Different Political Beliefs and Different Frame Building for an Inter-religious Conflict: A Comparative Analysis of the Star and Malaysiakini

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Abstract

On August 28, 2009, a day during the Ramadan month and just three days before the National Independence Day of Malaysia, some 50 residents from Section 23 in Shah Alam marched from the state mosque after their Friday prayers to the secretariat building with a severed cow's head. Some of the protesters were also seen spitting and stepping on the cow's head, while at the same time threatening to "shed blood". The march was aimed to protest against a proposed relocation of a 150-year Hindu temple to Section 23 in Shah Alam, Selangor. The protesters claimed that it was not appropriate to build a Hindu temple in a Muslim-majority area. The cow is considered sacred by Hindus, and the protest has evoked condemnation from various quarters while even making international news. By employing framing as the theoretical framework and content analysis as the research method, this study examines what pictures mainstream and alternative newspapers have created for readers' understanding of the Cow-Head protest. It was found that conflict was the most salient frame in both the mainstream and alternative newspapers. However, the aspects of conflict highlighted by them were different. The dissimilar coverage of the same issue by the newspapers denoted the varied points of view held by them, which were rooted in different political beliefs and institutional practices.

Keywords: Framing; Content analysis; Inter-religious conflict; Interethnic conflict; Interethnic relations; Cow-head protest

Introduction

On August 28, 2009, a day during the Ramadan month and just three days before the National Independence Day of Malaysia, some 50 residents from Section 23 in Shah Alam marched from the state mosque after their Friday prayers to the secretariat building with a severed cow's head. Some of the protesters were also seen spitting and stepping on the cow's head, while at the same time threatening to "shed blood" [1]. The march was aimed to protest against a proposed relocation of a 150-year Hindu temple to Section 23 in Shah Alam, Selangor. The protesters claimed that it was not appropriate to build a Hindu temple in a Muslim-majority area. The cow is considered sacred by Hindus, and the protest has evoked condemnation from various quarters while even making international news. The Selangor state is governed by the *Pakatan Rakyat* (People's Alliance, PR), which is a political rival of the *Barisan Nasional* (National Front, BN). Consequently, the PR state government accused rival BN, especially UMNO (United Malays National Organization) of instigating the crowd to protest the relocation while the latter denied any involvement in it [2].

The last few years have seen a number of religious and ethnic tensions in Malaysia, which continue to impact on the lives of Malaysians from all walks of life. At the same time, Islam is increasingly becoming a major symbol of Malay-ness in Malaysia in which faith is inseparable from the Malay ethno-cultural heritage [3]. The division between the Malays and non-Malays is widened by the religious divide between Muslims and non-Muslims, creating a distinct and acute awareness of the "other". This has resulted in the aggravation of the inter-ethnic fracture in Malaysian society [4,5]. Furthermore, religion, ethnicity and related issues have always been a difficult area for reporting in multicultural societies. Where stories on religion are routinely

judged and framed by the media to, albeit inadvertently, misrepresent and disrespect the essence of what adherents of different faiths believe in, stories on religion do provide the fuel for prolonged conflicts—even violence in societies that are historically divided by tribal and cultural rivalries [6]. Therefore, this paper aims to examine the coverage of the Cow-Head protest by mainstream and alternative newspapers in Malaysia, where religions, politics and media are intertwined in many powerful and profound ways.

Objectives and Research Questions

The objective of this study is to compare the framing of the Cow-Head protest by mainstream and alternative newspapers in Malaysia. Specifically, it asks the following questions:

RQ1: What was the intensity of newspapers coverage of the Cow-Head protest?

RQ2: What were the news sources used by the newspapers?

RQ3: What were the news frames employed by the newspapers?

RQ4: What was the valence of the news articles?

Background of the study

The census of 2014 shows that Malaysia has a total population of 30.2 million comprising multi-ethnic citizens who are Malays/indigenous groups (68.2%), Chinese (24.6%), Indians (6.4%) and Others (0.8%). Malays are predominantly Muslims while other religions embraced by the people are Buddhism (19.8%), Christianity (9.2%) and Hinduism (6.3%) [7]. The Malaysian Constitution defines Malays as persons who profess the religion of Islam, habitually speak the Malay language and conform to Malay custom. Gatsiounis [8] commented that Islam became the defining element of the Malay identity after other Malaysians adopted some aspects of the Malay culture like food, dress and language. Nah [9] further remarked that one 'can effectively become "Malay" by embracing Islam' and is a beneficiary of the affirmative action policies that such a status brings about. In addition, Kua [10] noted that racism has been part of Malaysian political, economic, social and cultural realities ever since colonial times. Today, race has been so deeply institutionalized that it is a key factor in determining benefits from government development policies, bids for business contracts, education policy, social policy, cultural policy, entry into educational institutions, discounts for purchasing houses and other official policies. The author criticized that the ruling coalition BN is still dominated by racially-defined component parties like UMNO, MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association) and MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress). These parties compete for electoral support from their respective racial constituencies by pandering to racial interests. Meanwhile, some opportunistic opposition parties likewise pander to their constituencies using racist propaganda to win electoral support, and this practice has also contributed to the vicious circle of racial politics which has characterized Malaysian politics all these years.

Control of Mass Media in Malaysia

As a result of the nation's multi-ethnic and lingual population, newspapers in Malaysia are published in different languages to cater to the respective major ethnic groups. There are currently 50 newspapers in Malaysia, and 16 of them are published in English, 13 in Bahasa Malaysia, 19 in Chinese and 2 in Tamil. Bahasa Malaysia dailies reach 46.5% of the Malaysian population, followed by English dailies (28.7%), Chinese dailies (24.1%) and Tamil dailies (0.7%). Political scientists categorized the Malaysian system as a 'quasi democracy', 'semi democracy' or 'modified democracy'. This implies that the political system perches uneasily between democracy and authoritarianism [11]. Scholars highlighted that media freedom in Malaysia is heavily curtailed by legislation and ownership [12,13]. Various laws such as the Printing Presses and Publication Act, Internal Security Act, Official Secret Act, Sedition Act and Multimedia and Broadcasting Act allow the Government to impose prior restraints on publication, post-publication punishments and penalties for the acquisition of official information.

The structure of media ownership in Malaysia is directly and indirectly controlled by the Government or government-linked individuals. *Radio Televisyen Malaysia* (RTM) has been owned and controlled by the Government since its inception. Media Prima is an investment arm of UMNO and it owns *News Straits Times*, *Business Times*, *Malay Mail*, *Berita Harian*, *Harian Metro* and *Shin Min Daily News*, TV3, NTV7, 8TV, TV9, Fly FM and Hot FM. Besides, *Utusan Malaysia* and *Kosmo!* are published by Utusan Melayu (M) Berhad, which is also related to UMNO [12,14]. The MCA and MIC also control a substantial part of the mainstream media. MCA, through its official holding company, Huaren Holding Sdn Bhd, owns *The Star*, RedFM 104.9 and 988 [14]. There are two Tamil newspapers in Malaysia – *Tamil Nesan* and *Malaysia Nanban* and their ownership rests mainly in the hands of the former MIC president Samy Vellu and his wife [15,16]. Business tycoon Vincent Tan, a close associate of the former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir and other BN leaders, owns *The Sun* and MiTV [15,16]. On the other hand, the All Asia Television and Radio Company (ASTRO) is owned by Ananda Krishnan and Tunku Mahmud Besar Burhanuddin. It was also revealed that Krishnan has a close relationship with Mahathir and was therefore able to secure a media license [15,17]. McDaniel [18] found that the Chinese-language newspapers in Malaysia are relatively more independent when compared to their Malay- and English-language counterparts. *Sin Chew Daily*, *Guang Ming Daily*, *Nanyang Siang Pau* and *China Press* are owned by yet another business and media tycoon Tiong Hiew King, while the *Oriental Daily* is owned by Lau Hui Kang [14]. In regard to the close media–state partnership in Malaysia, Wong [19] addressed that such a relationship would influence the journalists to engage in self-censorship in order not to offend the Government. It cultivates a culture of fear – starting with journalists and other writers and spreading to the publishers or broadcasters, distributors and even the public at large when confronted with anything that smacks of the slightest critical commentary on the Government. Moreover, the greater concern is that the vast majority of journalists, editors, commentators and politicians in Malaysia accept the existing conditions, even as they suffer with the restrictions [20]. Significantly, Mustafa [21] stated that the public sphere in Malaysian society has been constrained so that ordinary citizens and concerned civil society groups have not

been able to fully express their views and to directly participate in the country's democratic processes. He also contended that the mainstream press is instrumental in helping to promote the state's hegemonic influence over the society.

In 1997, Malaysia announced a no-censorship guarantee for the Internet, which is known as the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) Malaysia Bill of Guarantees. The then Prime Minister Mahathir was trying to attract investors to the proposed MSC, which would serve as the nation's bridge from the Industrial to the Information Age. The MSC is about 15 km wide by 50 km long, and stretches from the Petronas Twin Towers in Kuala Lumpur to the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (the region's largest airport). Estimated to take 20 years to reach its full potential at an approximate cost of US$20 billion, the MSC would help to diversify the Malaysian economy at a time when the nation faced increased competition from lower wage countries in the region, such as China and Vietnam [22-24]. In addition, Abbott [22] pointed out that Mahathir was determined to give Malaysia a competitive advantage over its neighbor Singapore where stringent controls had been imposed on Internet Service Provider (ISPs). The Internet and online journalism have been much celebrated in Malaysia by those who crave for alternative perspectives [24]. Furthermore, it is clear that the Internet has had a discernible impact on Malaysian politics [14,15]. Commenting on the loss of BN in the online war during the 12th General Election, the former Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi admitted: We didn't think it was important. It was a serious misjudgment... We thought that the newspapers, the print media, the television were important but young people were looking at text messages and blogs. It is painful to admit the influence of the alternative media [14].

Theoretical framework: Framing

Tuchman and Gitlin were two of the earliest scholars to introduce framing to media studies in 1978 and 1980 respectively [25]. They used the concept of framing as a tool to understand news as a social construction and social resource. Framing differs significantly from the repetition- and accessibility-based models in agenda setting and priming [26]. According to Entman [27], framing is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described [27,28] enumerated several news features that commonly convey frames. They are headlines and kickers, subheads, photographs, photo captions, leads etc. Wong [19] outlined four major dimensions of framing that could be studied: (1) presentation of news items (their size and placement); (2) news topic items (or what issues are included in the frame); (3) cognitive attributes (or the specific details of issues included); and (4) affective attributes (valence or tone of the article/picture). Manheim [29] also explained that valence is the tone of a news story or comment regarding certain frames. It is believed to have the potential to generate behavioral effects. By indicating discourse valuations or carrying positive and/or negative elements, valenced news frames present the extent to which the coverage reflects favorably or unfavorably on the event/issue. In addition, Weaver [30] mentioned that frame can

be studied by means of systematic content analysis, interpretive textual analysis or discourse analysis. Tankard (2008) remarked that framing give quantitative researchers a way to approach ideology, a subject mostly dealt with by critical theorists to date. Framing may even give quantitative researchers a means to examine the hypothesis of media hegemony, one that has been difficult to validate empirically.

The literature to date has identified a handful of frames that occur commonly in the news [31-33]. A study by Semetko and Valkenburg [34] identified five news frames (attribution of responsibility, conflict, human interest, economic consequences and morality) that were common in the Dutch national news media coverage of the Amsterdam meetings of European heads of state in 1997. It was found that the use of news frames depended on both the type of outlet and the type of topic. Most significant differences were not between media (television vs. the press) but between sensationalist vs. serious types of news outlets. Sober and serious newspapers and television news programs more often used the responsibility and conflict frames, whereas sensationalist outlets more often used the human interest frame. The five generic news frames constructed by Semetko and Valkenburg [34] have been widely used in the framing analysis of a range of issues, including racial-ethnic issues, integration, immigration, drugs or crime [35]. News is socially constructed and it reflects not just what happens but also the context within which it was gathered and processed [36]. It was stressed that which events were covered (or not) and how they were covered were influenced by many considerations, including law, economics, political forces, culture, race, organizational structure of media and work routines of journalist [37,38] When it comes to ideologically sensitive issues, Song [39] found that the mainstream news media serve as an institution of social control by imposing frames that marginalize causes or movements that challenge the values of the mainstream society. Alternative media, on the other hand, often serve as a communication outlet for movements and causes that are ignored or marginalized by the mainstream media.

Methodology

The newspapers chosen for this study are *The Star* (mainstream) and *Malaysiakini* (alternative). *The Star* enjoys the highest circulation in the English-language stream. It has nationwide circulation, although predominantly within peninsular Malaysia [40]. The MCA is a major shareholder of *The Star*. The English newspapers in Malaysia are usually read by the elites and English-educated readers, who are mostly concentrated in the urban areas. Lent (1990) stated that it is only the readership of English newspapers that could transcend racial groupings in Malaysia. Hence, the author claimed that the English press also serves as an interethnic medium. *Malaysiakini* is the country's first commercial online newspaper launched by Steven Gan, just nine days before the 1999 general election with funding from international press freedom groups, including the South East Asian Press Alliance (SEPA). The alternative newspaper began with only three journalists producing two or three stories per day. However, *Malaysiakini* expanded its content dramatically within four years, producing a total of 40–50 items per day, including 10–15 local stories, 3–4 opinion pieces, 10–11 letters and some

foreign news sourced from the *l'Agence France-Presse* (AFP) [23]. Furthermore, *Malaysiakini* has won warm praise from around the world as well as a number of international awards for journalism [41-43].

Sampling and coding procedures

The sample of this study was drawn from August 28 to October 30, 2009 as it represented the peak period of the Cow-Head dispute. This study used the census sample as scholars agreed that a census often makes the most sense for research that examines a particular event or series of events [44,45]. The unit of analysis was the article, which included straight news, editorials, columns, opinions and letters. The articles were collected via database search, which were pulled from the respective newspaper's online archive by using "cow's head" and "Cow-Head protest" as the keywords.

The framing of the Cow-Head dispute was examined from four different dimensions: 1) intensity of coverage, 2) news sources, 3) news frames; and 4) valence of the articles. The intensity of coverage was studied from three angles: 1) number of news items, 2) type of news items, and 3) mean size of news items (measured by word count). This study employed the inductive or emergent coding approach for analyzing the news sources. The researchers outlined the coding categories after a preliminary examination of the data. The categories for news sources used in this study were: 1) Civilians; 2) UMNO leaders; 3) Other BN component parties' leaders; 4) Royal Police Malaysia (PDRM); 5) non-governmental organization representatives (NGOs); 6) opposition leaders; 7) religious leaders; 8) protesters; and 9) others. This study adopted and modified the five most commonly used news frames (conflict, human interest, economic consequence, moral and responsibility) identified by Semetko and Valkenburg [34] (refer Appendix A). The following were the frames used in this study with their theoretical definitions:

1. Conflict – emphasizes disagreement and conflict between individuals, groups, parties or institutions; an individual, group, party or institution reproach another; dichotomizes or labels the good and bad.

2. Consequences – reports the consequences of an event, issue or problem has on individuals, groups, parties, institutions or the country; reports the outcome of a court case; reports the investigation or legal action taken against any individual, groups, parties or institutions.

3. Responsibility – presents an event, issue or problem in such a way as to attribute responsibility for its cause or solution to either the government or to an individual, group, party or institution.

4. Moral – puts the event, issue or problem in the context of religious tenets or moral prescriptions; emphasizes on collaboration and fellowship.

5. Human interest – brings a human face or an emotional angle to the presentation of an event or issue; refers to an effort to personalize the news.

Valence (also known as tone, slant or direction) of the articles refer to the attitude expressed towards any individual, group, party or institution by its user. This study uses the categories of supportive, critical and neutral for the analysis of attitude expressed towards the Cow Head protesters.

1. Supportive – conveys a favorable impression towards the Cow-Head protesters; supports or justifies their behaviors; contains quotes by individuals who approve their behaviors.

2. Critical – conveys a negative impression towards the Cow-Head protesters; causes the readers to form a negative opinion towards them and their behavior; contains unfavorable descriptions of their behaviors.

3. Neutral – neither favorably nor unfavorably portrays the Cow-Head protesters (**Figure 1**).

Findings

The following are some basic information regarding the frequency and percentage of the variables suggesting the importance of conceptual differentiation between the two newspapers.

Intensity of coverage

Table 1 shows that the total number of news items found in *Malaysiakini* (100 articles) [46-57] is almost double of the amount collected from *The Star* (53 articles). In addition, *Malaysiakini* was found to publish a bigger mean size of news items (590 words) compared to *The Star* (402 words) [58-70]. By giving much less coverage to the Cow-Head dispute, *The Star* did not report quite a few related developments of the incident, which will be elaborated in the later section of this paper. Nonetheless, both the newspapers published most of their coverage in the form of straight news, followed by columns and letters. A finding of interest was that only *The Star* devoted some space for editorial [58-70] **(Table 1).**

News sources

Both *The Star* (44.44%) and *Malaysiakini* (60.0%) [46-57] relied on civilians as their most important news sources for the coverage of Cow-Head dispute **(Table 2)**. UMNO was found to be the second dominant news sources in *The Star*, while *Malaysiakini* used NGOs as its second main news sources **(Table 2).**

News Frames

Conflict frame

As demonstrated in **Table 3**, conflict was found to be the most salient frame in both *The Star* (40.68%) and *Malaysiakini* (63.48%). A finding of interest was that most of the conflict frame in *The Star* was found in its opinion pieces like editorials, columns, letters and opinions rather than straight news. Through the conflict frame, *The Star* mostly condemned the act of the protesters. For example, a columnist wrote that the Cow-Head protest left him feeling utterly disgusted. He mentioned that the men who organized and participated in the foul act are nothing but rank racists, and by cloaking their activities in a veil of piousness they show themselves to be even more despicable [58-70]. Another columnist criticized that the protest was not
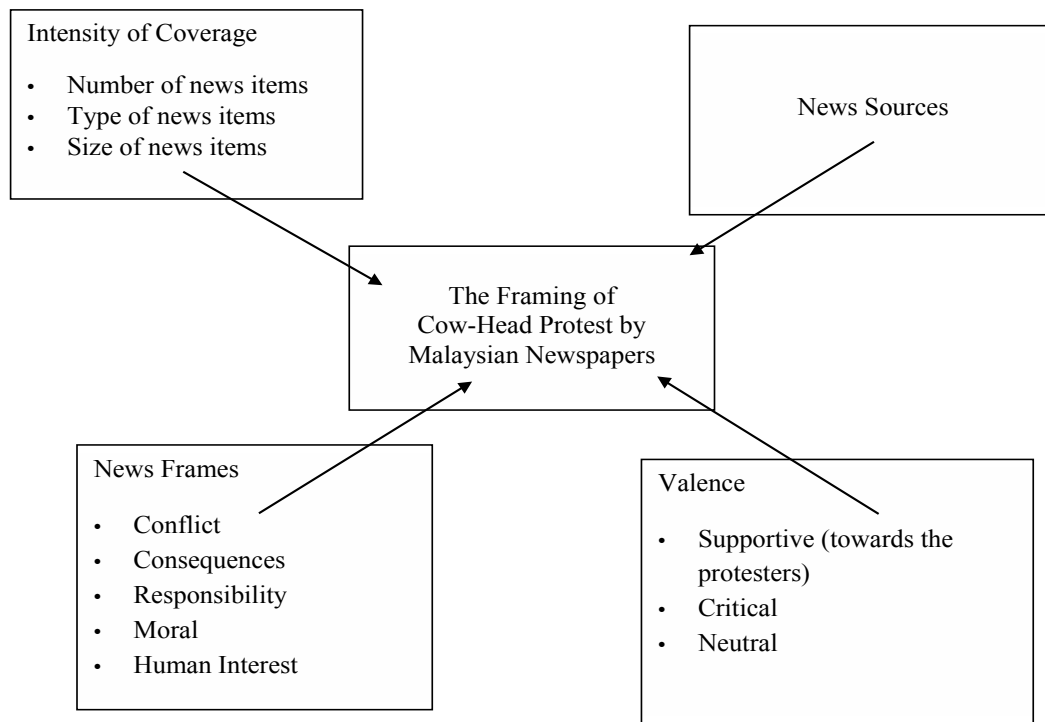
Figure 1 Research framework of the study.

Table 1 Types of news items for the cow-head protest.

	The Star (n = 53) %	Malaysiakini (n=100) %
Straight news	58.5	62.0
Editorials	1.89	0
Columns	15.1	17.0
Letters	17.0	12.0
Opinions	7.55	9.0
Size (mean):	402 words	590 words

Table 2 News sources for the Cow-head protest.

	The Star (n = 53) %	Malaysiakini (n = 100) %
Civilians	44.44	60.0
UMNO	21.11	3.67
Other BN component parties	8.88	4.09
Royal Police Malaysia	8.88	4.08
NGOs	8.88	11.84
Opposition	2.22	8.98
Religious leaders	2.22	0.41
Protesters	2.22	1.22
Others	1.11	5.71

a spontaneous outburst but a cold-blooded transgression and crafted so as to give maximum offence. He also slammed that the police's failure to intervene the protest raises questions about their seriousness in maintaining racial harmony [58-70]. Furthermore, a columnist pointed out that no religious text forbids the worship of another religion in any neighborhood. The author stated that the Malaysian Constitution guarantees

Table 3 News frames for the Cow-head protest.

	The Star (n = 53) %	Malaysiakini (n = 100) %
Conflict	40.68	63.48
Consequences	35.6	27.83
Responsibility	13.56	2.61
Moral	10.17	6.09

freedom of worship throughout the land, with no conditions on where the freedom might be curtailed. Therefore, the author criticized that the Cow-Head protest was unreasonable, unlawful, unconstitutional, inflammatory and irreligious [58-70].

The Group Chief Editor of *The Star,* Wong Chun Wai wrote that the protesters might have carried the cow's head to insult the state government. However, he condemned that the protesters simply did not use their head to think it over because the protest was over a Hindu temple, and to use a cow's head was sheer stupidity. He also warned that we have to be careful when we use terms like "majority" and "minority" because Malaysia is a multi-racial country where one community would outnumber another in some areas [58-70]. On another hand, a Muslim reader sent in her opinion through SMS saying "As a Muslim I can't believe that people after Friday prayer, especially during holy month of Ramadan, could do that awful protest with a cow's head"[58-70].

The Star also reported that the chairman of the action committee for the protest, Mahayuddin Manaf said the residents were merely protesting the relocation of the Hindu temple but it had been "hijacked" by another group that brought along a cow's head to the state secretariat building. He then claimed that the

residents have been victimized and unfairly accused of stroking racial and religious intolerance [58-70]. While condemning the protesters, the conflict frame in *Malaysiakini* also devoted much space to criticize the police, UMNO and the Government for taking sides with the protesters. It is noteworthy that only *Malaysiakini* reported that the Selangor state government accused UMNO of instigating the Cow-Head protest while *The Star* did not publish such news. Shah Alam PAS (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party) Member of Parliament (MP) Khalid Abdul Samad was quoted by *Malaysiakini* saying that he could only recognized five Section 23 residents whereas "the rest were all outsiders". He also believed that the five residents are UMNO members as he has met them before [46-57]. Furthermore, some Section 23 residents told the reporters of *Malaysiakini* that five of the protesters came from the same neighborhood and "they are all UMNO members"[46-57]. In addition, DAP (Democratic Action Party) MP Charles Santiago said it was "weird" that the dozens of policemen "watched silently" when the protesters were spitting on and kicking the bloodied cow's head. He strongly condemned the lack of action on the part of the police, who he accused to have subtly been accomplices to the act that is totally disrespectful of Hindus [46-57]. The Hindraf's (Hindu Rights Action Force) London-based leader P Waythhamoorthy alleged that UMNO and certain police cohorts organized the unsavory and inflammatory Cow-Head protest intended to incite racial hatred and ill-feeling among Malaysian Muslims and Hindus. He also slammed the Selangor police chief Khalid Abu Bakar for suggesting that the police would only probe the incident if a report was lodged [46-57]. On another hand, the Shah Alam district police chief Noor Azam Jamaluddin conveyed his apology to several PR leaders during a meeting and explained that the police officers at the scene were "juniors", suggesting that they were inexperienced in handling such matters. The police chief also gave his word that action will be taken immediately against those responsible for the protest [46-57]. *Malaysiakini* reported that the Home Minister Hishammuddin defended the Cow-Head protesters, while arguing that the latter cannot be blamed for the controversy. It was reported that Hishammuddin had an hour-long closed-door meeting with residents' representatives. He then defended the protesters saying that "they just wanted their voices to be heard". He addressed that it was however unfortunate that the protest was given negative publicity because it was linked to religious and racial sentiments [46-57]. Following Hishammuddin's statement, opposition parliamentarians and non-governmental groups lodged a police report against him, demanding that he be either sacked or he resigned. The complainants criticized that Hishammuddin has exonerated the offenders of all blame and has used his powers to influence the course of the ongoing investigation and the final action to be taken against the offenders [46-57]. It is significant to note that these news were left out by *The Star* too.

Consequences frame

Through adopting the consequences frame, *The Star* mainly reported about the legal action taken against the Cow-Head protesters. On September 10, 2009, 12 men were charged under the Sedition Act (carrying and stepping on the cow's head) and Police Act (illegal assembly). It was reported that the 12 men arrived at the court accompanied by local and outstation supporters, and they shouted out to the media that they were not guilty and that they were united in their stand [46-57]. The consequences frame in *Malaysiakini* focused on the action taken against the alternative newspaper by the Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission (MCMC). Following *Malaysiakini*'s coverage of the Cow-Head protest, the MCMC sent a letter to the newspaper, requesting it to remove two "provocative" videos from its website. The videos included the footage of the controversial Cow-Head protest and the press conference held by the Home Minister Hishammuddin. The MCMC claimed that those videos "contain offensive contents with the intent to annoy any person, especially Indians"[46-57]. Commenting on MCMC's request, *Malaysiakini* editor-in-chief Steven Gan said that the videos were news events which were of public interest. He also stated that the intention in putting up the videos was not to 'annoy' anyone, but to do their job as journalists to draw attention to the protest and to ensure action is taken so that similar incidents would not happen again in Malaysia. Gan also said that there was no plan for *Malaysiakini* to take down the videos and the newspaper was seeking legal advice on the matter [46-57]. The MCMC followed up its investigations on *Malaysiakini* by conducting four visits to the newspaper's office. It included an eight-hour questioning session involving the newspaper's 12 staff members. Among those questioned were *Malaysiakini* chief executive officer Premesh Chandran, editors, journalists, video team members and one technical staff [46-57]. The MCMC also sent digital forensics experts to *Malaysiakini*'s office and demanded the newspaper to hand over the original tapes of the two videos [46-57]. Furthermore, *Malaysiakini.tv*'s servers hosted at the Internet service provider Jaring in Bukit Jalil Technology Park Malaysia was inspected by the authorities. *Malaysiakini* believed that the authorities were adamant in charging them, while they were preparing to defend themselves in court [46-57]. While *Malaysiakini* reported much furious reaction from various parties against the MCMC's actions, *The Star* was rather silent about these incidents. Those who backed *Malaysiakini* included pro-human rights NGOs, academics, members of civil society and even political leaders from BN component parties.

On another hand, as a consequence of the Cow-Head protest, the Shah Alam City Council organized a public dialogue with Section 23 residents over the relocation of the 150-year Hindu temple. It was reported in *Malaysiakini* that some of the participants shouted profanities at the then Chief Minister of Selangor Abdul Khalid Ibrahim, calling him "MB *bodoh*" (stupid Chief Minister) and "Khalid *babi*" (Khalid the pig). Also heard above the din were "you should be ashamed of being a Malay" and "don't be like a cow led by a ring through the nose". It was also reported that the interruptions, boos and profanities continued throughout the dialogue while the Indian residents sitting on the other side of the hall, remained mostly quiet [46-57]. Besides being muted on the MCMC incidents, *The Star* also did not report about this public dialogue.

In addition, *Malaysiakini* reported that 16 people, including former Internal Security Act detainee P Uthayakumar, were arrested at a candlelight vigil near Dataran Merdeka. The vigil was organized by Hindraf with a march of a 100 participants marching

from nearby Masjid Jamek, while singing songs, carrying roses and candles. However, before they could reach Dataran Merdeka, the crowd was confronted by two dozen police officers. It was reported that several police personnel pounced on Uthayakumar until he fell to the ground. He was then held on all fours and rushed to an awaiting police truck [46-57]. Significantly, this news was not found in *The Star*. Instead*, The Star* published a straight news to specifically report on Hishammuddin's statement about his role in the Cow-Head incident. Hishammuddin told *The Star* through text messages that he was not supportive of the Cow-Head protesters' unruly act and wanted the police to act against them. He also insisted that he did not instruct the MCMC to demand *Malaysiakni* to remove the two videos from its website [46-57].

Responsibility frame

By employing the responsibility frame, *The Star* reported that Sultan Sharafuddin Idris Shah of Selangor called upon the then Chief Minister of Selangor Khalid Ibrahim to amicably settle the issues surrounding the relocation of the Hindu temple without hurting the feelings of both Hindus and Muslims [58-70]. The minister in the Prime Minister's Department Koh Tsu Koon suggested that the police should have a standard procedure to deal with public protest to show it is consistent and fair in its action. He addressed that the Cow-Head protest had raised many doubts and unhappiness, hence he mentioned that the police must be sensitive to public perception and not just carry out their duty as the image of the police is a reflection of the Government [46-57]. While *The Star* devoted 13.56% of its coverage to the responsibility frame, the same frame only accounted for 2.61% in *Malaysiakini*. A columnist of *Malaysiakini* stressed that it was time for journalists from mainstream and online media to take stock and write – on behalf of their readers – and reach out across faith lines and ethnic boundaries. He added that the journalists have an obligation to work towards a more open society [46-57].

Moral frame

The Star reported that the Prime Minister Najib Razak urged the people to refrain from condemning or insulting other religions and their believers. He also advised Muslims to follow the true Islamic teachings of showing respect. Najib added that both Surah Al-Maidah and Surah Al-An'am warned Muslims if they went against other religions, it would cause the other believers to act violently against Muslims. He also reminded that Muslims were forbidden from insulting or desecrating items considered sacred to followers of other religions, so that, in turn, the non-Muslims would show respect to Islam [58-70].

In its opinions section, *Malaysiakini* published readers' voices towards the Cow-Head protest. A Muslim reader mentioned that he would like to apologize to the Hindus in Malaysia for the unforgivable action in the absence of an outright apology from Malay-Muslim leadership. The reader also stated that what the protesters have done have nothing to do with Islam or the Malays. Instead, they have brought shame to Islam in the holy month of Ramadan. In response to this, a Hindu reader expressed that he was touched with the very rational and sensitive comments given by the Muslim brothers. He called for the nation

to value the diversity and respect each other's faith and religion. He also remarked that the people should not be emotional and fall for the trap of May 13 [46-57]. Furthermore, *Malaysiakini* also published a lengthy column article that commented on the statesmanship of the then Chief Minister of Selangor Khalid Ibrahim. The columnist wrote that Khalid has shown himself to be the kind of mature and even-keeled leader Malaysians desperately need. The author pointed out that it was interesting to compare two official responses to the Cow-Head protest: Home Minister Hishammuddin's closed-door meeting with the protest organizers, and Khalid's public dialogue with a wider range of residents from both sides of the debate. Furthermore, it was commented that Khalid was not disappointed by the boorish, disruptive behavior of the few, saying "We understand (the residents' feeling)", and adding: "We should not be owned by this group of people. Although this group will continue to be there… we should not take this as a deterrent but as a challenge for us to prove them wrong". The columnist remarked that Khalid behaved like a statesman, a leader who listens seriously to all Selangorians regardless of race, religion or partisanship [46-57].

Valence

This study found that both *The Star* (80.0%) and *Malaysiakini* (82.0%) were highly critical towards the Cow-Head protesters **(Table 4).** Through their coverage, both the mainstream and alternative newspapers conveyed a negative impression towards the protesters; causes the readers to form a negative opinion towards them and their behavior, while containing unfavorable descriptions of their behaviors **(Table 4).**

Discussion

The differences in the number and size of articles published by *The Star* and *Malaysiakini* indicated that they carried unequal weight of attention for the Cow-Head dispute. The findings also reflected that *The Star* adopted some gatekeeping, agenda-setting and framing practices to control the coverage in order to construct a certain "reality" for the readers, or even shaping their opinions and attitudes towards the Cow-Head dispute. Tewksbury and Scheufele [71] asserted that when journalists decide how to describe the political world, they often subconsciously engage themselves in the framing process. They choose words and images that have the power to influence how audiences interpret and evaluate issues or policies. This study found that both *The Star* and *Malaysiakini* relied on civilians as their most important news sources. This is in fact a very interesting findings as previous studies [72-75] found that mainstream newspapers relied heavily on UMNO leaders as their news sources for coverage of inter-religious or interethnic conflicts. Significantly, Loo and Mustafa [6] emphasized that information should be sourced from more parties to obtain a diversity of opinions surrounding interethnic issues. Nonetheless, the voices of reason and moderation

Table 4 Valence for the Cow-head protest.

	The Star (n = 53) %	Malaysiakini (n = 100) %
Supportive	2.5	3.0
Critical	80.0	82.0
Neutral	17.5	15.0

ought to be given prominence over extreme views. Newspapers should avoid letting dominant parties define themselves simply by quoting their leaders' restatement of familiar demands or positions. Instead, newspapers should ask civilians and grassroots organizations for their sentiments and viewpoints, or even what solutions they could suggest for the interethnic conflicts. The newspapers should also find out from civilians whether the position stated by their leaders or the Government is the only way or the best way to achieve the changes they want. Subsequently, the newspapers should query the Government regarding the ideas or peace perspectives put forward by the civilians and grassroots organizations. In addition, Tan and Lee [14] believed that media should flesh out the entire range of perspectives that various individuals and organizations have taken over time. It is hoped that through a gathering of seemingly irreconcilable positions, a better level of understanding and empathy may arise.

Although conflict was the most salient frame found in both *The Star* and *Malaysiakini*, the aspects of conflict highlighted by them were different. *The Star* focused on condemning the Cow-Head protesters, while avoided criticizing the police, UMNO, BN or the Government. This pattern was also reflected in the editorial article written by the Group Chief Editor of *The Star,* Wong Chun Wai, whereby he slammed the protesters rather harshly but failed to address the incompetency of the police in handling the issue, or the manner in which UMNO leaders reacted to the dispute. In fact, *The Star* portrayed UMNO as taking a moderate approach. As mentioned earlier, the close media–state partnership in Malaysia influences the journalists to engage in self-censorship in order not to offend the Government [19]. Mustafa [23] also contended that the mainstream press is instrumental in helping to promote the state's hegemonic influence over the society. Furthermore, in their study to examine the gatekeeping process undertaken by Malaysian newspapers in reporting interethnic conflicts, Yang and Md Sidin [75] found that the reporters at *The Star* were very careful in choosing their words, while toning town radical political rhetoric. The authors also documented that *The Star's* editorial would always make a more moderate approach although the newspaper recognized that the method has not always been appreciated as people tend to see moderation as an act of cowardice. On another hand, studies on alternative media showed that they often provide a space for the rational-critical discourse, which is crucial to the creation of a public sphere [76,77]. As compared to *The Star*, *Malaysiakini* painted a rather different picture of the Cow-Head protest through its news frames. More often than not, the articles published by *Malaysiakini* tended to question the power and authority, which was described by Steele [42] as "aggressively pursuing the bottom line without opposing the Government." The editor-in-chief of *Malaysiakini* Steven Gan also mentioned that the alternative newspaper "cover things that are not being covered by the mainstream, [so that] readers can at least have an alternative opinion on the issues" [75]. Similarly, Kenyon [78] recorded that one of the routines in *Malaysiakini* newsroom is to look out for political stories that other media downplay or ignore. It was also found that the journalists of *Malaysiakini* look at issues from a "big picture" point of view, such as identifying what a particular story had to do with the Constitution and freedom, what it is in terms of the larger

political picture and its implications in a multiracial society. Steele [42] even underscored that in the specifics of Malaysian political culture, where the Government has de facto control of the press and laws preventing journalists from reporting on sensitive issues as ethnicity and religion, *Malaysiakini* has always been singled out for its independence and guts. At a time when mainstream media had lost credibility due to their pro-government stance, *Malaysiakini* gained immediate attention and international accolades for its independence reporting. Steele [42] also argued that *Malaysiakini* uses the norms of good journalism to legitimize alternative views of events, thus challenging the authoritarianism of the BN. Significantly she recognized that some of *Malaysiakini*. tv's most influential videos have been of the destruction of Hindu temples and immigrant squatter communities. This study found that the Cow-Head protest is reported by *The Star* and *Malaysiakini* as both an inter-religious conflict as well as a political issue. In a multi-ethnic country like Malaysia, religions, politics and media are indeed intertwined in many powerful and profound ways. In fact, previous studies have documented that religious issues have been highly politicized in Malaysia while the country's beautiful diversity had become an easy prey for many politicians to inflame divisive sentiments for personal interest [79-81].

In their study on the issues and practices in religion reporting, Loo and Mustafa [6] asserted that the existence of conflict is an inevitable part of human interaction. Therefore the question should not be on how to prevent it but rather how to deal with it in such a way as to produce the best possible and least violent outcomes for all the parties concerned. The authors called for newspapers to provide a fair, balanced and neutral coverage of the interethnic conflicts. They also stated that newspapers should provide more in-depth analyses and discussions rather than merely focusing on the straightforward reporting of the facts. This will provide the public with access to balanced and comprehensive information and ensure better understanding of the issues. It will also help the public to discuss the interethnic issues in a constructive manner [82-85].

Conclusion

Framing analysis allows researchers to examine the roles of media in the development of social and political issues. Framing also reflects a conflict between dominant social norms and efforts for change. This study examined what aspects the mainstream and alternative newspapers have created for readers' understanding of the Cow-Head protest. The findings indicated that the newspapers reported the dispute with different intensity and prominence. It was found that although conflict appeared to be the most salient frame found across the dailies, the aspects highlighted by them varied. The dissimilar coverage of the same issue by the newspapers denoted the varied points of view held by them, which were rooted in different political beliefs and institutional practices. As for future research, in order to investigate the impact of news frames on people's perception of an issue, it would be interesting to juxtapose the findings of this study with public opinion data to measure public perceptions towards the Cow-Head protest.

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