

Framing Religious Disputes: A Comparative Analysis of the Lina Joy Controversy Reported by Malaysian Newspapers

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ABSTRACT

This article reports the outcome of an analysis of how the Malaysian mainstream and alternative newspapers reported one of the most controversial religious problems encountered in Malaysia's recent history—the Lina Joy's religious conversion. Lina Joy's decision to pursue changes to her National Registration Identity Card after renouncing Islam to become a Christian in 1990 sparked off complex legal procedures that attracted great attention from the media. By employing framing as the theoretical framework and content analysis as the research method, this study found that conflict was the most salient, important and enduring frame in all of the newspapers, regardless of mainstream or alternative.

Keywords: Framing analysis, inter-ethnic relations, multicultural communication, religious disputes, vernacular newspapers

1. INTRODUCTION

Azlina Jailani was born and raised in a Malay Muslim family in Malaysia. She declared herself a Christian in 1990 and subsequently changed her name to Lina Joy in 1999. She also pursued the process of a change in her particulars in her National Registration Identity Card (NRIC). However, around the time of her name change, the National Registration Department (NRD) began placing the word 'Islam' on the NRIC of those identified as Muslim by the NRD. Joy's new NRIC with her new legal name thus carried the word 'Islam' which led to her filing a lawsuit in the High Court, arguing that she was legally entitled to an identity card without the word 'Islam.' This move was controversial because Joy bypassed the *Syariah* (Islamic religious) courts. She argued that because she no longer considered herself a Muslim, she was no longer under the jurisdiction of the *Syariah* courts; the NRD, however, countered that under the law, they could not change her legally registered religion from Islam to Christianity without her first receiving a certificate of apostasy from a *Syariah* court.

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The case made its way through the courts, with the Court of Appeal ruling against Joy. The apex Federal Court issued a final judgment on the case on May 30, 2007, which held that only after Joy had received a certificate of apostasy from a *Syariah* court, could she embrace Christianity. The Federal Court's decision provoked further discussion on the fundamental freedom of conscience as guaranteed by the Malaysian Constitution. The Federal Constitution states that while Islam is the religion of the Federation, other religions may be practised in peace and harmony throughout the country. The Lina Joy case became a focal point of tensions between the Muslims and religious minorities in the country. While some Muslims welcomed the ruling as ensuring adherence to Islamic law, Muslim norms and practices, many religious minorities felt that the judgment was an infringement of Joy's constitutional rights.

2. STUDY BACKGROUND

Malaysia is a former British colony with a current population of 28 million with the major races being Malays, Chinese and Indians. Peninsular Malaysia gained independence in 1957 while Malaysia came into being in 1963. Some issues colour its landscape, religious freedom being one of the most debated ones, which is the topic of this study. Islam is the official religion of the country though other religions may be practised by non-Muslims. Malays are compulsorily Muslim and renouncing their religion is a difficult issue as examined in this study.

The structure of newspapers in Malaysia is strongly influenced by the multi-lingual nature of the nation's population. Newspapers are published in different languages to cater to the respective major ethnic groups. There are currently 51 newspapers in Malaysia, with 16 being published in English, 13 in Bahasa Malaysia, 18 in Chinese and 3 in Tamil. An important characteristic of the vernacular newspapers is their tendency to concentrate on events important to their respective communities (Halimahton *et al.*, 2006; McDaniel, 1994; Syed Arabi, 1989). It is also found that the vernacular newspapers play a central role in shaping the political and social reality for their ethnic groups because the editors and journalists are usually members of the community elite. While championing the interests of their ethnic group, the vernacular newspapers undertake different approaches to problems because each ethnic group has a different living standard and economic status (Ooi, 2006; Khoo, 2000; Kua, 2002; Mansor, 2005).

In addition, an analysis of press freedom in Malaysia revealed that the media faced significant legislative constraints (Brown, 2005; George, 2005; Netto, 2002; Rodan, 2005; Smeltzer, 2008; Tan and Zawawi, 2008; Wang, 2001; Zaharom, 2000). Various laws such as the Printing Presses and Publication Act (PPPA), Internal Security Act (ISA), Official Secrets Act (OSA) and Sedition Act allow the Government to impose prior restraints on publication, post-publication punishments and penalties for the acquisition of official information. Besides, media ownership by political parties and connected business individuals is another major threat to press freedom. The introduction of the Internet represents a fundamental discontinuity in the old approach to media management in Malaysia. The Internet has become the medium that Malaysian citizens use for mass communication without first having to secure a government license. Among the various independent news sites, scholars

regard *Malaysiakini* as the most interesting and successful one (George, 2005; McDaniel, 2002; Rodan, 2005; Tan and Zawawi, 2008). The alternative newspaper enjoys average daily hits of approximately 200,000, which compares respectably with the circulation of mainstream newspapers such as *The Star* and *New Straits Times* (Brown, 2005). Furthermore, *Malaysiakini* has won warm praise from around the world and a number of international awards for journalism.

2.1 Statement of Problem

Religion, ethnic and their related issues have always been a difficult area of reporting in multicultural societies (Mustafa, 2010). Since the Federal Court's decision on Lina Joy, many things have been said about the issue in the mainstream newspapers, alternative newspapers and blogs. This study aims to compare the coverage of the Lina Joy controversy by the mainstream Malay, English and Chinese newspapers as well as the alternative newspapers. The following research questions were examined for purposes of the study:

- RQ1: How extensively was the Lina Joy controversy covered by the newspapers?
- RQ2: What were the news sources used by the newspapers in their coverage of the Lina Joy controversy?
- RQ3: What was the news frame used by the newspapers in their coverage of the Lina Joy controversy?
- RQ4: What was the slant of the articles published by the newspapers in their coverage of the Lina Joy controversy?

2.2 Significance of the Study

The findings of this study will provide useful objective information about the Lina Joy controversy. By examining the coverage of the controversy by the mainstream Malay, English and Chinese as well as the alternative newspapers, this study is able to provide insight into the concerns and attitudes of the different ethnic groups based on their own perspectives and agendas. The results of this study can also provide a better understanding of how the vernacular newspapers report about 'the Other'.

In addition, the results of this study will benefit the media practitioners and decision-makers. It may give an indication on how to handle religious- or race-related controversial materials to promote consensus and integration. It is hoped that this study may foster media awareness on evaluating, revising and making appropriate changes to their role in promoting integration.

Based on a literature search, comparison of different ethnic media's reportage on religious disputes or inter-ethnic cases were found to remain largely unexplored. This study will be able to fill the gap of knowledge by comparing the coverage of the Lina Joy controversy by the Malay, Chinese and English newspapers. According to Bramlett-Solomon (cited in Lasorsa, 2002), while religious, race and ethnicity variables are included in mass communication studies, few of them are theory based. By employing framing theory as the theoretical framework, this study is able to offer theoretical support for future research that is related to communication and ethnic relations.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study relies on framing theory as the theoretical framework. The most frequently cited definition of framing comes from Entman (1993):

“Framing is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.” (Entman, 1993: 52)

In addition, Griffin (2003) regarded framing as “the process of calling attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring others, which might lead to different reactions.” Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) described framing as “the selection of a restricted number of thematically related attributes for inclusion in the media agenda when a particular object is discussed.” Besides, Tankard *et al.* (cited in Weaver, 2007) considered media frame as “the central organising idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration.”

Tankard (2008) enumerated several news features that commonly convey frames. They are headlines and kickers, subheads, photographs, photo captions, leads and etc. Moreover, Wong (2004) outlined four major dimensions of framing that could be studied: (1) presentation of news items (their size and placement); (2) news topic items (or what issues are included in the frame); (3) cognitive attributes (or the specific details of issues included); and (4) affective attributes (tone of the picture). In addition, Weaver (2007) mentioned that frames can be studied by means of systematic content analysis or more interpretive textual analysis alone. Van Gorp (2007) also observed that some researchers opt for a rather qualitative approach in analysing media frame, such as discourse analysis, while others apply traditional content analysis or other quantitative methods. He argued that the strongly abstract nature of frames implies that quantitative research methods should be combined with the interpretive prospects of qualitative methods.

Furthermore, Tankard (2008) remarked that framing might give the quantitative researchers a way to approach ideology and hegemony. He pointed out that until now these two subjects were dealt with mostly by the critical theorists, and have been difficult to validate empirically. Meanwhile, Song (2007) also noted that framing analysis allows the researchers to examine the roles of media in the development of social and political issues. When it comes to ideologically sensitive issues, the mainstream news media serve as an institution of social control by imposing frames that marginalise causes or movements that challenge the values of the mainstream society. Alternative media, on the other hand, often serve as a communication outlet for movements and causes that are ignored or marginalised by the mainstream media.

4. METHODOLOGY

Content analysis is used as the research method for this study. The newspapers chosen were *Utusan Malaysia*, a daily in Bahasa Malaysia or the national language; *The Star*, an English language daily; *Sin Chew Daily*, a Chinese language daily and *Malaysiakini*, an alternative newspaper. *Utusan Malaysia* is one of the top Malay newspapers in the country.

More importantly, it has been singled out for evoking racial tension between the Malays and non-Malays (Kua, 2010; Lee, 2010; Lim & Har, 2008; *Malaysiakini*, 27 November 2007; *Malaysiakini*, 11 December 2007; *Sin Chew Daily*, 10 January 2010; *Sin Chew Daily*, 13 January 2010). *The Star* and *Sin Chew Daily* enjoy the highest circulation within their respective language stream.

The sample of this study was drawn from May 30 to June 30, 2007, which was the peak period of the issue. The unit of analysis for this study was the articles, which included straight news, editorials, columns, opinions and letters. The articles were collected via database search, which were extracted from the respective newspaper's online service by using five key words: (1) Azlina Jailani, (2) Lina Joy, (3) apostasy, (4) religious conversion, and (5) freedom of faith. The sample consisted of 129 articles derived from the four newspapers.

This study adopted and modified the five most commonly used news frames (conflict, human interest, economic consequences, moral and responsibility) identified by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) in the coverage of a range of issues, including integration, racial-ethnic issues, immigration, drugs or crime. The following are the frames used in this study with their operational definitions:

1. Conflict – emphasises conflict between individuals, groups, parties or institutions as a means of capturing audience interest; reflects disagreement between individuals, groups, parties or institutions; an individual, group, party or institution reproaches another; dichotomises or labels the good and bad; news item refers to two sides instead of more than two sides of the issue/problem; news items refer to winners and losers.
2. Human interest – brings a human face or an emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue or problem; refers to an effort to personalise the news, dramatise or emotionalise the news in order to capture and retain audience interest; employs adjectives or personal vignettes that generate feelings of outrage, empathy-caring, sympathy or compassion; emphasise how individuals and groups are affected by the event, issue or problem; news items go into the private or personal lives of the actors.
3. Consequences – reports an event, issue or problem in terms of its consequences on individuals, groups, parties, institutions or the country; reports the outcome of a court case.
4. Moral – puts the event, issue or problem in the context of religious tenets or moral prescriptions; emphasises collaboration and fellowship.
5. Responsibility – presents an event, issue or problem in such a way as to attribute responsibility for its cause or solution to either the government or to an individual, group, party or institution; news items suggest the issue or problem requires urgent action.
6. Others – any content that could not fit the above four categories.

5. FINDINGS

The results of the study with some basic information on the frequency and percentage of the variables are presented.

5.1 Extent of Coverage

Table 1 shows that the Lina Joy controversy was given the most coverage by *Malaysiakini* (71 articles), followed by *Sin Chew Daily* (35 articles), *The Star* (16 articles) and *Utusan Malaysia* (7 articles). On average, *Sin Chew Daily* published the most number of words on the Lina Joy controversy (665 words). All the three mainstream newspapers had most of their coverage in the form of straight news while *Malaysiakini* had the most letters.

5.2 News Sources

The leaders from the ruling party, United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and the representatives from professional organisations (like the Bar Council) appeared to be the most important news sources for *Utusan Malaysia* (Table 2). *The Star* and *Sin Chew Daily* also obtained most of their information from the representatives of professional organisations. In stark contrast, *Malaysiakini* demonstrated a strong tendency to rely on common civilians as its news sources.

Table 1. Extent of coverage

	<i>Utusan Malaysia</i> (n = 7)%	<i>The Star</i> (n = 16)%	<i>Sin Chew Daily</i> (n = 35)%	<i>Malaysiakini</i> (n = 71)%
Type				
Straight news	73.33	63.04	77.60	19.72
Editorials	6.67	4.35	0.80	0
Columns	13.33	0	21.60	7.04
Letters	6.67	32.61	0	69.01
Opinions	0	0	0	4.23
Size	577 words	494 words	665 words	558 words

Table 2. News sources

	<i>Utusan Malaysia</i> (n = 7)%	<i>The Star</i> (n = 16)%	<i>Sin Chew Daily</i> (n = 35)%	<i>Malaysiakini</i> (n = 71)%
Ruling parties	42.86	12.50	17.14	2.82
Opposition parties	0	12.50	14.29	5.63
Professional	42.86	31.25	34.29	5.63
Religious	14.29	25.00	8.57	8.45
Common civilians	0	18.75	20.00	77.46
Others	0	0	5.71	0

Table 3. News frames

	<i>Utusan Malaysia</i> (n = 7)%	<i>The Star</i> (n = 16)%	<i>Sin Chew Daily</i> (n = 35)%	<i>Malaysiakini</i> (n = 71)%
Conflict	28.57	43.75	62.86	84.51
Human interest	0	6.25	2.86	2.82
Consequences	28.57	25.00	5.71	2.82
Moral	14.29	0	8.57	2.82
Responsibility	14.29	25.00	8.57	7.04
Other	14.29	0	11.43	0

5.3 News Frames

5.3.1 *Utusan Malaysia*

Utusan Malaysia covered the conflict and consequences frames equally, which were 28.57% respectively (Table 3). In the conflict frame, it reported that the then Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi asked the people to accept the Federal Court's decision, and also to accept and recognise the jurisdiction of the Syariah Court (*Utusan Malaysia*, 14 July 2007).

Through the consequences frame, *Utusan Malaysia* reported the majority decision delivered by the Federal Court to reject Joy's appeal to remove the word Islam from her identity card (*Utusan Malaysia*, 30 May 2007). The Malay newspaper also had its coverage adopting the moral, responsibility and other frames, which were 14.29% respectively. By exhibiting the moral frame, it published an article written by the mufti of Perlis, Mohd. Asri Zainul Abidin, who urged the Muslims not to have a narrow interpretation of Islamic teachings and be tolerant towards other religions. He suggested that mosques be like those during the Prophet Muhammad period, where non-Muslims were allowed to enter to listen to religious talks or to seek financial help during difficult times. He also mentioned that mosques should be opened to the non-Muslims to see the practice of Muslims and to obtain information about Islam (*Utusan Malaysia*, 22 July 2007).

Through establishing the responsibility frame, *Utusan Malaysia* published another article written by Mohd Asri in which he urged the Muslims to build a strong understanding of Islam. He stated that there is a need to study the reasons of why people renounce Islam. He asked the Muslims not to point fingers at others without first reflecting on themselves. It was mentioned that many who want to renounce are those who practised other religions before they embraced Islam. Some of them were converted because of marriage. When divorce occurred, they lost a place to rely on. Asri claimed that there are many in the Muslim community who do not show concern towards those who are newly converted. Therefore they have no choice but to return to their original family or community that understands them better (*Utusan Malaysia*, 3 June 2007).

5.4 *The Star*

The conflict frame made up 43.75% of *The Star's* coverage on the Lina Joy controversy. The contradicting decisions by the judges of the Federal Court were reported. Chief Justice

Ahmad Fairuz Sheikh Abdul Hamid ruled that the NRD had reasonably required Joy to get a certificate of apostasy from the *Syariah* Court. The chief judge also ruled that since the *Syariah* Court had the jurisdiction over cases involving conversion to Islam, it should, by implication, have the power to decide on apostasy matters. He added that the way one leaves a religion is set by the religion itself (*The Star*, 31 May 2007a). On the other hand, the Chief Judge of Sabah and Sarawak, Justice Richard Malanjum described the insistence of the NRD for Joy to obtain a certificate of apostasy from the Federal Territory *Syariah* Court or any Islamic authority as illegal and unreasonable. He alleged that NRD's unreasonableness would have a consequential effect in some states where apostasy is a criminal offence (*The Star*, 31 May 2007b).

It was reported in *The Star* that the General-Secretary of the Council of Churches, Rev Herman Shastri, viewed the Federal Court's decision with regret and concern. He said that the constitutional provision in Article 11 of the Federal Constitution which guarantees freedom of religion in the country has been severely violated (*The Star*, 1 June 2007a). In addition, the Bar Council supported the minority judgment of Justice Richard Malanjum that no court or authority should be easily allowed to have implied powers to curtail rights that are constitutionally granted. Its then president S. Ambiga said the Federal Constitution is and must remain in law, supreme. She was quoted as saying that in an event of any inconsistency or conflict between the provisions of State Enactments and of the Federal Constitution, the latter must prevail (*The Star*, 1 June 2007b).

The Star devoted equal coverage to the consequences and responsibility frames, which were 25.00% respectively. In the consequences frame, *The Star* reported that the decision by the apex court will affect one's constitutional freedom to choose one's religion as well as who one can marry, especially for those who want to renounce Islam and for people who convert to Islam but later want to revert to their former religion (*The Star*, 30 May 2007).

Through the responsibility frame, *The Star* attributed the responsibility to solve jurisdictional conflict and to protect freedom of religion to the Government. For example, the chairman of the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM), Bishop Paul Tan Chee Ing said it had now become more pressing for the Government and lawmakers to revisit the relevant legislation and to reinstate the jurisdiction of the Civil Courts so that equal protection of the rights to choose and express one's religion is accorded to all Malaysians as enshrined by Article 11 (*The Star*, 31 May 2007c). On the other hand, referring to the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) article titled "Malaysia Rejects Christian Appeal" on Joy court's decision, the then Information Minister Zainuddin Maidin said the piece was inaccurate and sensational. He also reminded local media practitioners of their responsibilities and asked them to not follow the style of the foreign media which are prejudiced against the country (*The Star*, 2 June 2007).

Human interest frame accounted for 6.25% of *The Star*'s coverage on the Lina Joy controversy. Through her solicitor Benjamin Dawson, Joy told *The Star* that she was disappointed that the Federal Court was not able to vindicate a simple but important fundamental right that exists for all persons, namely, the right to believe in the religion of one's choice and equally important, the right to marry a person of one's choice and to raise

a family in the Malaysia context. She claimed that the Federal Court has not only denied her the right but also to all Malaysians who value fundamental freedoms (*The Star*, 31 May 2007d).

5.5 *Sin Chew Daily*

Sin Chew Daily devoted 62.86% of its coverage to the conflict frame. It was reported that the then Executive Director of Sisters in Islam (SIS), Zainah Anwar was disappointed as the Federal Constitution was not upheld. She also mentioned that Joy was stripped of her rights as a wife and a mother because she could not even have the most fundamental right to choose her religion and this was indeed a tragedy (*Sin Chew Daily*, 31 May 2007a). The Malaysian Consultative Council on Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism (MCCBCHS) also expressed its disappointment towards the court's decision. It was mentioned that forcing a follower of another religion to obtain a certificate of apostasy from the *Syariah* Court was an extreme restriction towards the freedom of religion (*Sin Chew Daily*, 31 May 2007b).

The second focus of *Sin Chew Daily* was on other frames (11.43%), in which the background of the Lina Joy controversy was reported. The moral (8.57%) and responsibility (8.57%) frames were the third concern of *Sin Chew Daily*. Reflecting the moral frame, a column article in *Sin Chew Daily* called for understanding and forgiveness towards those who want to renounce Islam. The writer pointed out that those who converted to Islam have been estranged by their friends and relatives, but they persisted with strong faith, and the Muslims praised them for the courage and perseverance. Thus, the writer called for the Muslims to demonstrate the same spirit of understanding towards those who want to renounce Islam (*Sin Chew Daily*, 10 June 2007).

Through adopting the responsibility frame, *Sin Chew Daily* also attributed the responsibility to solve the jurisdictional conflict and to protect the freedom of religion to the Government. Opposition leader Teresa Kok was quoted as saying that the Government must amend the Federal Constitution to ensure that the jurisdiction of *Syariah* Court would not go beyond the Civil Court (*Sin Chew Daily*, 31 May 2007c).

5.6 *Malaysiakini*

The conflict frame (84.51%) prevailed in *Malaysiakini*'s coverage. It emphasised that the decision of the Federal Court was a mockery of the Malaysian Constitution and an insult to all Malaysian citizens regardless of race, ethnicity and religion. It also criticised the fact that the Lina Joy controversy had been exploited by certain parties for their own political gains. For example, a reader said the court's decision was expected because it was the safest judgment especially prior to a looming general election (*Malaysiakini*, 1 June 2007).

On the other hand, *Malaysiakini* also reported that some Muslim groups welcomed the Lina Joy verdict, saying that justice had been served. For example, the chairperson of the Muslim Professionals Forum, Mazeni Alwi regarded the Lina Joy case as purely an administrative procedure that degenerated into unhealthy tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims. Nevertheless, he welcomed the decision with a sense of relief and said that the Muslims would like to congratulate the judges who have exercised their wisdom and

courage to come to a decision on such a controversial issue under the intense glare of the international and local media, alongside that of interested observers from across the spectrum of human rights and religious organisations (*Malaysiakini*, 2 June 2007).

The second focus of *Malaysiakini* was on responsibility (7.04%). Besides attributing the responsibility to the Government and the judiciary to affirm the supremacy of the Federal Constitution over *Syariah* laws, the alternative newspaper also published some articles that called for the moderate Muslims to put their foot down. For example, a reader mentioned that it is time for the moderate Muslims to re-examine the theology and the imaging of a God of compulsion. He asserted that the moderate Muslims in Malaysia and all over the world must begin to hold their clerics and leaders to a higher standard. Moreover, it urged the Muslims to think whether or not the God they worship embodies liberty, justice and truth. They were also urged to ask whether Islam is a religion of peace or compulsion (*Malaysiakini*, 5 June 2007).

The human interest, consequences and moral frames each made up 2.82% of *Malaysiakini*'s coverage on the Lina Joy controversy. In one of the articles that exhibited the human interest frame, it was reported that Kalthum Omar, the 71-year-old mother of Joy hoped that certain quarters will not come between her and her daughter but allow them to speak to each other. It was also reported that the case of Kalthum illustrated the sufferings of parents who are separated from their children due to religious factors (*Malaysiakini*, 20 July 2007).

In the consequences frame, the former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad was quoted as saying that Malay Malaysians seeking to renounce their religion must also be prepared to give up their special rights associated with the race. This is because the Constitution determines Islam to be among the characteristics of being a Malay (*Malaysiakini*, 3 May 2007). In addition, *Malaysiakini* also reported that the constitutional expert, Shad S Faruqi said opening the doors to apostasy in Malaysia would unravel the Malay demographics as it had significant legal, political, social and economic consequences (*Malaysiakini*, 3 May 2007).

Among the articles that adopted the moral frame, there was a column article that called for Muslims to advocate a peaceful resolution to the Lina Joy issue fundamentally through education for peace. The writer stated that religion must be approached from a philosophical standpoint in order to draw out the best of what it can offer to help humanity understand multiple ways of knowing the Creator – the Universal God that reveals itself in the consciousness of humanity by many names (*Malaysiakini*, 4 June 2007).

5.7 Slants

Table 4 demonstrates that *Malaysiakini* appeared to be most supportive and sympathetic towards Joy (50.70%). Meanwhile, *The Star* was most critical towards Joy (37.50%). In addition, *Utusan Malaysia* was found to be the most neutral newspaper in reporting the Lina Joy controversy (71.43%).

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The differences in the number of articles and words published by the four newspapers indicate that they carried unequal weight of attention to the Lina Joy controversy. The

Table 4. Slants

	<i>Utusan Malaysia</i> (n = 7)%	<i>The Star</i> (n = 16)%	<i>Sin Chew Daily</i> (n = 35)%	<i>Malaysiakini</i> (n = 71)%
Supportive	0	31.25	42.86	50.70
Critical	28.57	37.50	34.28	16.90
Neutral	71.43	31.25	22.86	32.39

results demonstrated that the number of articles published by *Malaysiakini* was markedly more than the mainstream newspapers. In fact, *Malaysiakini* started to report about the Lina Joy controversy on 3 May 2007, which was almost two weeks earlier than the other three mainstream newspapers. These findings are in accordance with the research conducted by Steele (2009), who mentioned that if there is a model *Malaysiakini* story, it is one that involves freedom of expression, civil liberties and human rights.

It is noted that the journalists from the vernacular newspapers in Malaysia have attempted to conscientiously report as well as they possibly could the contentious religious issues that unfolded in the country. These journalists also have their peculiar set of challenges given that they each have their own ethnic and cultural constituencies to serve (Mustafa, 2010). The finding that there was extremely little coverage by *Utusan Malaysia* on the Lina Joy issue indicate that the religious dispute has been downplayed by the pro-government Malay newspaper because renouncing Islam is ‘taboo’ in the Malay/Muslim community. Perhaps it worried that extensive coverage to the controversy would trigger its readers (who are mostly Malays/Muslims) to think, question, or even challenge the status quo. In addition, Loo and Mustafa (2010) pointed out that some issues Malaysian journalists face in reporting about religion is that there are verbal directives from government officials informing the editors on how to report. However, a good newspaper should not turn its back on a problem; the more a problem is discussed and analysed, the sooner there will be workable solutions. In fact a minimum condition of democratic citizenship is that people have access to information on issues that shape their lives (Jamal and Deane, 2007). As rightly pointed out by Mustafa (2010), self-censorship is often resorted to by journalists as a convenient mechanism to ensure that their reportage of religion and its related issues does not offend the adherents of particular faiths. But, on the other hand, the risk is, there is a possibility that what is censored or hidden from public view may well cause unnecessary suspicion, tension and misunderstanding, which subsequently develops into a full-blown conflict. He highlighted that sweeping things under the proverbial carpet may only prove hazardous in the long run.

By devoting most of their articles to the straight news, the three mainstream newspapers performed surveillance instead of correlation function. When straight news dominates the coverage, it leaves little room for the creativeness of journalists, resulting in a top-down communication format (Van Dijk, 1988). In addition, the finding resonated with Teoh’s (cited in Loo and Mustafa, 2010) opinion that stories on religion and faith reported by Malaysian

newspapers tend to be superficial; they are mainly straightforward reporting of the facts with little in the way of analysis. Loo and Mustafa (2010) also highlighted that Malaysian journalists often leave out actual causes in their reporting about stories related to religion and faith simply because these are likely to stir up public discussions and are likely to fan discontent among readers. Vera (cited in Loo and Mustafa, 2010) also argued that Malaysian journalists in general, like the Malaysian public, have not been taught to report or discuss religious issues in a responsible, unemotional and rational manner. They have always been told how to report – just get the official statement and the facts, no need to comment, feature stories would have to be sober, the manner in which religious officials act and operate should not be questioned, etc.

In stark contrast to the mainstream newspapers, *Malaysiakini* devoted most of its coverage to letters, which greatly reflected the readers' comment on the issues. Letters are known as an "enduring forum for public debate" by Wahl-Jorgensen (2002), while Jha (2008) recognised that letters allow citizens to communicate with one another, and even to act together. Atton (2009) asserted that if alternative journalism belongs to the public in a way that dominant journalism does not, this has to do with its social basis, with its connection between writer and audience. In his discussion on alternative media, Atkinson (2008) mentioned that interactivity has been described as a reaction on the part of a receiver to earlier transmissions from a sender, and it has been understood as audience engagement with stimulating qualities of texts. He added that true interactivity can only occur when audiences are able to co-create media content alongside producers. The letters published in *Malaysiakini* reflected a higher level of interactivity between the readers and the alternative newspaper as compared to its mainstream counterpart.

A closer examination of *Utusan Malaysia's* news sources revealed a lack of source diversity, and voices of dissent were shut out of the media. While the results suggested a uni-dimensional interpretation of the controversy by *Utusan Malaysia*, the heavy reliance on UMNO leaders as news source also indicated that the newspaper allowed the dominant political party in the country to act as opinion leaders in defining the issue. Since public officials tend to speak a universalising and rationalising language, the heavy reliance on them tends to legitimate the state and its policy. As a mouthpiece for UMNO (due to the ownership), *Utusan Malaysia* did not give voice to the leaders from opposition parties. This degree of bias in source selection made clear the newspaper's considerable gate-keeping function in determining both content and perspective of news stories. The findings also lend further support to the study conducted by Mustafa (2003), in which he claimed that *Utusan Malaysia* had failed to perform in a fair and just manner. It only managed to primarily promote the views, interests and concerns of the Government to the extent of marginalising, even distorting information, ideas and opinions pertaining to the opposition and other concerned and critical Malaysians. As mainstream newspapers, although *The Star* and *Sin Chew Daily* were not expected to be covering the dissenting voices to any great extent, it would be reasonable to expect the different actors' voice be represented. Through their conflict frames, *The Star* and *Sin Chew Daily* managed to reflect the multifaceted nature of the Lina Joy controversy to a certain extent. However, some of their articles touched on the deeper issues but little was done to dig deeper or to follow up on the ideas.

On the other hand, the sourcing practise employed by *Malaysiakini* was strikingly different from the three mainstream newspapers, where it used common civilians as the most salient source. The bottom-up collective expression of various groups at the grassroots can help to redefine and refine many aspects that sometimes escape the attention of the people in power (Shamsul, 2005). Kee (cited in Loo and Mustafa, 2010) asserted that it is healthy to allow non-specialists to air their views about religious issues for they too, are people affected by religious practice. However, Kee said that in Malaysia, there is an unhealthy tendency among some to tell non-specialists to keep quiet because they do not know what they are saying, and invariably there is no room given for debate.

According to Loo and Mustafa (2010), approaching religion-related stories beyond the reactive conflict frame will involve journalists consciously redefining the fundamental elements of newsworthiness, re-assessing their knowledge base and understanding of interfaith-based issues, how they will ask their questions and finally, how they will reconstruct the information and reactions they have gathered into a narrative with a clear goal in mind – which is to inform, contextualise, elucidate and educate their audience. One of the goals that journalists should strive for is to make sure that the voice of reason and moderation is not crowded out by undue media emphasis on extreme religious views and actions of recalcitrant members from different faith groups. In other words, while ample space needs to be provided by the media for all parties involved in a religious conflict, news priorities should be given to the moderating voice of reason than the vitriolic sloganeering of extremists.

Teoh (cited in Loo and Mustafa, 2010) also stated that instead of reporting on issues only when they arise, it would be good for journalists to write on religion and faith issues on a regular basis to try and bring about greater understanding. Additionally, journalists ought to also go beyond the conflict angle into the human interest frame. Vitug (cited in Loo and Mustafa, 2010) asserted that journalists should also examine the ‘unseen’ impact of conflicts – psychological and emotional scars. Drawing on examples of such impact would serve as a grim reminder to the media audiences – and the people involved – of the personal, familial, social, economic and political costs of prolonged conflict.

Malaysiakini painted a rather different picture of the dispute through its news frames. Letters showing different stances and lengthy columns discussing the complexities of the issue were published. The discussion has gone beyond the case of one’s conversion and ventured into questions of Islamic statehood and religious freedom. More often than not, the articles published by *Malaysiakini* tend to question the power and authority, which was described by Steele (2009) as “aggressively pursuing the bottom line without opposing the Government.” Moreover, the former Singaporean journalist and media scholar, Cherian George has called the kind of journalism practised at *Malaysiakini* as “contentious”. He claimed that the Internet news outlets in Singapore and Malaysia are:

“...contentious in that they directly and explicitly challenge the authority of elites in setting the national agenda and in forging consensus...These websites are engaged in more than just a struggle against government domination. They also embody competing normative notions of journalism and its role in democracy and subscribe to a more morally-engaged and less disinterested mode of journalism than their mainstream counterparts.” (George, cited in Steele, 2009: 98)

In addition, it is of significant concern that all the four newspapers except for *Utusan Malaysia*, had reported that the Lina Joy case has been politicised. This assertion resonated with the findings documented by various scholars. For example, Syed Husin (2008) acknowledged that in Malaysia, the political structures and processes are still very ethnic in nature. He criticised that a small minority of desperate politicians from all divides are often guilty of turning even genuine grievances into ethnic dissatisfactions, whether it is to promote their own egos, strengthen their own parties or weaken the leaders and parties that are in opposition to them. In his discussion on the transformation of race relations in Malaysia, Lee (2004) noted that the Islamic field is central to the definition of race relations since the Malay-Muslim majority exerts a strong influence on cultural and political developments in the country. As Malay identity is shaped and reshaped by its religious component, it becomes more conspicuous as a vehicle of exclusionary activities.

Therefore, it is crucial that journalists interpret frame and report religious tensions in their proper social, economic and political contexts (Loo and Mustafa, 2010). To overly emphasise the tension or conflict as episodic events without clearly explaining its contexts is to foment distortion of why, how and what actually took place. Consequently, the lack of contextual reporting will only exacerbate the misunderstanding among the general public. Digging deeper into the underlying causes of religious tension goes a long way towards informing and educating media audiences, thus helping to bridge the perceptual and cognitive gaps between adherents of all faith groups.

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