruigrok and Atteveldt (2007) argue that the angle of frame is influenced by the type of event which ranges from local, international, and global. For instance, British newspapers were more concerned with the 911 disaster in New York rather than the Madrid and London attacks. Nonetheless, it can be concluded that most of the studies conducted both before and after 911 tend to frame it from the domestic point of view. In another study of the same incident, Ben-Shaul (2006) state that the Palestinian Authority Television constantly related the incident to the Israeli military deployments and movement in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The study concludes that the reporting of 911 showed that the media reflected the ideologies of their respective elites. This indicates that there is a link between crises with ongoing elite agendas that influence different domestic media frames.

This is also supported by other studies such as the Hurricane Katrina crisis that killed more than 10,000 people in the U.S.A. as well as the Sichuan earthquake. In a study of news reports on Hurricane Katrina that struck the Gulf Coast on 29 August 2005, Berger (2009) points out that the media legitimated government punishment as disaster policy through lurid reports of individual crime. Even though journalists expressed their opposing views with regard to state neglect, news convention nonetheless suggested militarized policing and imprisonment as fundamental to restore order. The study further points out that, due to the lack of credible sources, US journalists relied on rumors in order to aid the state effort of regaining control. Furthermore, Barnes et. al (2008) suggest that media articles mainly emphasized a broader definition of problems that involved

government responses, but at the same time less attention was given to the perspective of victims. Thus, individual responsibilities frames were lacking.

Apart from that, studies of past aviation crises have also proven that media frame is a means of dominant ideology. One of the important findings is Entman's (1991) study of two air-downing incidents as reported by the American media - Korean Airline flight 007 (KAL 007) that was shot down by the Soviet Union and Iran Air flight 655 (IR655) that was shot down by a U.S. Navy cruiser. Soviet guilt was emphasised in the KAL007 crisis whereby it was described as morally indefensible while in the case of IR655, complex problems of operating high technology military equipment was the focus. In investigating the words and images found in U.S. magazines and newspapers, Entman found that the U.S. was portrayed as less morally responsible for the IR655 incident compared to the Soviet Union in the KAL007 incident. While both cases are rather similar, Entman (1993) indicates that U.S. media practitioners relied heavily on elite sources in covering both incidents and thus most frames were found to have supported the dominant frame as the elites were the "primary sponsor of news frames" (7). Therefore, the contrasting frames embedded in these cases implied a reciprocal relationship between media frame and dominant frame, particularly the government policies and the media ownership. In the process of framing, media owners have the power to decide on the way news should be framed. One major concern is that information not framed in the newspaper would not reach the public, yet it could be crucial for them to form a better understanding or interpretation of a certain event or issue. As such, it is inevitable to discuss the findings in relation to the wider context, which entails Malaysia Airlines and Malaysian government practices in the country.

### **Crisis Reporting in Malaysia**

Loo (2013) is of the view that journalism in Malaysia is often underestimated compared to other communication professions such as public relations and advertising, resulting in uncritical reporting and less concern for investigative journalism. Norsiah, Mohd Sobhi, and Nazialita (2015) added that investigative journalism in Malaysia is still in its infancy and that collective changes need to be made for improvement. Often, Malaysian journalists are "bound by ethics, rules, laws and regulations" (638), which claim to protect national security. Nevertheless, Turow (2014) perceives this as circumstances that allow for government restrictions that limit the ways of news reporting and writing.

Additionally, Mustafa (2012) also points out that Malaysian journalism students are not given access to information in reporting, despite the fact that it is important for them to be familiar with news reporting. Students should be exposed to critical theories of society so that they can view the media within the larger context and be equipped with analytical and investigative skills. Moreover, it will help them to ask probing questions, particularly in the reporting of political and economic crises that are deemed sensitive to the political elite.

Crisis comes in many forms and notable examples include war, riots, natural disaster, disease and social activism. Undoubtedly, crisis journalism requires skills as the cause of a crisis has to be identified so that possible remedies can be provided to the public as to how they should react and respond to the threat. Nevertheless, their narrative and interpretation of issues are often influenced by several internal and external factors that cause further deviation from the code of the journalism

profession. Many crisis reporters have seen the negative effect of upholding good ethics on their credibility, which strikes fear in journalists who intend to carry out thorough investigations (Norsiah, Mohd. Sobhi and Nazialita 2015). This is illustrated by several mysterious crises in the country that remain unsolved and, as time passes by, their coverage in the media diminished and people started to forget about them. This includes the ill-fated Tanjung Kupang air crash, the gruesome murder of Nurin Jazlin, and the killing of beauty queen Jean Perrera Sinappa that remain puzzles to this very day (Malaysian Digest, January 7, 2013).

Journalistic value is to be “a safeguard of credibility” that allows independent news judgments that serve the public interest, particularly during crisis (Herbert 2013). However, crisis journalism in Malaysia is limited by certain boundaries. Malaysian journalists may understand the importance of their roles during crisis, but the latter are downplayed in the country due to the limited resources, lack of trainings as well as controls and restrictions. Therefore, editors and journalists eschew investigative reporting and critical comment in the reporting of crises to suit the Malaysian culture of “responsible journalism” (Kenyon and Marjoribanks 2007, 104). This is further supported by Tamam, Raj, and Govindasamy (2012) who state that the core values and responsibilities of the journalism profession are marginalized so that journalism is regarded more as a means to a financial end. Consequently, other roles such as watchdog, investigator, analyst, and critic are downplayed. One of the examples pointed out by Francis Loh (2009) is that little discussion on serious issues took place during the electioneering campaign in the country and that there is always claimed that there are no important issues, simply because the journalists and the editor have the mindset that all issues have been resolved through a new promise by the politicians or through the new policies implemented by the government. This means that crisis reporting in the country is largely influenced by the political and cultural contexts.

## **Framing Theory**

Framing is an effective way to comprehend media roles during any event or crisis. Different from the agenda-setting theory, framing research “expands beyond agenda setting research into what people talk or think about by examining how they think and talk about issues in the news” (Pan & Kosicki 1993, 70). Mishra (2011, 24) states that the “mass media set the frames of references that readers or viewers use to interpret and discuss public events.” It organizes ideas or storylines that provide meanings in telling the audience what the problem of the crisis is – the essence of the issue. Entman (2004) explains that framing involves problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation which all play a vital role in organizing ideas as well as shaping the news story while providing meanings to the news (Kim 2006, 7). Hence, it can be said that media frame can be very powerful and plays a critical role in shaping public understanding of the MH370 crisis. Audiences’ attitudinal and behavioral reactions are influenced by the way news is being portrayed and framed, especially for the victims’ family members. In short, the news or issue framed by the journalist is an active interpretation and media adoption whereby the audiences adopt and see the world in the same way the journalist does (Temmerman 2012, 124).

In the process of selection and salience, the slant of news plays a vital role. Entman (2010) states that “(S)lant occurs when a news report emphasizes one side’s preferred frame in a political conflict while ignoring or derogating another side’s. One-sided framing emphasizes some elements and

suppresses others in ways that encourage recipients to give attention and weight to the evaluative attributes that privilege that favored side's interpretation. This is the essence of slanted news" (392). News slant can be either supportive or critical of a group or individual. In a study by Yang and Md Sidin (2012), *Utusan Malaysia* appeared to be more critical than *Sin Chew Daily* in framing the Hindraf demonstration. Often, *Utusan Malaysia* projected the demonstration in a very negative way due to the contradicting objectives of the demonstration that appear to have challenged the Malay's privileges. Therefore, the newspaper that is owned by a group of United Malays National Organization (UMNO) members felt threatened and consequently portrayed the demonstration negatively. This implies that the slant of a newspaper is greatly influenced by a range of causal factors, including the political, economic, and social context of the country.

Indeed, it is crucial to understand who has the power to control news framing. What does it mean to the people when the media attempt to legitimize certain people's rights by giving them space to express their views, while de-legitimizing other groups of people? Selecting one word over another presents the 'framing' or 'representing' of a certain issue, actor, or event in some particular way. Entman (1993) mentions that the presence and absence of certain keywords, stereotyped images, and sources of information in a news story constitutes a frame and provides cues on how the audience should interpret certain events. This is particularly important as the audience tend to see the world in the same way the journalist does (Temmerman 2012). The ways in which the media frame the MH370 incident provide cues to the audience as to what and how to think about the issue. Selecting certain issues and ignoring others can lead to biases and distortions that can mislead the audience. To answer the questions on news frame, a study in the Malaysian context is fundamental as it could help to further explain how legal authority was used to downplay social conflict, particularly through the use of law to control mental production.

## METHODOLOGY

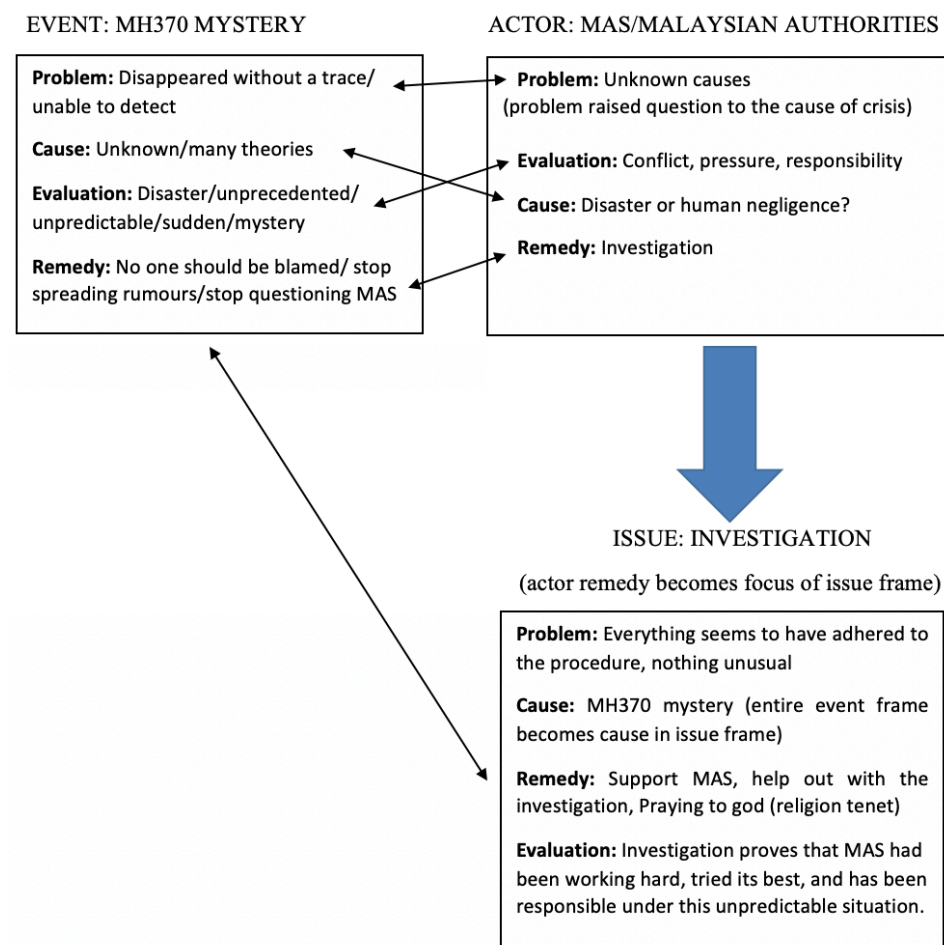
Content analysis is a research technique that is widely used in analyzing newspaper content and communication text (Mastro and Figueroa-Caballero 2018; Zeti & Mazni 2017). According to Lock and Seele (2015), content analysis is strongly rooted in journalism studies. The authors further describe that content analysis gives researchers the opportunity to analyze secondary communication text/material and generate meaning from manifest and latent content. However, merely studying the quantitative nature of text without deeper investigation into its logic and context is not enough. As pointed out by Wellington and Szczerbinski (2007), qualitative data can yield richness, color, and the people's view and perspectives, while quantitative data can provide structure and fact. Therefore, this study employed both quantitative and qualitative content analysis methods to collect empirical data for analysis of the communication phenomenon. The sample was drawn from the 8th of March 2014 to the 14th of March 2014. The choice of the period is in view of the fact that it represents the peak of the MH370 crisis. A total of 185 news articles were extracted from both newspapers—84 from *Malaysiakini* and 103 from *The Star*. The news articles were extracted from the local as well as international section and opinion/columns/commentaries. Coding of the articles was done sentence by sentence to ensure that more detailed information can be obtained from the newspaper articles.

The choice of the newspapers is informed by the fact that they are widely read in the country. *The Star* is Malaysia's highest circulating English newspaper with a daily circulation rate of 175,986 between January to June 2018, according to the Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC) Malaysia.

*Malaysiakini* is the most popular media portal in Malaysia, according to the 2018 Reuters Digital News Report. The annual study of news consumption in various markets showed *Malaysiakini* ranking first in Malaysia with 44 percent of weekly usage by local users.

Generally, this study compared the slants of news (supportive or critical) in reporting the crisis. In addition, this study investigated the four main framing functions suggested by Entman (2004) which are problem definition, causal interpretation, moral judgment, and treatment recommendation.

Figure 1 illustrates how the problem in the actor frame is a more specific version of the cause in the event frame. In the case of MH370, the problem is the unknown cause that raised questions on who should be held responsible for the missing flight. The remedy in the actor frame, namely investigation, becomes the focus of the issue frame; the paradigm of unknown cause supplied analogies upon which authorities and MAS readily drew in responding to the MH370 crisis.



**Figure 1. Developed Frame for MH370 Mystery (Adapted from Entman 2004).**

## FINDINGS

### Quantitative Content Analysis

On slants of news, a total of 199 sentences were found to be either in critical slant or supportive slant in the two newspapers. As could be seen in table 1.0 below, 70.8% of the news stories from *The Star* were very supportive of the Malaysian government's investigation of the missing flight. In contrast, *Malaysiakini* provided more critical views on the crisis, with 82.9% of its news stories being critical of the Malaysian government's handling of the crisis.

			Slant		Total
			Critical	Supportive	
<b>Paper</b>	<i>Malaysiakini</i>	Count	145	30	175
		Expected Count	133.7	41.3	175.0
		% within Paper	82.9%	17.1%	100.0%
		% within Slant	95.4%	63.8%	87.9%
		% of Total	72.9%	15.1%	87.9%
	<i>The Star</i>	Count	7	17	24
		Expected Count	18.3	5.7	24.0
		% within Paper	29.2%	70.8%	100.0%
		% within Slant	4.6%	36.2%	12.1%
		% of Total	3.5%	8.5%	12.1%
<b>Total</b>		Count	152	47	199
		Expected Count	152.0	47.0	199.0
		% within Paper	76.4%	23.6%	100.0%
		% within Slant	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		% of Total	76.4%	23.6%	100.0%

**Table 1: Paper \* News Slants Crosstabulation**

### Qualitative Content Analysis: Reading the text in *The Star* and *Malaysiakini*

#### **Problem Definition**

In defining the problem of the MH370 crisis, *The Star* framed the crisis as an unprecedented aviation mystery in Malaysian history. Headlines such as “Confounding Mystery of the Missing Airliner” and “Foreign Media Anchor on D-G ‘Unprecedented Mystery’ Comments” are featured in the newspaper. It seems unbelievable that no black box was found to date. Thus, *The Star* used keywords such as “sudden”, “mystery”, “tragic event”, “shocking”, “unprecedented” and “simply disappears” to define the crisis.

The Boeing 777-200, bound for Beijing with 239 passengers and crew, took off at 12:41am Saturday, its subsequent disappearance described as an unprecedented aviation mystery that continues to grab global attention. (*The Star*, March 13, 2014)

Strong evidence of the unpredictable nature of the tragedy provided by *The Star* is that Boeing 777-200 holds the safest flying record in the Malaysian history.

The Boeing 777 flown by Malaysia Airlines is one of the world's most popular- and safest- aircraft. (*The Star*, March 9, 2014)

In contrast, *Malaysiakini* tends to put the blame on human negligence in defining the problem of the crisis. Headlines such as “Stolen passports add twist to MH370 mystery” and “Airport Security Lapse Makes World News” are featured in the newspaper. The newspaper highlighted that the failure of the authorities to identify the two imposters on board the flight is a serious matter as it maybe led to a terrorist attack or hijacking of the flight.

If MAS and all airlines worldwide were able to check the passport details of prospective passengers against Interpol’s database, then we would not have to speculate whether stolen passports were used by terrorists to board MH370,” Interpol secretary general Ronald K Noble said in the statement. (*Malaysiakini*, March 10, 2014)

Furthermore, the lack of information as well as contradictory information can further worsen the crisis. The main problem is with the internal communication. It seems that the various government agencies involved have not been communicating effectively. As mentioned in *Malaysiakini*:

“I (The Guardian’s Flight global operation and safety editor David Learmount) think the Malaysian military knows a lot more about the position of the aircraft than has come out. But the military don’t appear to be in charge of the search. The problem is that the various government agencies are not communicating effectively.” (*Malaysiakini*, March 12, 2014)

### ***Causal Interpretation***

In interpreting the cause of the MH370 crisis, *The Star* iterated that the incident happened suddenly, thus the causes of the crisis are to be investigated. Headlines such as “Cops Exploring Possible Angles” and “Many Theories on how Plane could be disappeared into Thin Air” are featured in the newspaper. Thus, no conclusive cause was reported in the newspaper during the first week of the crisis.

He (Najib) said the government would review every procedure as it did not know the actual cause of how it happened. At the moment, when we don’t have any solid evidence there are surely many theories swirling about but they cannot be conclusive. (*The Star*, March 10, 2014)

In reporting the security lapse issue, *The Star* provided a very general viewpoint by stating that the investigation is ongoing—“all air travel security procedures at Malaysian airports will be reviewed after the discovery that two MH370 passengers boarded the flight using stolen passports (*The Star*, March 10, 2014).” In contrast to *The Star*, words such as “hijacking,” “sabotage,” and “terrorism” appeared in *Malaysiakini* and became the topic of hot debates on of the cause of the MH370 crisis. It can be seen from the headlines of *Malaysiakini* such as “FBI joins MH370 probe, terror concerns rise” and “info on MH370 imposters could compromise probe.” The reason is that the motive of passengers using stolen passport to board the flight is suspicious, and whether the imposters have a motive or not, an allegation of a linkage to terrorism will arise.

The fact that some passengers have flown under false passports have fuelled speculation of a terrorist link in the MH370’s disappearance, and Hishammuddin

said international counter-terrorist intelligence agencies are assisting investigations. (*Malaysiakini*, March 9, 2014)

When news of the stolen passports emerged, investigators began to look into the possibility of a terrorist attack. (*Malaysiakini*, March 11, 2014)

### ***Moral Evaluation***

Under moral evaluation, *The Star* utilised positive keywords such as “did their best,” “quick debunk false news,” “extremely calm,” and “well-briefed” in judging the authorities. Most of the time, *The Star* highlighted that the Malaysian government had put great efforts into the search and rescue operation. Furthermore, the newspaper also reported the difficulties and challenges faced by the authorities in searching for the missing flight. Headlines such as “Arduous and Difficult Task for Search Team” and “No Rest yet for Maritime Officers in Mission” were used in the newspaper. It creates a positive image for the authorities who had put in every single effort to look for the plane despite the many difficulties faced.

The authorities, in particular Malaysia Airlines, did their best, under the most difficult of circumstances, to give us the latest and most accurate reports on a regular and sustained basis. (*The Star*, March 9, 2014)

Very arduous and difficult – this is how a maritime expert described the task of locating any plane wreckage at sea. This is because the ocean is vast and deep, said former Malaysian Maritime Search and Rescue department head Datuk Capt Jaffar Lamri. (*The Star*, March 12, 2014)

On the contrary, *Malaysiakini* utilized negative keywords such as “evasive in response,” “fail,” “poor,” and “lambasted” in evaluating the authorities. More often than not, the authorities appeared weak and incompetent in handling the crisis. This can be seen in headlines such as “MH370 a hefty price for 3<sup>rd</sup> world mentality?” and “Aviation Experts Rap Malaysian Authorities.”

Malaysia authorities have come under intense criticism from the international media regarding its handling of the incident as well as allegedly offering conflicting information. (*Malaysiakini*, March 13, 2014)

Moreover, the newspaper also put the blame on the authorities for causing confusions. A number of unanswered questions have been raised as to why no verbal contact or announcement was immediately made when the plane disappeared from the radar screen, why the Malaysian communications system was disabled, as well as why the search for the flight was conducted at the wrong location.

Hanoi had embarked on the shocking move earlier due to scanty and confusing information from Malaysia over where the aircraft may have headed after it lost contact with air traffic control. The confusion over where to look (flight location) is adding to one of the most baffling mysteries in modern aviation mystery, and

prolonging the agonizing wait for hundreds of relatives of the missing passengers and crew. (*Malaysiakini*, March 12, 2014)

### ***Treatment Recommendation***

With regard to treatment recommendation, both newspapers suggested praying. In *The Star*, headlines such as “Malaysian of all Faiths Unite in Prayers for Passengers” and “Pray hard, Don’t Give Up hope” are highlighted in the newspaper. Similarly, this can be seen in *Malaysiakini* headlines such as “Penang Cops to hold inter-faith prayer for MH370” and “Sympathies, Prayer for Missing Passengers and Crew.”

We pray for the safety of the passengers and we hope that their families remain strong through this difficult time,” he said. (Party president Datuk Seri Liow Tiong Lai) (*The Star*, March 14, 2014)

Council of Churches of Malaysia general-secretary Rev Dr Hermen Shastri told *The Star* yesterday that he encourages all Christians to include prayers for the affected families. (*Malaysiakini*, March 12, 2014)

## **DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION**

The Anti-Fake News Act 2018 was passed by the Malaysian parliament to curtail the dissemination of fake news. In her defense of the passage of the bill, the then Minister in the Prime Minister’s office, Datuk Seri Azalina Othman said in an interview with *The Star* that the act serves as a “deterrent to send a clear message to each individual to be responsible in sharing information that is true and right.” This includes the spread of fake and inaccurate information during the disappearance of MH370 (*The Star*, March 30, 2018). Since the incident happened, Malaysians have been frequently warned to refrain from sharing and posting unverified information about the missing flight. But this leads to the question of why rumors and unverified information have nonetheless kept trending on social media. Will rumors survive if there is sufficient information during the crisis? During a situation when there is a lack of substantive information, it is human nature to figure out unanswered questions and therefore the people’s ability to analyze critically becomes impotent. In other words, when there are sufficient information subsidies, rumors become weak and can be easily disputed. The importance of having serious journalism to combat the spread of false, misleading, and exaggerated content that will undermine democracies around the world is further highlighted in Newman (2019).

It should be noted that rumors and inaccurate information, particularly on social media, have already led to a significant decline of the media industry. In the case of the MH370 crisis, it was reported that there is either no effective crisis communication (Peiter 2014) or sometimes what can be obtained are only inconsistent and inaccurate news reports (Kronborg 2015). This could serve as one of the reasons for the emergence of conspiracy theories and speculations, as people attempt to fill in the missing puzzle piece or blank spaces in their knowledge. This also explains the findings of this study that the information provided during the hot period of the crisis was very general and limited. It is significant to note the unequal power of information sharing between the citizens and the authorities during crises. In Malaysia, people are often not allowed to question the main source

of information, even though they are merely practicing basic human rights and democracy in the country.

Though alternative news media such as *Malaysiakini* were able to draw some critical analysis compared to mainstream newspapers such as *The Star*, there is no clear evidence of the whereabouts of the flight and no one is sure of what happened to the passengers and crew on board. In most of its coverage, *The Star* provided a very general viewpoint that defined the incident as having an “unknown cause,” is “unpredicted,” and “unprecedented.” In contrast, *Malaysiakini* attempted to provide a more diverse news angle by touching on the issues of “human negligence” and “theory of terrorism” for failing to identify the supposedly imposters who were claimed to have been on board the flight. However, there is no proper source of information to identify the real cause of the incident. There are also lots of doubts and concerns—from the delayed announcement of the missing airline, the negligence on the part of immigration personnel on the issue of the imposters, to the provision of false leads to conduct searches in the wrong area. Others include the reason why the Malaysian communication system was disabled, why Malaysian authorities declared that the flight may have ended in Andaman Sea, and that the passengers are presumed dead. This information is important during the first few weeks of the crisis and is thus expected to have been released through the media. However, this remains a mystery even to this day. Instead of reporting the so-called significant stories or issues, newspapers are often trapped in certain power relations as the practice of journalism in the country are often bound by laws and rules that suit the Malaysian culture of “responsible journalism” (Kenyon and Marjoribanks, 2007, 104). This is further supported by Ezhar, Sony and Manimaran’s (2012) that the core values and responsibilities of the Malaysian journalism profession are marginalized so that journalism is regarded more as a means to a financial end. Consequently, other roles such as being the watchdog, investigator, analyst, and critic are downplayed. This also corroborated by Lim and Ihediwa (2018) who further state that Malaysian mainstream newspapers such as *The Star* and *Malay Mail* often provide a “supportive” responsibility frame to the authorities by framing the crisis as an unprecedented and catastrophic disaster to indirectly show sympathy and express helplessness. This suggests that while the authorities might be held responsible, the incident is beyond human control and so no one should bear its full responsibilities. It is also shown in this study that there are many supportive slants attributed by *The Star* to the authorities than critical frames.

The study of the MH370 crisis offers a glimpse not merely into the Malaysian media, but media issues often raised at the global level. This is raised by Zelizer (2015) and Lee and Baek (2018) that journalists are trapped in certain unequal power relations and this leads to similar patterns of reporting. The lack of critical reporting and weak investigative journalism practices are great concerns as people often struggle for information during times of crisis to ease tension and alleviate anxiety (Kotsiopoulos 2014). Lei (2016) emphasizes the importance of having critical news reporting in identifying societal problem, analyzing its cause and providing remedy, though it is often limited due to controls and restrictions in the country. In Malaysia, information is often curbed through coercion and consent. The use of the Sedition Act, Communication and Multimedia Act, and SOSMA to silence the opposition have been reported and criticized by many scholars. This study therefore urges the Malaysian media to practice critical investigative journalism and dig out more stories and information to enable effective and efficient crisis communication, as well as to minimize the harm of crisis. However, changing the media structure and operation does not simply entail changing the way journalists operate as the current state and economic context will have to be altered as well. The latter is especially significant to ensure that

media framing can be objective and fair. This is part of the New Malaysia concept to ensure a free and democratic society without corruption. With this, it is hoped that media laws in the country will change for good and that journalism will be granted more freedom to flourish during time of crisis in this country.

The study of MH370's disappearance is not without its limitations. The content analysis of Malaysian newspapers focuses on framing in news production, but it is unclear whether the victims' family members and friends find the information provided by the authorities to be sufficient. However, as this study was carried out during the preliminary stage of a more comprehensive examination of the MH370 crisis. Journalists and members of the victims' families and friends were subsequently interviewed at a later stage. The outcome is in-line with that of this study as the respondents noted that there is a lack of access to information in general. Most of the journalists were not allowed to interview and question official sources. Besides, most of the news gathered during the period were from press conferences that presented very limited information. Similarly, the victims' family members and friends remarked that they had very limited access to information during the crisis. Most of the media contents were reported from the perspective of Malaysian authorities, lacking balance and critical viewpoints. The findings imply that the news frame has a close relationship with a wider context of authoritarian and journalism practice in the country. Overall, this study furthers a scholarly understanding of how the Malaysian media frame news stories when the country is challenged by a crisis of an international magnitude, and also provides some knowledge of Malaysian political context in influencing news frame. In addition, this study highlights the importance of having critical news as it enables people to think critically by recognizing national and cultural bias as well as learning how to interpret events from multiple viewpoints.

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