



# Framing of the 1MDB financial scandal: A comparative study of the coverage by *The Star* and *Malaysiakini*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the framing of a financial scandal involving top government officials by a mainstream news medium (*The Star*) and an alternative news medium (*Malaysiakini*) before the historic change of the country's ruling party. In particular, the paper reveals why a financial scandal became politicised, and how a controversial issue was framed within the context of lawsuit threats and newspaper permit suspension. A total of 815 straight news articles from 1 July to 30 September 2016 published in *The Star* (185 articles) and *Malaysiakini* (630 articles) were analysed. The quantitative content analysis revealed that headlines generally contained two to three dimensions, and *The Star* had typically longer and more multi-dimensional headlines. The political, constitution and jurisprudence dimensions dominated the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) news headlines, accounting for 56.7% of 1,619 dimensions identified. Although 1MDB was a financial scandal, only *Malaysiakini* framed it as such while *The Star* downplayed the effect of the alleged embezzlement of 1MDB funds on the Malaysian economy. As for the crime and justice dimension, *The Star* focused on details of the unfolding events whereas *Malaysiakini* highlighted suspects of the alleged embezzlement and sacking of high-ranking government officers assisting the investigation. There is a stark contrast evident in the framing of the morality dimension of 1MDB news articles with *The Star* presenting the government voice, whereas *Malaysiakini* carried the voice of the opposition leaders and religious heads. The findings indicate that *The Star* was more guarded in framing 1MDB news compared to *Malaysiakini*.

Keywords: *The Star*, *Malaysiakini*, framing, 1MDB, financial scandal

## INTRODUCTION

The study compared the framing of 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB), a financial scandal involving top government officials in *The Star* and *Malaysiakini*, news media in Malaysia. In particular, the paper reveals why a financial scandal became politicised, and how a controversial issue is framed in the context of fears of lawsuit and newspaper permit suspension. The five legislations that restrict press freedom in Malaysia are the Publications and Printing Presses Act, Internal Security Act, Sedition Act, Official Secrets Act and Defamation Act (Yang & De Rycker, 2017).

1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) is a strategic development company set up by the former Prime Minister Najib Razak in February 2009 as a platform for foreign investment to drive long-term economic development for the country (Ramanathan, 2016). 1MDB was originally Terengganu Investment Authority established to further the economic interests of the state of Terengganu (Hisyam, 2015). 1MDB invested in a number of overseas ventures including PetroSaudi to develop Arab's energy projects (Brown & Wright, 2016). In early 2015, media attention was drawn to 1MDB after it missed payments and owed \$11 billion to banks and bondholders (Brown & Wright, 2016). In July 2015, 1MDB came under investigation for alleged impropriety after investigators traced transfers of some US\$700 million into Najib Razak's personal bank accounts (*South China Morning Post*, 2018, June 9). This was followed by media reports on investigations by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) into international corruption focusing on properties in the United States (Story, 2015) and Cayman investments in the Caribbean (Peel, O'Murchu & Harris, 2015). For details on key transactions conveying the extent of the purported transgressions, see Case (2017).

In 2015, Najib Razak sacked his deputy who queried the 1MDB loses ("Malaysian PM", 2015). He also terminated the Special Task Force on 1MDB and the Parliament's Public Accounts Committee (PAC), suspended *The Edge* publications, arrested Rafizi Ramli (a prominent Malaysian opposition lawmaker from *Parti Keadilan Rakyat*, PKR), and removed the Attorney General (Story, 2015). In 2016, Swiss and U.S. prosecutors revealed purchases done using 1MDB fund. In 2017, the U.S. prosecutors identified individuals linked to 1MDB such as former Singaporean banker Yeo Jiawei (Robertson, 2017), Jho Low (*The Guardian*, 2017, June 16), Miranda Kerr and Leonardo DiCaprio (Holmes, 2017). The alleged use of 1MDB funds to finance the 2013 election was a major campaign issue in the urban areas during the 2018 14<sup>th</sup> General Election. This, among other reasons, led to the defeat of the *Barisan Nasional* coalition which had ruled Malaysia for 60 years since independence. The newly elected *Pakatan Harapan* government lifted the Official Secrets Act on the Attorney-General's Report and The 1MDB Audit Report was declassified on 15 May 2018 (National Audit Department, 2018).

Very little is known about the framing of 1MDB news because media researchers may have inadvertently avoided it due to the sensitivity of the issue. Thus far, the focus has been largely on the framing of ethnic-religious issues and partisan politics. For example, Sanawi (2014) showed that *Utusan Malaysia* and *The Star* (mainstream news media) were critical of *Bersih* 3.0 rally while *Harakah* (alternative news media) framed the rally as an effective platform in garnering support for the opposition to bring about change. *Harakah* belongs to the opposition Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS). The same event was portrayed positively by *Keadilan Daily* and negatively by *UMNO Online* (Selamat & Rosli, 2015). *Keadilan Daily* is a newspaper belonging to *Pakatan Keadilan Rakyat* (an opposition at the time but currently in the ruling government) whereas *UMNO Online* belongs to the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), a member of the *Barisan Nasional* coalition led by former Prime Minister Najib Razak. In partisan politics, the news media's approach to framing is predictable because they favour authorities they are linked to. With regard to ethnic-religious

issues, the news media tend to portray the situation as being under control to avoid heightening interethnic tensions such as the Low Yat incident whereby a theft case escalated into a racism-fuelled brawl (Yang & De Rycker, 2017). Similarly, the incident whereby Selangor Islamic Affairs Department (JAIS) turned up at Damasara Utama Methodist Church to investigate the presence of Muslims was reported with a neutral stance by both *Utusan Malaysia* and *The Star* (mainstream news media). In addition, Yang and Leong (2017) revealed that *The Star* downplayed the “Cow-Head” protest by Muslims on 28 August 2009 by presenting the story in opinion pieces (editorials, columns, and opinions) rather than in straight news articles. In contrast, the alternative news website *Malaysiakini* questioned the legality of the Malaysian authorities in relocating a Hindu temple to a Muslim-majority area in the state of Selangor. Numerous studies confirmed the predictability of news framing of ethnic-religious issues, that is, downplayed by mainstream newspapers and sensationalised by alternative newspapers (see also Azlan, Rahim, & Basri, 2012; Ismail & Ahmad, 2014; Khalid, 2011). While the 1MDB scandal is a financial scandal and not related to ethnic issues, this study reveals that 1MDB takes on political dimensions, due to the involvement of the former prime minister who set up the fund.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF STUDY

The theoretical framework used in this study is the framing theory based on Entman’s (1993) definition of framing:

*Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame 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. (Entman, 1993, p. 52)*

Entman (1993) used the example of the cold war frame that dominated US foreign affairs news at one time. The cold war frame selectively made certain aspects more salient to influence audiences. The frame defined civil wars as problems, diagnosed the source (cause) of the problem as communist rebels, passed moral judgement on the cause of the problem and their effects, recommended solutions for the problems and predicted their likely effects. Repetition makes these aspects of the cold war more salient. Salience is also achieved through associations with symbols which are culturally familiar to audiences, that is, if the frames connect to the audience’s existing schemata or belief systems. In framing, details that are omitted are equally important as those included, that is, some problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations and/or recommendations/solutions that are intentionally omitted can steer the audience towards thinking in a particular way.

In Entman’s (1993) view, in the communication process, frames have four locations: the communicator, the text, the receiver, and the culture. The communicators (journalists) make framing judgements on what to say in the news. The text they produce contains “frames, which are manifested by the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotype images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). The frames, however, may or may not influence the receiver (audience) as intended by the communicator – subject to audience’s existing schemata or belief systems. “The culture is the stock of commonly invoked frames; in fact, culture might be defined as the empirically demonstrable set of common frames exhibited in the discourse and thinking of most people in a social grouping” (Entman, 1993, p. 53). Put simply, culture in the communication process refers to pre-

existing cultural expectations or common patterns of thinking among the audience, which is linked to their existing schemata or belief systems.

While Entman (1993) views frames as having four locations, de Vreese (2005) is more concerned with the processes taking place at those locations. de Vreese (2005) views communication as a dynamic process that involves frame-building (how frames emerge) and frame-setting (the interaction between media frames and audience predispositions). The three stages are framing in the newsroom, frames in the news, and framing effects. Frame-building connects the first two stages. The starting point of how frames emerge takes place in the newsroom where journalists take into consideration editorial policies, news value as well as social movements. With these in mind, the journalists build frames in the news using issue-specific and generic frames. Examples of generic frames given by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) are conflict, human interest, attribution of responsibility, morality and economic consequences, and these are applicable across different types of news. Other researchers such as Boydston, Card, Gross, Resnik, and Smith (2014) recommend other generic frames, including the economic frame, capacity and resources frames, morality frames, fairness and equality frames, constitution and jurisprudence frames, policy prescription and evaluation, law and order, crime and justice frame, security and defence frame, health and safety frames, quality of life frame, cultural identity frames, public opinion frames, political frames, and external regulation and reputation frames. The relevance of the frame depends on the news coverage as well as the journalist's intention to make certain aspects of a perceived reality more salient. The outcome of the frame-building process are frames that manifest in the text. Subsequent to frame-building is the frame-setting process which connects the second and third stages of communication as conceptualised by de Vreese (2005). Framing effects refer to the effects of framing on the audience such as information processing, attitudinal or behavioural changes that can be studied.

Gamson (2001) divided news framing research into three areas: publishing process, text analysis, and the relationship between texts and the audience. In fact, these three areas are in accordance with de Vreese's (2005) conception of the three stages of framing: framing in the newsroom, frames in the news, and framing effects. Research on frames in the news, through either text or content analysis, examines what the news says or, put more technically, news framing. Gamson and Modigliani (1987, p. 143) defined news (media) frames as "a central organizing idea or storyline that provides meaning to the unfolding strip of events. ... The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue". de Vreese (2005, p. 53) stated "in short, a frame is an emphasis in salience of different aspects of a topic" and this is used as the operational definition of frame in the present study. For example, a financial scandal involving a politician has an economic aspect as well as a political aspect, and either or both aspects of the news can be emphasised in the news framing.

In analysing the content of the frames in the news, Entman (1993) stated that a content analysis informed by the theory of framing would avoid treating all negative or positive terms or utterances as equally salient and influential. The salience of elements in the text can be determined by studying framing effects on the audience (which goes beyond the analysis of the news content) but the content analysis can reveal repetitions of frames and associations with symbols which are culturally familiar to audiences. To assess the prevalence of frames in the news, an inductive approach can be taken whereby frames emerge from the news analysed but the limitation of the inductive approach is that it relies on "too small a sample" and the analysis is difficult to replicate (Hertog & McLeod, 2001, as cited in de Vreese, 2005, p. 53). On the other hand, a deductive approach is based on frames that are defined and operationalised before the analysis. Scholars in favour of the deductive approach, including Cappella and Jamieson (1997) and de Vreese (2005) believe that the pre-defined frames lend focus to the analysis. Using a priori defined news frames also facilitates

generalisability and comparability of findings across social issues and studies, which is vital for theory building. In the present study, a deductive approach to the content analysis of news frames was adopted.

## METHOD

### *Corpus*

A quantitative content analysis of online news articles from a mainstream newspaper (*The Star*) and an alternative newspaper (*Malaysiakini*) was conducted. *The Star* was established on 9 September 1971 as a regional newspaper and on June 23, 1995, it was recognised as Malaysia's first news website. Now *The Star* is the widest read English newspaper in West Malaysia. *The Star* is 42% majority-owned by Huaren Holdings Sdn Bhd, affiliated with the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), a race-based political party under the *Barisan Nasional* coalition (Siow, as cited in Lim, 2014).

*Malaysiakini*, launched in 1999, is acknowledged as the first independent news website in Malaysia and publishes news in Malay, English, Chinese and Tamil. *Malaysiakini* receives no funding from the federal or state ruling governments and is owned by a non-government entity (Lim, 2014). The seed capital for *Malaysiakini* was mainly from its founders (Premesh Chandran and Steven Gan) and a US\$100,000 grant from the Bangkok-based Southeast Asian Press Alliance (SEAPA) (*Malaysiakini*, n.d.). Over the years, *Malaysiakini* received grant support from agencies such as Asia Foundation, Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), Dutch Embassy in Malaysia, Free Voice (FV), Friedrich Naumann Foundation (FNS), International Centre for Journalists (ICFJ), Media Development Loan fund (MDLF), National Endowment of Democracy (NED), and Open Society Institute (OSI) but none of the grants exceeded 10% of *Malaysiakini*'s total budget to ensure that the news website did not become reliant on any single source of funds and to maintain its independent reporting (*Malaysiakini*, n.d.).

The use of the search term "1MDB" in the online portal of the two news media yielded 815 news articles from 1 July to 30 September 2016 (185 from *The Star*, 630 from *Malaysiakini*). The emphasis was on straight news articles to reflect the newspapers' official stance towards the issue.

The data collection period was chosen to coincide with the announcement of the DOJ probe into the purchase of assets with funds allegedly embezzled from 1MDB. This was the peak of 1MDB news reporting in Malaysia after the DOJ charged that from 2009 to 2015, more than US\$4.5 billion (RM19 billion) belonging to 1MDB had been diverted by high-level officials and their associates. By September 2016, the 1MDB news coverage had decreased tremendously. The data collection period is within the time frame recommended by scholars such as Ali (2015) and Gabriel (2018) for studying news media's response to DOJ's revelations of "one of history's most outrageous public-corruption scandals" (Gabriel, 2018, p. 69).

## DATA ANALYSIS

The unit of analysis was the headlines of news articles. The main ideas in headlines are repeated in the lead sentence of the news article and reveal its theme.

In the study, a deductive approach in coding was adopted, whereby Boydston et al.'s (2014) "Policy Frames Codebook" was referred to. Boydston et al.'s (2014) framework was developed through several rounds of inductive and deductive testing of 9,502 news articles on immigration, smoking and same-sex marriage from 1990 to 2012. The outcome was a reliable and comprehensive framework comprising 15 frames: economic; capacity and resources; morality; fairness and equality; constitution and jurisprudence; policy prescription and evaluation; law and order, crime and justice frame; security and defence; health and safety; quality of life; cultural identity; public opinion; political; external regulation and reputation; and others. The preliminary analysis of 1MDB news headlines (Murudi & Ting, 2017) showed that only five frame dimensions were applicable, namely, economic; crime and justice; economic; constitution; and jurisprudence and morality.

Each word in the headlines studied was coded with reference to Boydston et al.'s (2014) framework shown in Table 1. The examples shown in Table 1 are taken from Murudi and Ting (2017) to show the interrelated ideas of the five frame dimensions which helped to reduce subjectivity in coding 1MDB headlines. The presence or absence of the frame dimensions were coded as yes or no, respectively. However, this coding required the need to study phrases that cohere with a particular frame dimension. For example, in the headline "Umno Youth vice-chief lodged report as an individual", the words "lodged report" allude to report of criminal activities and were coded as the crime and justice frame. The words "Umno Youth vice-chief" were coded as the political frame because Umno is a political party in Malaysia. The "Umno Youth vice-chief" term can also be referred to by name, and the relevant frame is the political frame as well. A single sentence can cue more than one frame dimension but a single word is usually coded as one frame. For example, a headline with the words "Bank Negara Governor (Central Bank Governor)" was coded as the economic frame because "Bank Negara Malaysia plays its role as an overseer in ensuring the safety, reliability, and efficiency of payment systems infrastructure, and to safeguard the public's interest" (Bank Negara Malaysia, 2018). To ensure the accuracy of the coding, the coded headlines were revisited based on Card, Boydston, Gross, Resnik, and Smith (2015) who reported how the "Policy Frames Codebook" was produced.

**Table 1.** Frame dimensions according to Boydston et al. (2014)

Frame Dimension	Definition	Examples
Constitution and Jurisprudence	Does the article focus on the constraints imposed on freedoms granted to individuals, governments, and corporations via the Constitution, Bill of Rights and other amendments, or judicial interpretation, specifically with the authority of individuals/corporations to regulate and act independent of government?	Headline: US DOJ Report: Police to act only if there's criminal element—IGP (Borneo Post, 26 July 2016). The words "US DOJ Report", "Police", "IGP" refer to government authorities.
Political	Does the article focus on any political considerations surrounding an issue? Highlights actions or efforts or stances that are political, such as partisan filibusters,	Headline: Rahman Dahlan: Najib again proves wrong Dr M's claims (Borneo Post, 30 September 2016). The names

involvement of lobbyist, bipartisan efforts, dealmaking and vote trading, appealing to one's base, mentions of political manoeuvring or explicit statements that a policy issue is good or bad for a particular political party?

refer to Malaysian politicians and ministers.

Economic	Does the article focus on the costs, benefits, or monetary/financial implications of the issue (to an individual, family, community, or to the economy as a whole)?	Headline: Case closed on 1MDB based on available info, says BNM Governor (12 August 2016, Borneo Post, 2016). The words "BNM Governor" refers to the Bank Negara (Central Bank) Governor, an authority in Malaysian economy.
Crime and Justice	Does the article focus on specific policies in practice and their enforcement, incentives, and implications; the interpretation of laws by individuals and its enforcement; lawbreaking, loopholes, fines, sentencing and punishment and also on the increase or reduction in crime?	Headline: Umno Youth vice-chief lodged report as an individual (Borneo Post, 31 July 2016). The words "lodged report" allude to report of criminal activities.
Morality	Does the article focus on any perspective or policy objective or action (including proposed action) that is compelled by religious doctrine or interpretation, duty, honour, righteousness or any other sense of ethics or social responsibility?	Headline: DOJ lawsuit: Don't be driven by emotions, Hishammuddin advises Umno members (Borneo Post, 7 August 2016). The words (e.g., don't be driven by emotions) suggest that it is right to remain calm.

## RESULTS

In the three-month study period, *Malaysiakini* (630 articles) had published more articles on 1MDB than *The Star* (185 articles), clearly indicating that the alternative newspaper was more interested in the 1MDB issue.

### *Number of frame dimensions in mainstream and alternative news media headlines*

The number of frame dimensions exceeded the number of headlines because a single headline may contain two to three dimensions. *The Star* had relatively more frame dimensions in its headlines (mean of 2.22; range: 2–5) than *Malaysiakini* (mean of 1.92; range: 2–4), indicating that *The Star* headlines were longer and more multi-dimensional.

An example of a one-frame headline is "Red-shirts to hold gathering near Sogo" (*The Star*, 22 July 2016). This has a clear political dimension because "Red-shirts" referred to *Barisan Nasional* supporters who opposed the *Bersih* supporters who wore yellow T-shirts. An example of a headline containing three dimensions is "MACC working with FBI on 1MDB probe" (*The Star*, 22 July 2016). MACC (for Malaysian Anti-Corruption Council) and FBI reflect the constitution and jurisprudence dimension as both are authorities that act independent of the government in investigating cases. Since 1MDB is a strategic

development company set up for foreign investments, it was coded as an economic dimension. The word “probe” suggested possible lawbreaking, giving the news headline a crime and justice dimension.

### *The dominant frame dimensions*

Two dimensions dominated the 1MDB news headlines. Table 2 shows that overall, the political dimension (32.2%) is the most dominant dimension in the 1MDB headlines, followed by constitution and jurisprudence (24.5%). *Malaysiakini* showed a similar pattern but *The Star* gave the two dimensions almost equal salience. Since 1MDB is a company set up by the then prime minister, the issue developed a strong political dimension and the economic dimension became secondary despite it being a financial scandal. Additionally, the need to bring wrongdoers to court for money laundering made the constitution and jurisprudence frame relevant.

**Table 2.** Frequency and percentage of frame dimensions in *The Star* and *Malaysiakini* headlines

Frame Dimensions	<i>Malaysiakini</i> (n=630 articles)		<i>The Star</i> (n=185 articles)		Overall Total (N=815 articles)	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Political	417	34.5	105	25.6	522	32.2
Constitution & Jurisprudence	287	23.7	110	26.8	397	24.5
Economic	195	16.1	75	18.3	270	16.7
Crime and Justice	200	16.5	67	16.3	267	16.5
Morality	111	9.2	53	13.0	164	10.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>1210</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>410</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>1620</b>	<b>100</b>

The framing of the political dimension was different in the two news media. *The Star* showed that 1MDB was under investigation and Malaysian authorities were taking action against the perpetrators. In addition to reporting the unfolding events, *The Star* produced more news with politicians’ comments on the *Bersih 5* rally, leakage of the Attorney-General’s report on 1MDB, and the DOJ report on Malaysian Official 1 (MO1). In contrast, *Malaysiakini* criticised Najib Razak and placed the blame on the *Barisan Nasional* government for corruption. *Malaysiakini* produced some news on Najib Razak’s denial of the DOJ report but the quantity was far less than those that reported the opposition’s comments. For example, “Who else had RM2.6b in his account, asks Muhyiddin” (*Malaysiakini*, 22 July 2016) and “Name and shame Najib, Dr M tells foreign nations” (*Malaysiakini*, 25 July 2016). Since 1MDB involved politicians, both news media used their names in the headlines.

One case in point to show the different framing strategies of the mainstream and alternative news media is Najib Razak’s involvement in 1MDB scandal. Initially, *The Star* reported that Najib Razak had no connection with Malaysian Official 1 (MO1), but later acknowledged that MO1 was Najib Razak but defended that he did not commit any wrongdoing. *The Star* was less focused on MO1 stories because it pointed to the then prime minister of Malaysia. In contrast, *Malaysiakini* frequently mentioned that MO1 needed to be arrested for money laundering and highlighted the opposition’s criticism on MO1.

As for the constitution and jurisprudence dimension, *The Star* gave it as much salience as the political dimension (Table 2), partly because the headlines were sentences with doer (politicians involved) and action (involving the constitution and jurisprudence



dimension). For example, “Court sets Nov 7 to hear Najib’s application to strike out Dr M’s suit” (*The Star*, 4 August 2016) and “Zaid files suit for return of 1MDB monies” (*The Star*, 17 August 2016). Meanwhile, the alternative newspaper had a different focus for the constitution and jurisprudence dimension. *Malaysiakini* sensationalised the *Sarawak Report*’s unauthorised news of Attorney-General’s report on 1MDB and MO1. *Malaysiakini* also showed how the Malaysian Agong (King) was dragged into the 1MDB case. For example, “Agong’s cousin ticks off MP for dragging palace into ‘MO1’ matter” (*Malaysiakini*, 21 August 2016). Further, *Malaysiakini* attempted to highlight the severity of the 1MDB case by mentioning the involvement of lawyers, and authorities such as the Attorney General, Inspector General of Police, police, FBI, and MACC as well as investigations by other countries.

A larger percentage of *The Star* news headlines (18.3%) carried the economic frame dimension compared to *Malaysiakini* (16.1%, Table 2). *The Star* headlines highlighted two main authorities (Singapore banks, Bank Negara), their actions (producing the 1MDB audit report and audited statements for 2013 and 2014), and consequences of 1MDB money laundering on economic growth and inflation rate. *The Star* attempted to be neutral by showing that 1MDB did not adversely affect Malaysia’s economy (“Investments spread across the country” and “1MDB no impact on economy”) while concurrently, producing contradictory news (“Bursa Malaysia down while other bourses up” and “1MDB continues to meet debt obligations”). *The Star* also carried articles on foreign investment to frame 1MDB as not affecting the Malaysian economy, and it blamed the opposition for feeding lies to the people for their own political interests.

On the other hand, *Malaysiakini* promoted the perception that saddled with huge debt, Malaysia was selling land to China, and going to be bankrupt soon. For example, “Ringgit headed for biggest weekly drop due to oil, 1MDB controversy” (*Malaysiakini*, 22 July 2016). *Malaysiakini* also published news on how Malaysian taxpayers’ money is ensnared in seized property overseas and blamed the government for their inaction in getting back the money. *Malaysiakini* covered the damages lost due to the money laundering but *The Star* made no mention of the amount. In short, *Malaysiakini* covered 1MDB as a financial scandal but *The Star* focused on the financial institutions’ actions which was more of a procedural matter.

The crime and justice dimension became prominent when the Attorney-General’s report on 1MDB (classified under the Official Secrets Act) was leaked, and when DOJ announced the alleged embezzlement of the 1MDB funds. *The Star* repeated the headlines but the content was different. For example, “Johari: Umno wrongdoers must answer for misdeeds” was carried as a news headline on 21 and 22 August 2016. *The Star* appeared to report on the developments of the event in consecutive articles to create news and sustain interest in the issue. For example, “Langkawi MP lodges police report over ‘MO1’ misinterpretation” (*The Star*, 20 August 2016) and “Langkawi MP says sorry for linking King to MO1” (*The Star*, 22 August 2016). By reporting on actual events relating to crime and justice, *The Star* stayed clear of trouble with the then ruling government.

In comparison, *Malaysiakini* did not choose such a safe approach. Their headlines with the crime and justice dimension highlighted suspects of the alleged embezzlement such as Jho Low and Riza Aziz (Najib Razak’s family friend and stepson, respectively) as well as high-ranking officers who assisted the investigation and were removed from office (former Attorney-General Tan Sri Abdul Gani Patail, former Bank Negara Governor Tan Sri Zeti Akthar Aziz and Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) chief commissioner Tan Sri Abu Kassim Mohamed). *Malaysiakini* was apparently not afraid to expose the leakage of government secrets, misuse of funds, and abuse of power in relation to 1MDB. For example, “Two more charges for ex-BSI banker in 1MDB-linked case” (*Malaysiakini*, 19 August 2016).

The morality dimension was the least used by both news media (Table 2). *The Star* was a channel for the then prime minister to salvage his reputation. After the DOJ announcement of the alleged embezzlement of 1MDB funds in July, the prime minister urged the public not to jump to conclusions and to give time for inquiries. He also pledged to continue his responsibility as a prime minister and claimed no wrongdoing on the matter of 1MDB. The words used in the headlines reflect duty (“fulfil my duties”, “throws full support”), social responsibility (“not misused”, “cooperating”), and personal interpretation (“need more clarity”, “refuses to speculate”). In August 2016, *The Star* took a different turn—the Malaysian government advised the public to not get involved in illegal rallies especially *Bersih* that was planned to be held in November 2016. The morality dimension in *The Star* headlines painted a positive image of politicians especially the then Prime Minister Najib Razak to appeal to the emotional side of readers to counter the portrayal of 1MDB as illicit money laundering.

In contrast, *Malaysiakini* presented the perspectives of the grassroots and used a moral and religious voice. *Malaysiakini* carried the opposition voice urging the then prime minister to take full responsibility for the biggest money scandal in the history of the country and resign immediately. The words used were “civil societies raise concerns”, “PM must resign”, “apologize”, “can show truth”, “stop making assumptions”, and “name and shame Najib”. Additionally, *Malaysiakini* also quoted from Christian and Muslim religious heads on transparency and values. For example, “Tackle 1MDB affair urgently, Catholic bishops say” (*Malaysiakini*, 31 August 2016) and “Swear on the Quran you didn’t know about plans to sabotage 1MDB’s IPO” (*Malaysiakini*, 30 August 2016). In *Malaysiakini*, the ethical questions were mostly on Najib Razak and the *Barisan Nasional* government on their involvement in 1MDB’s money laundering.

## CONCLUSION

The findings illustrate how the controversial financial scandal 1MDB was framed by the Malaysian news media in light of Najib’s defamation suit against *Harakah* (the opposition Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party’s newspaper) and the three-month suspension of *The Edge* publications (*The Edge Weekly* and *The Edge Daily*). Inevitably, news media companies, particularly the mainstream media, tread carefully to avoid lawsuits and permit suspensions, and arrest of their editors under various laws such as the Sedition Act 1948, the Official Secrets Act 1972, or Defamation Act 1957. Both news media reported views of politicians on the 1MDB developments. However, to stay clear of trouble, *The Star* only reported on events and comments made by politicians in favour of the ruling government. *Malaysiakini*, on the other hand, quoted politicians and other individuals, freely criticising the former prime minister. Elsewhere, Haley (2010) found that news media give more attention to politicians’ expressions which can lead to a stereotyped narrative pattern (Tong, 2006). Thus, the selection of individuals for quotes can result in biased news coverage. For instance, a tabloid media often frames issues to attribute blame to elites or social out-groups, and this is reflective of the interpretative reporting style in journalism (Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017).

Evidently, the alternative newspaper *Malaysiakini* presented readers with a better coverage of 1MDB. The reporting of 1MDB news was supported with additional information which refreshed readers’ memory on past related information, unlike *The Star* which was more inclined to present descriptive details of related events. It is a general perception that the lack of contextual reporting can lead to misunderstanding among the general public (Yang & Ishak, 2012). In his work on Occupy Wall Street news reporting, Cissel (2012)

contended that alternative newspapers are usually fairer in revealing sources of viewpoints unlike mainstream newspapers. Cissel (2012) also highlighted that mainstream news media use confusing narratives in their news reporting while alternative media try to convey the real stories. In the context of 1MDB news reporting, we could see the resulting confusion as a result of purposeful framing that downplayed certain dimensions (e.g., economic) so that news remained favourable to the government and helped it maintain its integrity in the governance of the country's economy. *Malaysiakini*, on the other hand, emerged as the moral voice that questioned the government by highlighting power abuse, money laundering and incurrences of national debts and leaked government secrets (e.g., the *Sarawak Report*). By exposing the wrongdoings of a particular target group, public support for the group can become weakened (Xu, 2013).

The findings demonstrate that the perception of readers on issues and events is shaped by news media. Frames have a very powerful effect in influencing how people view the world, by influencing how it comes to be understood (Holody, 2006). If readers rely on only one media source, they may not develop critical perspectives to realise that they are being fed stereotypes. However, when they seek news from various media sources, they develop a broader perspective to make a fair judgment on issues and the people involved. Framing influences how readers think about the issue as the framing emphasises particular aspects of an issue. Different news media frame an issue differently in accordance with their interests. For example, in the study time period, *The Star* had fewer articles on 1MDB and kept certain issues out of discussion but *Malaysiakini* questioned the government's accountability by reporting more on the opposition's criticism of the government. Based on each respective news media's intentions, the actors in a particular issue are framed differently and attention is drawn to selected aspects of the issue.

Future research should consider examining the effect of framing of 1MDB news articles on readers. In the context of Malaysia, this would also a prime time to compare how 1MDB news reporting is framed under the previous and the present government, particularly when the new government had initiated investigations into the case.

*Data Availability: The data used to support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.*

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