



Framing of the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) financial scandal: Politicising by mainstream and alternative newspapers before and after change of government

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ABSTRACT

This study compares the framing of the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) financial scandal and the politicising of the issue by a mainstream and an alternative newspaper before and after the historic change of ruling party in Malaysia in the 2018 general election. A quantitative content analysis of 1,357 news articles in *The Star* and *Malaysiakini* was conducted along with lexical analyses using a textual analytics software known as AntConc. The results indicate that 1MDB was more salient in *Malaysiakini* before the change of government but its salience was elevated in *The Star* during the new *Pakatan Harapan* regime. Both newspapers were oriented towards episodic framing, but in the new regime, *The Star*'s percentage of episodic articles increased while that of *Malaysiakini* decreased. The low percentage of thematic articles (less than 11%) indicate that the media framing of 1MDB could have made readers oblivious to the ramifying impacts of 1MDB on Malaysia and its citizens. *The Star* tended to quote ruling party politicians and adopted a formal stance in reporting 1MDB-linked events whereas *Malaysiakini* used more varied news sources and a personalised stance to engage readers. Before the change of government, *The Star* had a balance of positive, negative and neutral 1MDB-related articles but *Malaysiakini* articles were inclined towards a negative valence. During the *Pakatan Harapan* regime, both newspapers adopted a positive stance in reporting on 1MDB, focusing on actions to resolve the financial scandal. The textual frequency analysis reveals an obvious lack of negative adjectives, indicating an avoidance of evaluative judgements on a financial scandal involving high-ranking political figures.

Keywords: ***alternative media, mainstream media, framing, 1MDB***

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia's 14th general election on 9 May 2018 ended a 60-year rule by a coalition party for the first time since the independence of Malaysia. The change of ruling government changed the manner in which the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) financial scandal was handled and how it was framed in the media. During the former political regime, the transactions of the state-owned company set up for foreign investment came to light in early 2015, but media coverage had been cautiously selective in view of four legislations regulating press freedom. The Printing Presses and Publications Act (1984) controls the publication of news deemed derogatory or critical towards the government (Wok & Mohamed, 2017). As printing licences and publishing permits have to be approved by the Home Affairs Minister every year, the media often exercises self-censorship in their news coverage. Additionally, the Internal Security Act 1960, the Official Secrets Act 1972, and Defamation Act 1957 are legislations related to sedition and defamation. The Internal Security Act 1960 and the Official Secrets Act 1972 enable authorities to detain anyone without trial if perceived to be disrupting national harmony or security (Wok & Mohamed, 2017). In 2013, the former Prime Minister Najib Razak announced that his government intended to abolish the Sedition Act, but the Act was strengthened in 2014 on the grounds that it was needed for preserving security and national harmony (Wok & Mohamed, 2017). In 2015, authorities were permitted to block content that is deemed seditious and the penalty was increased from three to seven years of imprisonment if found guilty (Wok & Mohamed, 2017). These legislations which are used by the Malaysian government to control the media for social harmony, political stability and economic development deter the media from being critical (Wok & Mohamed, 2017).

The media have reasons to fear legislations regulating press freedom. For instance, *The Heat* was suspended indefinitely on 19 December 2013 for violating provisions of its printing permit after it carried a story about how the then Prime Minister and his wife spent their money but the suspension was later lifted on 7 February 2014 ("The Heat to resume publication", 2014). In another incident, the publishing permit for two publications of The Edge Communications Sdn Bhd was suspended for three months from 27 July 2015 over the publication of 1MDB-related reports (Story, 2015). The Home Ministry had claimed that *The Edge's* "reporting on 1MDB could lead to public disorder" (Wright & Hope, 2018, p. 321). However, on 17 December 2018 (after the new ruling coalition came into power), the High Court ruled that *The Edge* could claim for damages amounting to more than RM11 million from the Home Ministry for losses incurred during the three-month suspension.

In a climate of threatened press freedom, the alternative media fulfills the public's need for alternative perspectives of news as mainstream media are often seen as tools for government propaganda. Additionally, in Malaysia, the online platforms for alternative media benefit from a no-censorship policy on the internet announced by Mahathir Mohamad in 1997 (Steele, 2009). The main agreement in the Bill of Guarantee signed by Malaysia is that Malaysia should not impose any censorship on the internet as a reassurance to international investors (Wok & Mohamed, 2017). The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 replaced the Broadcasting Act 1984 which allowed the Film Censorship Board under the Home Ministry to control all broadcasting. The replacement was timely and necessary as the Broadcasting Act 1984 did not have provisions that could ascribe conditions for the licensing of Internet and satellite broadcasters despite the rapid expansion of the Internet and new media (Wok & Mohamed, 2017).

With regard to the no-censorship policy, Section 3 of the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 states that "Nothing in this Act shall be construed as permitting the censorship of the Internet". As a result, online news portals enjoy more press freedom than printed press because they do not need to apply for a publishing permit every year. These

conditions enable alternative media in Malaysia to lead media opinions, creating a counter-hegemonic frame (Kenix, 2011). “Online journalism has been much celebrated in Malaysia by those who craved for alternative perspectives” (Yang, Ponnann, & De Rycker, 2020, p. 41). However, online news portals still practise vigilance. The Evidence Act 1950, which was amended in 2012, holds websites, online forums, new outlets, blogs, internet service providers, and online users fully responsible for seditious content, irrespective of the authorship (Wok & Mohamed, 2017).

Research has shown that mainstream and alternative news media tend to report incidents with different salience, frames, news sources, and valence (Yang & De Rycker, 2017). For instance, the Low Yat Plaza theft case in Kuala Lumpur was framed as a racial issue. *Sin Chew*, a mainstream Chinese newspaper, was the most critical compared to *Harian Metro*, *The Star*, and *Malaysiakini*. As for the cow-head protest on 28 August 2009, where a group of Shah Alam residents protested against the relocation of a Hindu temple, Yang and Leong (2017, p. 85) found that *Malaysiakini* published more and longer news articles than *The Star*, and employed the responsibility frame to portray the Chief Minister as “a statesman, and a leader who listens seriously to all Selangorians regardless of race, religion or partisanship”. The newspapers selected civilians with preferred perspectives on the incident as news sources. A lack of diversity in opinions surrounding ethnic-religious conflicts can give rise to extreme views which overshadow voices of reason and moderation (see also Sofian, 2017). A mainstream newspaper *The Star* cited government representatives, civilians and expert opinions in its 2013–2017 coverage of cyberbullying, and the most salient frame used was prevention and intervention strategies to raise awareness (Yang, 2020). A stark difference between mainstream and alternative news media is evident in the coverage of the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (Bersih) 3.0 rally, where the mainstream news media adopted a pro-government stance (Sanawi, 2014; Selamat & Rosli, 2015).

However, little is known about their framing of a high-profile financial scandal involving a former prime minister, Najib Razak. Any attempt to question the matter may be criminalised (Moniruzzaman & Farzana, 2018). To our knowledge, Murudi and Ting (2019) is the only published study on the media framing of 1MDB. They found that the English mainstream newspaper *The Star* was cautious in its attribution of blame but the alternative newspaper *Malaysiakini* had a negative valence and gave more visibility to 1MDB, seen in its larger number of articles. Other research on 1MDB were from the political perspective (Baris, 2017; Chin, 2016; Chong, 2018; Gabriel, 2018; Hutchinson, 2018; Ismail & Ahmad, 2014; Moniruzzaman & Farzana, 2018; Nor, Firdaus, & Kaur, 2020; Wong & Ooi, 2018), financial angle (Ferry, Zakaria, Zakaria, & Slack, 2018; Hazis, 2018; Nazmi & Rahim, 2016), and legal aspect (Alaudin & Abdullah, 2019; Chen, 2019). It is important to study the framing of the 1MDB issue to investigate how the media exert influence on public and international interest for its serious ramifications on public trust, credibility of high-profile political figures, and reputation of national institutions, not to mention the country’s finances (Yoong, 2018). When the *Pakatan Harapan* government under Mahathir Mohamad came into power, investigations into 1MDB proceeded. Previously, *Malaysiakini* had highlighted the political dimension, implicating the then prime minister, while *The Star* had been guarded in their coverage (Murudi & Ting, 2019). A question which arises now is how the change of government affects the framing of 1MDB in mainstream and alternative newspapers. Thus, this study compares the framing of the 1MDB financial scandal and the politicising of the issue by a mainstream and an alternative newspaper before and after the change in government.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

In the communication discipline, framing research uncovers how the media shape public opinions on events and issues by focusing on either content or framing effects. Framing studies on content deal with the selection and salience of frames that manifest in the text. Based on Entman's (1993, p. 52) conceptualisation of framing, salience is achieved by selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making 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". The frames can be detected by examining particular words, metaphors, concepts, symbols and visual images linked to one central organising idea that consistently appear in the text, and this "renders one basic interpretation more readily discernible, comprehensible, and memorable than others" (Entman, 1991, p. 7). This is a sociological approach to framing whereby media frames are a dependent variable (Correa, 2010); the outcome of the frame-building process involving organisational pressures, journalistic routines and social movements (de Vreese, 2005).

The news articles can be framed in episodic or thematic frames. Based on Iyengar (1990), episodic framing depicts events or issues as particular instances and this influences readers to disconnect the episode from past history or events, unlike thematic framing which provides general contextual material such as policy issues, and underlying historical, social or economic antecedents. Thematic news is often interpretative (Dreijere, 2013), and readers tend to attribute causal and treatment responsibility to the government (Iyengar, 1990).

Studies have shown that journalists tend to use episodic framing rather than thematic framing for events and issues. In Malaysia, Yang and Heng's (2019) analysis of *The Star* showed the dominance of episodic framing in its 2014–2016 South China Sea dispute coverage. The mainstream media focuses on the here-and-now instead of offering contextualisation of the issue. Episodic framing is common in straight news and reflects a top-down communication format because of its reliance on elites as its new sources, which does not allow much space for journalists to be creative (Van Dijck, 2013). Park's (2012) analysis of *Chicago Tribune* articles over 10 years showed the prevalence of episodic framing over thematic framing, thereby exposing readers to news on individual perpetrators involved in corruption rather than corruption as a societal phenomenon. Excessive use of episodic framing may signal to the public and officials that corruption is inconsequential as long as it goes undetected, or that corruption issues will disappear when perpetrators are convicted (Park, 2012). For journalists to commit to their social function of evoking awareness for growing problems, Park (2012) suggested that they should adopt the thematic approach in the coverage of corruption issues. Interestingly, articles on white collar crimes are different from street crimes or poverty where episodic framing dominates. Wennermark (2013) analysed the reporting of Bernie Madoff's scandal in *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The New York Times* in 2007–2011 and found that the articles mention broader trends in white-collar crime and policies (thematic framing) as well as particular individuals (episodic framing). In episodic framing, the focus is on the perpetrator instead of the company, suggesting that corporate-owned media tend to protect the economic interests of corporations. In addition, Wennermark (2013) found greater focus on the criminal (10%) compared to the victim (8%). Because white-collar crimes does not cause obvious physical injury and does not fit the common perception of criminality, corruption cases are often disguised as normal business practices, making it difficult to be seen as an outright aggressive act on the victim (Wennermark, 2013). These reviews show that public perception of white-collar crimes is heavily influenced by how the media portrays the issue.

De Vreese and Boomgaarden (2003) introduced valence framing to political communication research whereby issues or events are evaluated positively or negatively. They argued that frames often have inherent valence, and in this way, news frames influence public support for various policy measures. “For Entman (1993), frames have inherent valence by nature as they contain a ‘moral evaluation’ as one of their defining characteristics” (Schuck & de Vreese, 2006, p. 10). Valence framing may influence readers’ attitudes towards issues and events.

Research on Malaysian newspapers shows that the neutral valence tends to be prevalent in mainstream newspapers while the negative valence is dominant in alternative newspapers. For the South China Sea dispute, *Malaysiakini* was critical (Yang, Ponnann, & De Rycker, 2020). However, the valence of *The Star* articles was mostly neutral (42.97%) and critical (35.42%) (Yang & Heng, 2019). Fewer articles (21.61%) were supportive of China’s claims, arguments, policy, and actions to stake their territorial claim on the South China Sea, and the presence of the positive valence in this issue reflects the newspaper’s multi-party orientation in reporting the conflict. The proportion of neutral, critical and supportive stance on the dispute can be attributed to Malaysia’s intention of maintaining an amicable bilateral relationship with China. A similar gravitation towards prevalent neutral (38.71%) and supportive (38.71%) stances was seen in *The Star*’s articles on the disappearance of flight Malaysian Airlines MH370, where most of the passengers were China nationals (Yang & Ponnann, 2019). In the context of bilateral relations, *The Star* articles often quoted individuals who supported cooperation, friendship and ties between Malaysia and China. However, a Malay mainstream newspaper, *Utusan Malaysia*, had a dominant neutral stance in its MH370 coverage. A Malaysian Chinese mainstream newspaper, *Sin Chew Daily*, was similar to the two newspapers published in China (*People’s Daily*, *Global Times*) in their dominant supportive valence, due to many Malaysians having business interests in China (Yang & Ponnann, 2019). Because of its Chinese readership, the valence of *Sin Chew Daily*’s MH370 coverage took into account the economic and political aspirations of both countries. Valence framing influences public support for various policy measures, but the review of valence framing in Malaysia newspapers indicates that national policy influences the coverage of issues and events to construct the desired national image for the Malaysian and international readership.

METHOD

Research context

This section describes key 1MDB-related events. In February 2009, 1MDB was established by Najib Razak, the former prime minister of Malaysia, as a state-owned company for foreign investment (Ramanathan, 2016). As the Finance Minister and Chairman of 1MDB’s Board of Advisors, he held power over both the management of the company and the board. 1MDB first started attracting attention in early 2015 when reports revealed it owed investors \$11 billion (Brown & Wright, 2016). In July 2015, alleged impropriety involving deposits of about US\$700 million into Najib Razak’s bank accounts was reported (“Malaysia 1MDB scandal”, 2018). Following this, the Department of Justice (DOJ) began probing into possible corruption tied to properties in the United States and the Caribbean. 1MDB investigations of fund misappropriation involved foreign countries such as the United States, Switzerland, Singapore, and Luxembourg.

1MDB developed into a political issue when Najib Razak removed his deputy and the Attorney-General investigating the issue (Story, 2015). This was followed by a series of events, seen as attempts to curb investigation into 1MDB. The Special Task Force on 1MDB

and the Parliament's Public Accounts Committee (PAC) were terminated. The Home Ministry suspended the publishing permit of *The Edge Weekly* and *The Edge Financial Daily* which reported on the issue and Rafizi Ramli, a prominent Malaysian opposition lawmaker, was arrested (Story, 2015). Another reporting medium, the independent portal *Sarawak Report* was blocked on 20 July 2015 (Ali, 2015).

In 2016 and 2017, Swiss and US prosecutors revealed purchases and individuals linked to 1MDB. The alleged use of the state fund to finance the 2013 election was successfully used by the opposition parties as a campaign issue during the 2018 14th General Election, breaking the *Barisan Nasional* coalition's 60-year rule since independence. Najib Razak was the then President of UMNO, the leading party in the coalition until its defeat. The ruling government under Mahathir Mohamad, from the new *Pakatan Harapan* coalition, lifted the Official Secrets Act restriction on the Attorney-General's 1MDB Audit Report on 15 May 2018 (Jabatan Audit Negara Malaysia, 2018). A special task force was set up to investigate 1MDB. In the same month, Najib Razak's condominium was raided and luxury items and foreign currencies were seized. Since then the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission has frozen bank accounts linked to 1MDB, and Najib Razak has been charged (Gunasegaram, 2018). An arrest warrant has also been issued for Low Taek Jho (better known as Jho Low) for alleged misuse of 1MDB funds (e.g., to purchase a luxury yacht and a private jet). The investigation uncovered more individuals involved in 1MDB transactions and a 34.6 billion debt. Najib Razak was charged for corruption on 3 July 2018 and arrested on 19 September 2018. The 1MDB trial is on-going and Najib Razak made his first appearance in court to answer charges on 3 December 2019. Thus far, Najib faces four charges of abusing his position to obtain gratification from 1MDB funds and 21 counts of money laundering involving the same money (Anbalagan, 2020). The visibility of 1MDB investigation in the media slowed down when the *Pakatan Harapan* government was replaced by the *Perikatan Nasional* government led by Muhyiddin Muhammad Yassin who became the 8th Prime Minister on 29 February 2020. On 28 July 2020, a Malaysian court sentenced Najib Razak to 12 years in prison after finding him guilty on all seven counts in the first of several multi-million dollar corruption trials but Najib Razak will appeal the verdict ("Najib Razak", 2020).

Corpus

The corpus for content analysis comprised 1,357 online articles from a mainstream newspaper, *The Star* and an alternative newspaper, *Malaysiakini* before and after the change of government on 9 May 2018. For ease of reference, the periods before and after the 14th General Election are referred to as "before GE" and "after GE" respectively. The two periods of data collection were selected due to the developments of the 1MDB scandal and the Malaysian political context. Before GE, the articles were collected between 1 July and 30 September 2016 because this was the peak of 1MDB news coverage in Malaysia after DOJ filed a civil suit on 1MDB under the Kleptocracy Asset Recovery Initiative (815 articles comprising 185 from *The Star* and 630 from *Malaysiakini*). After GE, the articles were collected from 10 May 2018 to 31 August 2018 (542 articles comprising 406 from *The Star* and 136 from *Malaysiakini*). This period was selected to coincide with the first 100 days of the *Pakatan Harapan* coalition as the ruling party, when the 1MDB investigation was initiated after an impasse under the *Barisan Nasional* government. The duration of three months for data collection is within the time frame recommended by media scholars (Ali, 2015; Gabriel, 2018).

The articles were identified using the search term "1MDB" in the online portal of the two newspapers. The alternative newspaper, *Malaysiakini* was chosen because it is known as pro-opposition and is owned by a non-government entity (Lim, 2014). According to the 2018 Reuters Digital News Report, *Malaysiakini* was the most popular media portal in Malaysia

with 44% of weekly usage by local users, followed by *The Star Online* (32%) and *Berita Harian Online* (24%) (“*Malaysiakini* is top news portal”, 2018). *The Star* was chosen as an example of a mainstream newspaper because it is the most popular English newspaper in West Malaysia. It is partly owned by Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), a Chinese-based political party in the *Barisan Nasional* coalition previously led by Najib Razak. Because of *Barisan Nasional*’s defeat in the 14th general election, *The Star* is affiliated to an opposition party under the *Pakatan Harapan* regime. Yet, as a mainstream newspaper, it is expected to continue as a government mouthpiece.

Analytical frameworks

The unit of analysis was news articles for the identification of episodic/thematic framing and valence. The content analysis was conducted through a deductive approach using predefined analytical categories. The coding was conducted by the second author. To calculate the intercoder reliability, a sub-sample of 40 was independently coded by the first author. The intercoder agreement was 90% for framing and 87.5% for valence.

For the analysis of episodic/thematic framing, a dominant frame was identified. An article is episodic if it is event-oriented (Iyengar, 1990) although it may contain background information (e.g., history, analysis of facts, expert opinions). An episodic-oriented article is triggered by an incident and is usually dated (e.g., “yesterday”, “X said on Tuesday”). The sources include statements by authoritative individuals, citations from reports, and disclosures by unnamed individuals. In contrast, an article is thematic if it highlights an issue in a wider context, focusing on trends over time (Iyengar, 1991).

As for valence, the headline and content were read to identify the dominant tone. De Vreese and Boomgaarden (2003, p. 378) acknowledged that a frame is inherently positive or negative depending on the perspective, that is, “with respect to for whom the information is positive or negative per se”. In this study, positive frames include actions to handle 1MDB and preserve the good image of the government (of the day) and the impact of 1MDB on citizens (e.g., economic consequences, political stability). Negative frames dealt with blame, criticism, allegations, suits, investigations of individuals, and mismanagement of 1MDB. During the preliminary analysis, the coding of multifaceted news such as rallies was discussed to reach intercoder agreement. For example, the reporting of the *Bersih* rally which called for clean and transparent governance has positive valence because it represents citizens’ actions in response to the 1MDB scandal. At the same time, it carries a negative valence because it highlights the then government’s wrongdoings. Therefore, the article is deemed to have neutral valence, which was operationalised as articles with no bias positively or negatively or the presence of both elements.

To triangulate the coding based on de Vreese and Boomgaarden (2003), the valence of articles was examined using the frequency of words. This was done with the assistance of a textual analytics software known as AntConc that can perform various lexical analyses. The articles were inputted into the software and content words (noun, verb, adjectives) were ranked according to their frequency of usage. By taking the top 20 or 30 words, the patterns of word usage show how words are repeatedly used to frame issues or events with a particular orientation.

Chi-square tests of independence were performed to determine whether there are significant differences between articles published before and after GE for episodic and thematic framing, and valence of the articles.

RESULTS

The salience of 1MDB in 1,357 news articles was analysed based on the number and average length of articles. Before GE, 1MDB was more salient in *Malaysiakini* (630 articles, 440 words) than *The Star* (185 articles, 350 words). After GE, 1MDB was more visible in *The Star* with a special section (406 articles, 360 words) than in *Malaysiakini* (136 articles, 390 words). Excerpts from articles are included to supplement the quantitative content analysis, to illustrate the results on the thematic and episodic framing, as well as the positive, negative and neutral valences.

Episodic and thematic framing of 1MDB news

1MDB coverage was strongly episodic in both newspapers. Table 1 shows that after GE, episodic framing increased in *The Star* (94.1%), concomitant with a decrease in thematic articles from 8.6% to 5.9%. On the other hand, *Malaysiakini* became more active in educating the public on the history and impact of 1MDB after GE, seen in the increase of thematic framing from 8.4% to 11.0%. However, the results of a chi-square test of independence showed that for *The Star*, there was no significant association between percentages of episodic and thematic framing before and after GE, $X^2(1, N=591) = 0.132, p=.75$. For *Malaysiakini*, the percentages of episodic and thematic framing before and after GE articles are also not significantly associated, $X^2(1, N=766) = 0.172, p=.75$. This indicates that the percentages of episodic and thematic framing are similar before and after GE in both the mainstream and alternative newspapers.

Table 1. Frequency and percentage of 1MDB news in episodic and thematic frames in *The Star* and *Malaysiakini*

Frame	<i>The Star</i>				<i>Malaysiakini</i>			
	2016		2018		2016		2018	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Episodic	169	91.4	382	94.1	577	91.6	121	89.0
Thematic	16	8.6	24	5.9	53	8.4	15	11.0
Total	185	100	406	100	630	100	136	100

Before GE, the episodic articles revealed details of the 1MDB scandal—individuals linked to 1MDB, seizing of assets, and probe into the alleged fraud. One strategy of keeping an issue alive when there is no new revelation is publishing the same news with fresh comments by politicians. Herein lies the difference between the mainstream and alternative newspapers. *The Star* reported the voices of the ruling party politicians but *Malaysiakini* frequently also published the opposition’s statements, NGOs’ comments, the US DOJ’s press statements, as well as reproduced news published in foreign media. By quoting a variety of news sources, *Malaysiakini* offered their readers a diversity and balance in opinions, making their articles appear more newsworthy and fairer. Conversely, *The Star* was seen as covering up the scandal. One example is the US DOJ’s seizure of 1MDB-linked assets. *The Star* questioned the legality of DOJ’s move whereas *Malaysiakini* highlighted Najib Razak’s denial of 1MDB involvement, and indirectly his own involvement. By doing so, *The Star* downplayed the DOJ lawsuit whereas *Malaysiakini* sensationalised it.

After GE, the episodic framing naturally focused on the release of various 1MDB reports, revelation of more questionable transactions and parties involved, and pressing of charges. However, *The Star* articles took on a formal stance as opposed to a personalised stance in *Malaysiakini*. Take for instance, articles on Clare Rewcastle Brown’s book release

on 1MDB (Brown, 2018). *The Star* reported wh-information on the book release but refrained from addressing the why-question. *Sarawak Report* was described as the news website that broke the alleged corruption stories but no mention was made of the reason or the agency responsible for the website's block, unlike *Malaysiakini* which was more forthcoming on the agency. In addition, *The Star* also used superordinate or umbrella terms to avoid referring to the specifics (e.g. "some of the country's most powerful leaders", "troubled state investment fund"). In contrast, *Malaysiakini* engaged readers with a personalised account of Brown's struggles to uncover the truth, including dealing with an arrest warrant.

As for thematic articles, before GE, *Malaysiakini* was seen as attributing blame to the former prime minister. For instance, a 26 August 2016 *Malaysiakini* article posed the question of whether it is a violation or a right for the *TangkapMO1* (Catch MO1) rally to be held at Dataran Merdeka. Malaysian Official 1 (MO1) alludes to Najib Razak. Professors, ministers and by-laws were cited to present various perspectives on the issue. On the other hand, *The Star* articles tended to assure readers that 1MDB had little adverse impact on the economy and Najib Razak's political position. For instance, *The Star* ran a thematic article on the fragmented opposition not being able to come together to present a coherent message (24 July 2016) and another detailing China's investments throughout Malaysia (10 September 2016). *The Star*'s frames protected the image of Najib Razak and the government. *Malaysiakini* contradicted this with a scathing background on the ramifications of 1MDB in its 29 September 2016 article as follows:

"The toxic outcome of 1MDB scandal spreads across the spectrum horizontally and vertically—all sectors are affected from the manufacturing to the arts; everyone is affected from the richest to the poorest. The 1MDB scandal had created a big financial hole that Najib Abdul Razak has to plug. This means distortions of national resources as money that is supposed to go to schools and hospitals is set aside to pay 1MDB debts."

After GE, the thematic articles in *The Star* showed a 180-degree turn by reporting details of the financial scandal such as the overpriced land bought from Ministry of Finance (30 May 2018), US scrutiny of Goldman Sachs (8 August 2018) and Jho Low (13 July 2018). However, this could be interpreted as a strategy for drawing attention away from Najib Razak to Jho Low in the attributions of blame and responsibility. Interestingly, *The Star* highlighted the need for tactful handling of the 1MDB mess so as not to shake investor confidence (24 May 2018), a veiled criticism of the current government's transparency about 1MDB insolvency which jeopardised Najib Razak's image. In comparison, *Malaysiakini*'s thematic articles drew attention to consequences of 1MDB scandal (e.g., 34.6 billion debt to pay off in five years, 25 June 2018) and investigations (e.g., appointment of the attorney general Tommy Thomas to replace Apandi Ali, 4 June 2018). *Malaysiakini*'s coverage can be read as an approval of the current government's effort to resolve the recovery of 1MDB funds.

Valence of 1MDB news

Table 2 shows the percentage of articles with positive, negative and neutral valence. Before the change of government, *The Star* seemed to take a neutral stance in reporting 1MDB but *Malaysiakini* articles were largely negative. After GE, both newspapers were similar in reporting 1MDB positively. The results of chi-square test of independence showed that for *The Star*, there is a significant difference in the valence of articles before and after GE, $X^2(1, N=591) = 31.210, p=.001$. For *Malaysiakini*, the percentages of positive, negative and neutral valence in articles before and after GE are also significantly different, $X^2(1, N=766) = 241.260, p=0.001$. The percentages of positive, negative and neutral valence of articles are

similar before and after GE for both the mainstream and alternative newspapers. The content analysis of the articles, supplemented by excerpts, reveals the differences between the mainstream and alternative newspapers which are not as evident from the comparison of percentages.

Table 2. Frequency and percentage of *The Star* and *Malaysiakini* articles with positive, negative and neutral valence

Valence	<i>The Star</i>				<i>Malaysiakini</i>			
	2016		2018		2016		2018	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Positive	59	31.9	230	56.6	39	6.2	81	59.5
Negative	75	40.5	103	25.4	374	59.4	33	24.3
Neutral	51	27.6	73	18.0	217	34.4	22	16.2
Total	185	100	406	100	630	100	136	100

Positive valence. *The Star* articles with positive valence projected a feel-good perception of a financial scandal but the positiveness of *Malaysiakini* articles was derived from the positive statements made by politicians from the then ruling party. Before GE, the positive framing in *The Star* was mainly for maintaining the good image of the former prime minister and the government to engender public trust. For example, in “Justice and truth must prevail, says Hishammuddin” (23 July 2016), a politician aligned to Najib Razak was quoted as saying “Regardless of who it is, action must be taken to restore the people’s confidence in the government”. The headline of a September 30 article read “The board of directors remains confident that the company has done nothing wrong”. Adjectives such as “confidence” were repeatedly used to carry a positive evaluation of the parties implicated in the DOJ civil suit. The readers were assured that the government would be responsible and just in addressing the 1MDB issue. *The Star* repeated the message that “all is well” and “there is no wrongdoing”. Insights into the editorial policy governing the framing in the newsroom can be seen from Gunasegaram’s (2018) statement in his book published after GE. When he was running the business desk at *The Star*, he approached the editor of *The Star* to examine the 1MDB story, and he was told to “lay off and that 1MDB was out of bounds in terms of writing stories” (Gunasegaram, 2018, p. xi).

For *Malaysiakini*, the positiveness of the articles before GE came from the quotations of government sources. For example, *Malaysiakini* reported an UMNO minister’s assurance of procedural fairness (“No conspiracy against BN, says UMNO minister”, 21 July 2016). Even though “conspiracy” is a negative word, the determiner “no” negates the negativity. *Malaysiakini* also reported the Malaysian government’s cooperation with foreign authorities in the investigations. However, positive articles such as these are usually followed by criticisms by other sources, usually opposition politicians; this explains why the percentage of positive articles in *Malaysiakini* is outnumbered by its negative articles.

After GE, both newspapers were similar in their reporting on actions to resolve 1MDB for the data collection period of May to August 2018. An example is the *Malaysiakini* article headlined “Najib: We want truth on 1MDB, no objection to fresh PAC probe” (15 August 2019). Even Najib Razak wanted to be seen publicly supporting the resolution of 1MDB although there were other reports of him claiming that he would suffer prejudice in the civil or criminal action against him (“Former Malaysian”, 2019).

Negative valence. Before GE, the negatively oriented *Malaysiakini* articles sought to expose the financial scandal whereas *The Star* portrayed the public's overreaction to 1MDB. It seemed as if there were no holds barred in *Malaysiakini*'s criticism of the government. The news highlighted power abuse, poor economic management, Najib Razak's image as a corrupted leader, legal suits and other improprieties. Examples of emotion-arousing words included "seize", "siphoned", "conspired", "distract", "complaint", "freeze", "investigated", "accuse", "criminal case", "lawsuit", "wrongdoing", "money laundering", "offence", "charged", "bankrupt", and "guilty".

On the other hand, before GE, the negatively oriented *The Star* articles focused on the public's response to 1MDB-related events. For example, in the news headlined "Nur Jazlan says Malaysians tired of demonstrations" (27 August 2016), the deputy home minister was referring to the *Tangkap MOI* (Catch MOI) rally which aimed to pressure authorities to take action against the former prime minister. The rally caught the headlines of *The Star* 18 times in August 2016 alone beginning with police permit problems and controversy over the date and venue, to people who would join the rally and preparation for riots. This approach diverted attention away from the involvement of high-ranking government officials in 1MDB although negative framing is unavoidable in reports on money laundering.

After GE, *Malaysiakini* seemed to continue its quest in highlighting power abuse, poor economic management and the former prime minister's image as a corrupted leader. For instance, "Najib's government used money raised from Khazanah to pay 1MDB dues — sources" (24 May 2018). In August 2018, for instance, *Malaysiakini* mentioned Jho Low in 13 headlines and Najib Razak in 11 headlines, three of which were in connection with Jho Low. In comparison, in the same month, *The Star* focused on Jho Low's role in 1MDB, mentioning him in 44 headlines and Najib Razak in eight headlines, indicating that the mainstream newspaper was still protecting the former prime minister.

Neutral valence. As far as *Malaysiakini* articles before GE are concerned, the neutral valence was mainly due to the presence of both positive and negative frames. For example, an article published before GE was headlined "Appointment of key gov't positions shouldn't be under PM" (23 September 2016). The trigger for the news was negative because it suggested that the power vested with the prime minister led to the loss of independence of government institutions as the power to appoint comes with the power to remove personnel from these positions. However, the second half of the article was positive as the suggestion of a two-term limit reflected a good democratic system. The presence of neutral valence in both news media seemed to reflect media fairness and impartiality as journalists tried to balance views from the perspectives of the government and the opposition.

A strategy to portray impartiality in the 1MDB coverage used by *Malaysiakini* after GE and *The Star* (both before and after GE) was adopting a matter-of-fact way. The following examples suggest that the negativity which characterised *Malaysiakini*'s articles on 1MDB before GE had dissipated. An article published in *Malaysiakini* on 31 May 2018 informed the public of a settlement of 1MDB bond coupon worth RM143 million to pay off the interest accrued by loans taken by 1MDB ("M'sia says settled 1MDB's bond coupon RM143m payment", 2018). Another headline suggests impartiality: "Despite Dr M's insistence, DOJ maintains non-involvement in Equanimity handover" (31 August 2018). Similarly, *The Star* reported events potentially damaging to the image of the former prime minister with a neutral valence. For example, "Rosmah arrives at MACC HQ to have her statement recorded" (5 June 2018). Rosmah Mansor is Najib Razak's wife. In the article, *The Star* provided background information on Najib Razak being questioned in relation to SRC International Sdn Bhd (a subsidiary of 1MDB) which was mentioned five times. However, readers without prior knowledge of SRC would not know the controversy associated with it. The impartial

coverage of 1MDB is difficult because of the inherently positive or negative bent of events and deliberate attempts are needed to make the news favourable to one side or neutral.

To add richness to the content analysis results, textual frequency analysis results were used to highlight the common themes and sub-themes in 1MDB news before and after GE in *The Star* (Table 3). The first column shows the themes while the second column shows the sub-themes. The asterisk indicates a stark contrast in that some words were top-ranked in 1MDB articles before GE but not after GE, and vice versa.

Table 3. Themes and sub-themes in *The Star*'s 1MDB articles before and after GE based on the top 20 words

Themes	Sub-themes	Before GE	After GE
1MDB		2930	676
Countries	Countries	1020	303
	Nation*	0	165
	Malaysia	1020	303
	U.S.	800	394
	Singapore*	0	107
Key players	Najib Razak	1514	321
	Jho Low*	768	0
	Minister	764	306
	Former*	735	0
	UMNO*	0	117
Stakeholders	Government	698	220
	Malaysian*	500	0
	Public*	0	120
	Rally (public action)*	0	148
Investigation	Investigation*	284	0
	MACC*	445	0
	Mahathir*	423	0
	Police	397	138
	Court*	316	0
	DOJ*	0	170
	Civil*	0	169
	Bank*	0	116
Scandal	Scandal*	368	0
	Money*	414	0
	Funds*	392	0
	Assets*	0	145
	Development*	0	182
Not categorised	Said	2253	866
	General	388	147
	Statement*	316	0

“Jho Low”, a key player in the 1MDB scandal, who was in the limelight in *The Star* articles before GE receded in prominence after the GE. The word “former” in reference to the former prime minister and other individuals who formerly held certain positions in the government machinery became less frequently used after GE as attention was diverted to the investigation proceedings. Before GE, the articles were focused on the need for an investigation following the civil forfeiture actions taken on 1MDB by DOJ, US as well as the government of Singapore, shown by the frequent use of words such as “investigation” and

“MACC” (Malaysian Anti-Corruption Agency), including calls by “Mahathir” to investigate the “scandal” and the questionable transfers of “money” and “funds”. The appeal to Malaysian interests being at stake due to the 1MDB financial scandal, captured by the word “Malaysian”, also decreased in prominence but was replaced by the word “public” which climbed into the top 20 words in the articles after GE.

Interestingly, the word “nation” became popular after GE but was not ranked among the top 20 words in articles before GE. The heating up of the 1MDB investigation can be seen in the frequent usage of words such as “DOJ”, “civil”, “bank” and “assets”. The word “assets” emerged in the after-GE articles, replacing the more general terms “money” and “funds”. In addition, the articles after GE revealed Singapore as one of the countries implicated in 1MDB’s fund transfer trail as well as the involvement of UMNO politicians. The public voice, including rally, was given more space in the after-GE articles.

Next, Table 4 shows the common themes and sub-themes in *Malaysiakini*’s 1MDB articles before and after GE to show a comparison of the top 20 words. In *Malaysiakini*’s articles before GE, “U.S.” ranked among the top 20 words but not “Malaysia”, implying its focus on the U.S. DOJ civil suit. This is why words related to the 1MDB investigation (“DOJ”, “report” and “police”) appeared frequently in the *Malaysiakini* articles before GE. However, after GE, *Malaysiakini* revealed the “banks” involved in the fund transfer, and the roles of “MACC” and “Mahathir” in the 1MDB investigation. The key players in the 1MDB scandal are Najib Razak, Jho Low, ministers, and individuals affiliated with “UMNO”. Before GE, the attention was on “UMNO” but after GE, the attention turned to “Jho Low” and “former” government officials and the former prime minister Najib Razak. As for stakeholders, the “rally” and the interests and actions of the “people” did not catch media attention after GE to be ranked among the top 20 common words in the *Malaysiakini* articles. Before GE, the words frequently used to refer to the questionable fund transfers were “funds”, “billion” and “assets” but the after GE, articles used “scandal”, “money” and “Equanimity” (the luxury yacht bought by Jho Low).

A comparison of the results of the textual analysis for *The Star* and *Malaysiakini* showed some differences. “Singapore” was mentioned by *The Star* after GE but did not surface frequently enough in *Malaysiakini* to make it to the top 20 words. Another difference is that *Malaysiakini* did not frequently use the word “court (case)” which appeared in *The Star* articles before GE, and “civil” and “development” which appeared in the after-GE articles, indicating that *The Star* focused on the investigation proceedings. The textual analysis was important in revealing an obvious lack of negative adjectives in the reporting of the issue by both newspapers, possibly to avoid judgemental framing of a sensitive issue.

Table 4. Themes and sub-themes in *Malaysiakini*'s 1MDB articles before and after GE based on the top 20 words

Themes	Sub-themes	Before GE	After GE
1MDB		2673	812
Countries	U.S.	1594	244
	Malaysia*	0	184
Key players	Najib Razak	1789	406
	Jho Low*	0	185
	Minister	1427	208
	Former*	0	217
	UMNO*	778	0
	Official*	723	0
Stakeholders	Malaysian	1047	107
	Government	845	203
	Public	537	88
	Rally (public action)*	515	0
	People*	488	0
Investigation*	Report	1018	0
	DOJ*	868	0
	Police*	581	0
	Bank*	0	140
	MACC*	0	84
	Mahathir*	0	91
Scandal	Scandal*	0	133
	Funds	622	133
	Money*	0	102
	Billion	569	166
	Assets*	477	0
	Equanimity*	0	90
Not categorised	Said	3385	812
	General	827	126
	Read*	679	0

DISCUSSION

The study examined news frames employed by *The Star* and *Malaysiakini* on 1MDB. Two main findings are worthy of a discussion. Firstly, the strong episodic orientation in the news articles of both newspapers suggests a cautious approach to handling controversial issues involving high-ranking politicians and government officers in an environment where legislations regulating press freedom may cause the suspension of printing permits. An episodic focus in framing news is generally reflective of media coverage on political corruption (Park, 2012). However, reporting events in isolation from the context influences readers to hold individuals accountable for the actions rather than the government and other institutions (Iyengar, 1990). The disconnect between the incident and the web of events linked to 1MDB may blind readers to the ramifying impacts of 1MDB on Malaysia and its citizens. In other words, readers may view the fund misappropriation and depletion of the country's coffers as not directly affecting them. They may view the devastating financial situation as being restricted to the 1MDB company and individuals directly linked to it. Although Yang and De Rycker (2017, p. 642) had noted that "*Malaysiakini* often looked at the Low Yat incident from a big picture point of view, such as, identifying what a particular story had to do with the larger political picture and its implications in a multiracial society";

this was only evident after GE. There was a marginal increase in the percentage of thematic articles in *Malaysiakini* after GE.

With regard to the production of thematic articles, the rarity of thematic articles may be due to the greater demand on time and effort for researching and performing in-depth analyses to write such articles. Furthermore, interpretative news reflects the slant of journalists or the newspaper. Although journalists rely on influential individuals in society as news sources, they retain the final decision about the framing and presentation of news (Falasca, 2014)—subject to the newspaper’s editorial policy governing framing. As 1MDB is a politically sensitive issue, it may be safer to steer clear of such judgemental pieces. However, in the future, there may be a demand for thematic articles. As noted by the Chief Content Officer (formerly known as editor-in-chief) of *The Star*, newspapers now need to offer in-depth analyses and commentaries as opinion shapers want to know the reasons behind a certain event or decision, considering that an exclusive story lasts only briefly before other news outlets catch up (Samani, 2019). *The Star* has also begun to restrict certain articles to its premium readers who pay a higher subscription fee. In view of the changes in news reporting, inclination towards thematic articles may be the way forward for newspapers to satiate the public’s hunger for quality news. Thematic framing may be the focus of future trends in news reporting, and journalists may need training to increase the versatility of their journalistic style so that they can go beyond reporting to offering analyses of events and issues.

Secondly, alternative newspapers play its role to offer hegemonic views best when controversial issues like scandals are covered up but they lose their distinctive edge when the government is transparent about pursuing the rule of law to resolve investigations. Before GE, *Malaysiakini* had published a great number of articles and 59.4% of its articles had a negative valence during a political regime when fears of lawsuit and newspaper permit suspension prevailed. The rational-critical discourse that appeared in *Malaysiakini* is characteristic of alternative news media which are not afraid to be critical of the government. Although *Malaysiakini* took care to quote verified sources, and did not directly publish the content of “classified documents” such as the Public Accounts Committee report on 1MDB, the Malaysian Auditor-General’s Report and those from Malaysia’s central bank (Gunasegaram, 2018), the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) raided its offices for alleged improper network use in 2016 (“MCMC raids Malaysiakini”, 2016). However, *Malaysiakini* was probably safe because it is an online portal that benefits from a no-censorship policy. In contrast, during the same period, *The Star* offered a somewhat balanced presentation of news with positive, negative and neutral valence despite 1MDB being a negative event as it involves alleged fraud and corruption. However, after GE, the 1MDB articles are considered to have positive valence as the investigation is endorsed by the prevailing government. One complication for *The Star* is that it is funded by Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) which is a component party in *Barisan Nasional* headed by Najib Razak before he lost to Mahathir’s *Pakatan Harapan* coalition. The framing analysis reveals that it is treading with sensitivity in its 1MDB reporting. This is where textual analysis offers evidence of the change in reporting focus before and after GE. After GE, *The Star* reduced its mention of “Mahathir”, “scandal”, “money” and “funds” till these words were no longer ranked among the top 20 words in the articles. In contrast, in *Malaysiakini*, these words climbed into the list of top-ranked words after GE, but were not in the list before GE. The differences between *The Star* and *Malaysiakini* may not be wholly due to their position as mainstream and alternative newspapers, but their corporate affiliations. The framing of news is the combined outcome of organisational pressures (e.g., editorial policies), journalistic routines (e.g., selection of news sources) and social movements (e.g., Malaysia’s political context) (De Vreese, 2005).

This study also uncovered subtle strategies used by the newspapers in reporting a financial-cum-political scandal involving high-ranking politicians by reducing thematic articles, and focusing on superficial information for wh-questions in episodic articles but avoiding the why-question and negative adjectives to refrain from making evaluative judgements.

CONCLUSION

This study on the framing of the 1MDB financial scandal showed that 1MDB was more salient in the alternative newspaper (*Malaysiakini*) before the change of government but its salience was elevated in the mainstream newspaper (*The Star*) during the *Pakatan Harapan* regime. Both newspapers were oriented towards episodic framing, but after the change of the government, *The Star*'s percentage of episodic articles increased while that of *Malaysiakini* decreased. The low percentage of thematic articles indicates that the media framing of 1MDB could have made readers oblivious to the ramifying impacts of 1MDB on Malaysia and its citizens. Before the change of government, *The Star* had a balance of positive, negative and neutral 1MDB-related articles but *Malaysiakini* articles were inclined towards a negative valence. During the *Pakatan Harapan* regime, both newspapers adopted a positive stance in reporting on 1MDB, focusing on actions to resolve the financial scandal. A limitation of the present study is not identifying sources of news (known and unknown), types of news (straight news, editorials, and opinion pieces), and their relationships with framing. These affect the visibility of the issue and the credibility of information on the issue as well as the viewpoints in which the issue is framed. The scarcity of causal relationships in news is reflected in the low percentage of thematic articles (of less than 10%) on 1MDB in both *The Star* and *Malaysiakini*, whether before or after GE. Because of this tendency in news reporting, it is likely that readers may be unclear about the history, causes, and involvement of various parties, underlying motivations, and power differentials. Reporting of causes and consequences of conflicts and issues is the weakest indicator of peace journalism in *The Star*'s reporting of the South China Sea dispute (Yang & Heng, 2019). Considering that newspapers influence public perceptions of issues and events, studies should compare the effects of media framing on perception of readers exposed to mainstream and alternative news and their reasoning about causal and treatment responsibility in financial and political scandals. In addition, researchers need to investigate the perspectives of journalists, as to how they feel about adopting a personal stance about controversial issues and conflicts and writing feature articles and editorials offering an editorial position on issues and events. The insights will contribute to a better understanding of the social world contextualising the writing of journalists and editors in the news media.

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

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