

The Representation of Government Agencies in the Health Debates on Radio Frequency (RF) Exposure in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Government departments and agencies are an important stakeholder group in risk communication specifically on environmental risks as they are directly involved in the implementation of guidelines and policies and in the communication of relevant initiatives to the public. Entrusted with policy-making and legislative powers, they therefore play a crucial role in the rising health debates on radio frequency (RF) emissions from telecommunication structures. RF exposure from the proliferation of base stations and rooftop antennas in Malaysia triggers concerns as a growing number of people claim that it is cancer causing and as such a health hazard. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the representation of the various social actors in the government departments and agencies in Malaysia in the health debates on RF exposure from telecommunication structures. Using van Leeuwen's social actor framework, this research aims to reveal the kinds of identities that are embedded in the discourse, specifically on how this group of social actors represent themselves in the health debates. The data is from five (5) face-to-face interviews with representatives from the regulator of the telecommunication industry, the health department and the local town councils. The findings suggest that the members of this stakeholder group are decision makers and interdependent in handling this perceived health risk. Yet they passivate the other, though they are part of the same stakeholder group, for lack of commitment and this blame avoidance hinders effective risk communication.

Keywords: Social actor, Representation, Risk communication, Government, Radio frequency

1. INTRODUCTION

There is increasing dissent among the public on radio frequency (RF) exposure from telecommunication structures. The World Health Organisation has classified RF from telecommunication structures as non-ionising radiation because there is no

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conclusive evidence that exposure to levels of RF below the published guidelines can cause any adverse health effects. However, some scientists, medical experts, politicians and journalists are concerned about the possible long-term effects of RF exposure (Johansson, 2009:157). This uncertainty is aggravated by the scientific community's conflicting views on RF as a cancer causing agent (Yasui, 2013: 937). In addition, a growing number of people claim that they are hypersensitive to RF and that it is a health hazard (Rööslä et al., 2004:141). As a result, the public generally enjoy the convenience of mobile communication but are opposed to having mobile phone base station sites near their neighbourhoods.

In Malaysia, the broadband penetration rate increased from 67.1 percent in 2013 to 70.2 percent in 2014 while the cellular telephone penetration rate rose from 143.8 percent in 2013 to 148.5 percent in 2014 (MCMC, 2014). This steady rise in the number of users requires an increasing number of telecommunication structures to ensure optimal coverage, especially in developed urban areas. This has resulted in a growth of base stations in the environment, such as telecommunication towers and antennas on roofs, or such structures placed inside or near public premises.

Consequently, many residents and activist groups in Malaysia are campaigning against the construction of these structures in residential areas as well as sensitive areas like schools, and also for the RF limits to be lowered. Telecommunication companies on the other hand require the construction of these structures to keep up with public demand and to provide good coverage. Both the Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) and the telecommunication companies have assured the public that the radiation levels are acceptably low and within the international public exposure guidelines. M.H. Othman of MCMC highlights that these assurances are however met with resistance by a sizeable segment of the population (personal communication, Feb 23, 2012).

Government departments and agencies are an important stakeholder group in risk communication as they are directly involved in the implementation of guidelines and policies and in the communication of these initiatives to the public. Covello (1993:18) describes risk communication as "the exchange of information among interested parties about the nature, magnitude, significance, or control of a risk". And the merit of risk communication lies in its ability to support specific goals of an organization challenged by a potentially hostile environment in which the various actors are vying to achieve their own interests and objectives (see Wardman, 2008:1622). So, effective risk communication can only be implemented if the reasons behind the conflicting views on RF are identified. Hence, there is a need to study the underlying reasons behind the health debates and this can be undertaken by examining how the government stakeholders talk about this issue and by the way they view themselves in this contestation as they are entrusted with policy-making and legislative powers.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the representation of various social actors in the government agencies in the health debates on RF exposure from telecommunication structures. The research aims to reveal the kinds of identities that are embedded in the discourse, specifically on how

this group of social actors represent themselves in the health debates.

2. GOVERNMENT IN RISK COMMUNICATION

The contestations on risk communication initiatives are attributed to the public's skepticism towards the motives of politicians, scientific advisors, regulators and the industry (Petts, Horlick-Jones & Murdock, 2001). In terms of environmental risk communication, the ratings of confidence in the government have eroded considerably in the last thirty years (see Peters, Covello, & McCallum, 1997) and this has hampered risk communication initiatives. As a result of low credibility, most risk messages from government authorities are viewed with suspicion (McComas, 2003:169). This view is supported by Frewer et al. (1996), Kasperon (1986) and Mitchell (1992) as they highlight that the public feel that these authorities have vested interests in risk messages. Studies on risk communication also corroborate that the public have low trust in government authorities and as a result are demanding a more democratic and responsible governance free from political and economic intervening motives (Markon, Crowe & Lemyre, 2013:319). Hence, most risk communication programs fail because of "polarized views, controversy, and overt conflict" and also because it has become "increasingly politicized and contentious" (see Slovic, 1999:689).

As a result of this low credibility, the government uses blame-avoiding strategies to evade the backlash from the public (Wenzelburger, 2014). Blame-avoidance strategies are commonly practised to avoid responsibility and liability. As such, Hansson (2015:299) is of the view that "blaming and denying are strategically planned and serve positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation". But blame avoidance involves matters of rightness and wrongness. Hence, Wyatt (2012:157) asserts that blame has a "moral component, which involves judging" and that leads to an estrangement, "a shattering of a previously held connection" (2012:156).

Therefore, social trust needs to be established by government departments and agencies managing risk and this can be initiated by consensual agreement and co operation in decision making. However, managers of environmental risk have different responsibilities and accountabilities, obligations and options which contribute to conflicting interests (Boholm, 2009:341). In addition, Clarke, Chess, Holmes, and O'Neill (2006:160) highlight that inter-organisational departments and agencies "involving law enforcement, public health, and clinical medicine which manage risk have become major battlegrounds" because their responsibility, power and authority are unclear. Such situations are not conducive in risk communication as Clarke et al. advocate that there must be rhetorical consistency to avoid public confusion and over-reaction. They affirm that policy makers must have interagency coordination so that the government can read from the same script and speak with one voice. But this requires the assertion of power by the various government social actors and such exercise of authority leads to conflicts. In this regard, Trettin and Musham (2000:422) highlight that each stakeholder group wants to promote their own self-interest in order to weaken the credibility of their opponents. Leiss (1995:686) appropriately illustrates risk communication as an anxious

game of poker among competing stakeholders in which each faction guards their own interests by employing “tactics and strategies (including ‘dirty’ ones)”. Incidentally, public confidence in government is dwindling as these institutions have been insensitive and callous to public concerns and fears pertaining to environmental risks (Peters, Covello, and McCallum, 1997:43).

From a discourse analysis perspective, Chilton (2004:46) maintains that policy debates see government officials legitimising their action through positive self-representation and delegitimising the other through negative other representation by using “ideas of difference and boundaries, and speech acts of blaming, accusing, insulting, etc”. Similarly, van Dijk (2009:251) and Wodak and Meyer (2009:26) confirm that social representation hinges on common knowledge, beliefs, ideologies, norms or values shared by a group of people. Therefore “identity is realized in discourse because people tend to identify themselves with their own social groupings (self) and often place themselves in opposition to other social groupings (other)” (Bloor and Bloor, 2007: 20). This is significant in this study as the various social actors in the government have diverse roles, responsibilities and authority in this contestation over RF exposure on public health. Hence, there may be a tendency to legitimise their own actions and delegitimise the actions of the other to maintain credibility and reputation.

Correspondingly, van Dijk (2006:123) highlights that group beliefs are characteristically ideological as they are controlled and organised by underlying ideologies. Therefore, the context and event models of their members are controlled when they speak as group members, and as a result the discourse structure is biased. He says that “ideological group beliefs take different forms, depending on their social functions. Some beliefs may be expressed in order to influence social policy or promote a cause” while other beliefs may centre on the norms and values of everyday practices of group members. The everyday practices of this stakeholder group differ based on their areas of jurisdiction and hence there may be a tendency to validate their systems and beliefs as more reliable.

3. REPRESENTING SOCIAL ACTORS

The main theoretical and methodological principle for this study is discursive and linguistically oriented and draws on a concept of discourse proposed by van Leeuwen’s (2008) Social Actors Network framework. This framework aids in revealing the representation of the social actors, specifically the kind of roles the groups and organisations play in the health debates because the actors can be represented positively or negatively, or as us versus them or, as part of an in-group or out-group. The framework looks at the representation of social actors through language. So it requires the researchers to ascertain from the “sociosemantic inventory the ways in which social actors can be represented and establish the sociological and critical relevance” and then question how the representation is linguistically realised (2008:23). Van Leeuwen states that this approach is based on two notions: the lack of bi-uniqueness of language, and that meaning is culturally based. According to him, the former can be seen in the way agency

as a sociological concept that is important in critical discourse analysis is analysed contextually as agents or patients. However, to portray the bi-uniqueness, he highlights that sociological agency is not only realised by linguistic agency or by the grammatical role of ‘agent’ but that it can also be represented by many other ways, for example, by prepositional phrases like ‘from’ and possessive pronouns like ‘our’ in which the grammatical agent can be sociologically represented as the ‘patient’. Van Leeuwen (2008: 24) emphasises that there is “no neat fit between sociological and linguistic categories”.

Therefore, van Leeuwen is against being too closely guided by specific linguistic operations or categories so as to avoid missing relevant instances of agency. He believes that meaning is interconnected to culture rather than language and as such cannot be associated with any precise semiotics. He asserts that meanings exist in society and that language functions as a tool in carrying the meanings while redefining them. Hence, he believes that the analysis should start from social encapsulations like foregrounding/backgrounding, and then be related to linguistic micro-mechanisms which may be utilised in comprehending such meanings. He states that such an approach “brings together what linguists tend to keep separate; it involves a number of distinct lexico grammatical and discourse-level linguistic systems, transitivity, reference, and nominal groups, rhetorical figures, and so on, because all these systems are involved in realization of representations of social actors” (1996:67).

But KhosraviNik (2010:58) highlights that van Leeuwen’s sociosemantic approach tones down the function of language and communication in constructing social ‘meanings’ as it is assumed that these meanings pre-exist as independent entities which flow into language. He suggests that relying solely on van Leeuwen’s sociosemantic categories results in oversimplifying the various levels of interactivity present in discourse and society, and condenses the analysis to morpho-syntactic or intra-textual levels. However, he reveals that van Leeuwen has proposed a practical framework of sociosemantic “which can take on linguistic facades through various linguistic mechanisms”. For these reasons, linguistic categories, namely, pronouns, modal verbs, adverbs, adjectives and conjunctions are included where applicable in the analysis.

Fairclough (1989) asserts that the use of pronouns is valuable in illuminating implied relationships between social actors. As such, pronouns are integral in the construction of identity as well as the way the stakeholders see themselves in relation to others and to society at large. The use of modal verbs like ‘might’, ‘should’, ‘will’ and also the phrase ‘we think’ project a certain authorial voice and attitude, and can facilitate manipulation when constructing social relations (Fairclough, 1992). In addition, Reisigl & Wodak (2009) corroborate that pronouns, modal verbs, adverbs, adjectives and conjunctive phrases are important devices in describing social actors and social actions either positively or negatively. Therefore, van Leeuwen’s sociosemantic categories complements the selected linguistic categories to give lucidity to the analysis of the social actors.

A pilot study of the data revealed that social actors are represented through

Activation / Passivation, Possessivation / Circumstantialisation / Possessivation, Genericisation/Specification, Differentiation/Indifferentiation and Functionalisation / Identification/ Appraisalment. Hence, these categories are chosen for analysis as these classifications are predominant in the data. These identified categories are briefly described below based on van Leeuwen's (2008) explanations.

i. Activation/Passivation:

Activation happens when social actors are indicated as the active, dynamic forces in an activity. Passivation on the other hand occurs when the social actors are portrayed as experiencing the activity or as the recipient of the activity. Passivated social actors can be subjected or treated as objects in the representation or beneficialised either positively or negatively as gaining from the action. The role of the social actors is not congruent with the grammatical role it is given.

ii. Participation/Circumstantialisation/Possessivation:

Activation of a social actor can be realised through participation (active roles of the social actors) or through circumstantialisation (indirectly through the mediation of a prepositional circumstantial), or by possessivation (the use of possessive pronoun).

iii. Genericisation/Specification:

Social actors are indicated with either a generic reference or a specific reference. Genericisation happens when social actors are represented as classes while specification occurs when social actors are identifiable individuals.

iv. Differentiation/Indifferentiation:

Differentiation clearly differentiates an individual social actor or group of social actors from another similar actor or group constructing, i.e. the differentiation between the 'self' and the 'other' or 'us' versus 'them'. Indifferentiation on the other hand creates no such distinction.

v. Functionalisation/Identification/Appraisalment:

Functionalisation references social actors by what they do or by what they are through activities and the things they do, such as their occupations or roles. Identification refers to social actors not through what they do, but in terms of what they inevitably are. For appraisalment, social actors are evaluated as good or bad, loved or hated, admired or pitied.

4. THE NATURE OF THE DATA

Qualitative data from spoken conversations was obtained from five (5) face-to-face semi-structured interviews with representatives from government departments/agencies that are directly involved in telecommunications, public health, and the implementation of guidelines and policies. This instrument is especially applicable to this research as it involves high-level bureaucrats with time constraints (Bernard, 2006:212). A purposive sampling method was used in selecting the sample based on the advice given by the Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission, the regulator of the telecommunication industry on Malaysia. The local town/city councils were specifically chosen as according to M.H. Othman (personal communication, Feb 23, 2012) protests from residents

against the construction of telecommunication base stations and roof top structures are predominately from urban areas like Petaling Jaya, Subang Jaya, and Penang. The questions in the interview guide covered values, beliefs, behavior, formal and informal roles, relationships, emotions and encounters of the interviewees or the political organisations they represented on the topic of study in order to enable comparability. The interviewees are:

i. The Deputy Director, from the regulatory body for telecommunications in Malaysia (**TRB**).

ii. The Senior Principal Assistant Director, from the government health agency for Malaysia, who is entrusted with the task of monitoring the findings of the perceived health risk from RF exposure (**HA**).

iii. Local Town Councils and Local Government

The following local town councils and local government were specifically chosen as according to M.H. Othman from MCMC (personal communication, Feb 23, 2012), protests from residents against the construction of telecommunication base stations and roof top structures are predominantly from urban areas like Petaling Jaya, Subang Jaya, and Penang.

a. Deputy Director, Petaling Jaya City Council (**MBPJ**)

b. Director, Municipal Council of Penang Island (**MPPP**)

c. Councillor, Subang Jaya Municipal Council (**MPSJ**)

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The government departments/agencies are partners as they are part of the machinery of the government but they play dissimilar roles in these health debates on RF as their objectives differ.

TRB is the regulator of the telecommunication industry in Malaysia and hence views itself positively as the trusted body in the country on issues pertaining to RF. This theme is the sole focus of its representation of 'self' as it aims to validate its powerful position in the telecommunication industry.

Excerpt 1: TRB

We are the **trusted body** on this issue here in Malaysia **besides WHO (World Health Organization)**. So who else **should** you trust and refer to besides WHO which is the World Health Organization. **Our regulations are based on WHO** and WHO refers to the **International Commission for Non-ionizing Radiation Protection (ICNIRP)**. These regulations are based on **scientific findings** and actually the base stations are **way below the set standard**.

TRB activates its role with the adjective phrase "trusted body" which indicates that it is the most reliable organisation in Malaysia who is qualified to speak on RF (see Excerpt 1: TRB). In addition, the prepositional phrase "besides WHO" is used to elevate their importance through functionalisation so as to be on par with WHO which is a specialised agency of the United Nations. Therefore, the repetitive use of the articulation "besides WHO" reinforces that there is no other authority or agency besides it in Malaysia that is more competent in dealing with RF. To strengthen this point,

TRB activates its alliance with WHO with the noun clause "Our regulations are based on WHO" which highlights its function of implementing rules and policies that

comply with world standards. Also, the verb phrase “refers to International Commission for Non-ionizing Radiation Protection” reinforces specifically that the standards adopted in Malaysia are based on the global benchmarks for RF emissions set by WHO in consultation with ICNIRP. By highlighting this cooperation with WHO and ICNIRP, activation is realised through participation as it shows TRB’s shared power relations with these two renowned bodies that are authorities on RF. Also, the adjective phrase “scientific findings” suggests that the standards are tested and approved by these world renowned bodies.

TRB emphasises its function again by activating its involvement in the health debates as a trusted agent responsible for matters pertaining to RF. The use of pronouns “we” and “our” in the articulation alludes a tight sense of in-group identity with WHO and ICNIRP and the adverbial clause “So who else should you trust and refer to besides WHO” puts TRB on the same pedestal as WHO. This is anticipated as TRB holds a powerful position in the telecommunication industry in Malaysia and wants to be seen on equal footing with WHO and ICNIRP, which are trusted and respected authorities on RF globally. Consequently, the modal verb “should” implies that the public are therefore supposed to recognise TRB as the trustworthy and reliable agency in Malaysia on matters pertaining to RF and that it is rightfully the point of reference in the country on this issue. Further, TRB’s positive appraisal of itself is indicated with the assertion that the base stations in Malaysia “are way below the set standard”. This reflects TRB’s tenacity in maintaining safe RF emission levels and indicates that it is in control of the situation.

Excerpt 2: TRB

If it’s high it could be 0.1% of the limit of maybe 0.3% so it is still below 1% so what we measure in Malaysian base stations is below 1% of the limit. It is less than 1%.

In Excerpt 2, TRB reinforces its role as a trusted regulator by specifying the RF emission level measurement in Malaysia. The clause “If it’s high it could be 0.1% of the limit of maybe 0.3%” indicates that TRB is vigilant and ensures that RF limits conform to international standards. The repetitive use of the verb phrases “is still below 1%” or “is less than 1%” emphasises TRB’s commitment in carrying out its duties. Further, the noun phrase “Malaysian base stations” specifies their area of jurisdiction and the authority it wields in Malaysia in ensuring that the RF emission levels are risk-free. It also mitigates the concerns of residents and activists on RF levels as it suggests that TRB is competent and reliable and is using its authority effectively to maintain a safe environment. It tones down the health debates on RF as being unsubstantiated.

This self-representation of TRB as a trusted body is perhaps necessary to gain the confidence of the public and to assure itself that it is able to monitor and maintain RF limits well below the international standards.

TRB is impressing that it is a responsible agent committed in monitoring the situation in consultation with world respected organisations. TRB represents HA as the ‘other’ although both agencies are within the same government departments/agencies stakeholder group.

Excerpt 3: TRB

HA is the actual **custodian of RF**. RF is radio frequency. So the people who control everything are the HA. They were appointed **by the cabinet** but I can’t remember the year, it’s either 2000 or late 1990s. So they are appointed as the **custodian for EMF**. **Most of the time they assist us** in our awareness programs and roadshows.

TRB activates HA’s role with the noun phrase “the custodian of RF” as it emphasises HA’s powerful role in the health debates (Excerpt 3: TRB). The prepositional phrase “by the cabinet” suggests that HA’s participation is by circumstantialisation as the appointment to act as the administrator on all matters pertaining to RF was sanctioned by the cabinet. This specification of HA’s appointment draws attention to the importance of this position and the power and authority given to them in dealing with RF-related issues. However, HA’s level of involvement is passivated with the adjective phrase “most of the time they assist us”. The verb “assist” denotes through functionalisation that HA is playing a supporting role in TRB’s awareness programs and roadshows despite being vested with the power to safeguard public health.

HA is not represented as the negative other but is subordinated by TRB for playing a secondary role despite holding a powerful position which is entrusted by the government. This mitigates HA’s credibility as a custodian of RF as they are portrayed as playing second fiddle instead of a dominant role in the health debates on RF. A similar representation of HA is made by the local government (see Excerpt 12: MPPP). This inaction by HA could be attributed to the organisational culture in most civil service departments which is commonly described as rigid, bureaucratic, centralised, insular and self protective. Meanwhile, TRB’s representation of self as a trusted body is reinforced as it is seen to be taking the lead in tackling this problem.

HA on the other hand represents itself in two ways: firstly, as a monitoring and reviewing body and, secondly, as a collaborator. They do not refer to themselves as custodians but just like TRB, HA infers that it oversees the RF situation locally in consultation with world bodies and is responsible in alerting the public and the government of any new developments. But the word “custodian” used by TRB in reference to HA is forceful and of a higher status as it refers to a guardian or defender, while a monitoring and reviewing body and a collaborator suggest that HA is only involved in some of the processes or duties of a custodian. Hence, HA’s representation of the ‘self’ is mitigated to a lesser extent and this supports TRB’s othering of HA as a subordinate

Excerpt 4: HA

The HA’s Inter-Agency Advisory Committee will continue to monitor and review the latest scientific findings and subsequently advise the government and the public.

In Excerpt 4: HA, the representation and participation of HA is activated with the possessive pronoun “HA’s” in reference to the Inter-Agency Advisory Committee.

The committee is given prominence through identification as it signals that it is under the purview of HA and is entrusted with the function "...to monitor and review ...and subsequently advise..." the government and the public. This kind of set-up is typical of a hierarchical bureaucracy with traditions of reporting to someone higher as dictated by roles, rules, processes, plans, and reports. Nevertheless, the verb phrase "continue to monitor and review" suggests that decision-making is ongoing through a systematic assessment, perhaps based on guidelines. The adjective phrase "latest scientific findings" denotes that the committee under HA does play a pre-emptive role by keeping abreast with the most recent scientific developments connected to RF. It connotes a positive appraisal of HA's commitment in the health debates.

Excerpt 5: HA

HA will **continuously collaborate** and **work closely with TRB** to **disseminate information** to the general public on the effects of RF emission from the base stations and mobile phones. **TRB was doing some great road shows in which we took part.**

In Excerpt 5: HA, the adverbial phrase "continuously collaborate" and verb phrase "work closely" activate HA not as an autonomous and isolated agency in this health debate but as that of a partner, specifically with TRB. It stresses through specification that HA is committed in collaborating with TRB's initiatives. The articulation "continuously collaborate" hints that the collaboration is regular and consistent and that this participation is active. This again conflicts with the way TRB 'others' them as subordinates. HA's participation is also defined through functionalisation with the verb phrase "disseminate information to the general public" suggesting that their role is to communicate news on RF to the public. The articulation "TRB was doing some great road shows in which we took part" is an affirmative acknowledgement of TRB's efforts in organising these road shows in which HA was a participant. This self-representation of HA validates that they are playing a secondary role to TRB in this collaboration.

Excerpt 6: HA

HA **continues to maintain contact** with WHO through its participation as a member of the International Advisory Committee (IAC) of WHO's International EMF Project to ensure that Malaysia keeps abreast with the latest findings

Likewise in Excerpt 6: HA, HA's representation as active collaborators with WHO is specified through functionalisation with the verb phrase "continues to maintain contact with WHO". It denotes that HA's role is to maintain contact with world-renowned bodies involved in RF and, through identification as a member of IAC, this involvement in WHO's initiatives is clearly established. The importance of this participation is specifically spelt out by highlighting IAC's significance in WHO's International EMF Project. Additionally, the verb phrase "ensure that Malaysia keeps abreast" and the adjective phrase "latest findings" draws attention to the aim of this collaboration which is to keep Malaysians informed of recent scientific developments on RF. This representation of collaborating and aligning

with both TRB and WHO is possibly important to HA's portrayal of 'self' as these organisations are powerful in their respective spheres locally and globally. Such collaborations add more credibility to HA's image.

Conversely, for the local governments, they see themselves firstly as custodians of safety and compliance, and secondly as non-experts in RF, and finally as a support agency to the other government bodies namely TRB and HA in issues on RF.

Excerpt 7: MPPP

Yes, we **ensure structure safety and compliance** that is it harmonizes with the surrounding and maintains **aesthetic values**. We look at the **tangible** part, that is the safety of the structure and, the **intangible** part is the harmonizing and aesthetic part, especially in the World Heritage Centre or zone.

In Excerpt 7: MPPP, the verb clause "ensure structure safety and compliance" activates this primary role through functionalisation as it highlights their role in this health debates. Additionally, the adjectives "tangible" and "intangible" signify the different roles they play within their job scope. "Tangible" is used to represent their visible role in ensuring safety while "intangible" draws attention to their unnoticed role in balancing the visual appeal of the areas under their authority. This is specifically applicable in Penang as certain areas are gazetted as World Heritage Zone by UNESCO. The adjective phrase "aesthetic values" extends their job functions beyond safety and compliance and includes keeping the town/city visually appealing. This suggests that they understand their well-defined areas of jurisdiction and hence are well aware of their scope of power and influence.

Excerpt 8: MPSJ

We look only at guidelines and if all requirements are met for telecommunication structures

In Excerpt 8: MPSJ, the specific function of the local government in the RF controversy is defined with the adjective phrase "only at guidelines". This reinforces that the local government's power and jurisdiction is confined to safety and compliance and not in RF. The repetitive use of the pronoun "we" in both Excerpts 7 and 8 indicates that the local government agencies see themselves as an in-group with shared knowledge, belief and values. This suggests that the role of the local governments is similar regardless of their location.

Excerpt 9: MBPJ

As part of the **agreement with TRB**, we look at complaints about telco structure and TRB looks after the radiation part. It is clearly stated. We are **not professionals in radiation**, we cannot give any talk about radiation. If you say "tiada, tiba tiba orang kata ada" (if we say no and if people confirm there is radiation after checking), **whose faces are going to turn red**

The role of the local government in the RF conflict is established and defined in Excerpt 9: MBPJ. The noun phrase "the agreement with TRB" specifies and identifies TRB as the other party in the contract and the adverbial phrase "clearly stated" indicates explicitly that there is separation of duties which was mutually agreed upon. The functionalisation of each party to the agreement is highlighted:

the local governments' areas of authority, control, and responsibility are distinctly confined to "complaints about telco structure" while TRB looks at "the radiation part". The noun phrase "the radiation part" is unclear but it can also be inferred from TRB's representation of 'self' that they are the trusted body on RF in Malaysia. Furthermore, the adjective phrase "not professionals in radiation" indicates that the local government is not qualified to speak on RF-related issues. So the adjective clause "whose faces are going to turn red?" indicates that the local government, as a respectable agency, does not want to be embarrassed if the information released by them on RF is incorrect. The role of the local government is again clearly established by way of functionalisation as it infers that they do not want to be embroiled in the health debates on RF as they are not qualified to comment it.

Excerpt 10: MPSJ

...we are **not the experts on radio frequency but** we discuss on the application to **see if they meet the guidelines or not**".

Similarly, in Excerpt 10: MPSJ, the adjective phrase "not the experts on radio frequency" and the verb phrase "see if they meet the guidelines or not" once again reaffirms by functionalisation that the primary role of the local government is to uphold the adherence of guidelines and that they are not qualified to make decisions pertaining to RF. The conjunction "but" also emphasises the local government's legitimacy as social actors who play an active role as upholders of guidelines and regulations while the preceding clause passivates their role pertaining to RF as they are "not the experts on radio frequency". The key here is the juxtaposition of both activation and passivation in order to legitimise themselves as local authoritative bodies and yet distancing themselves from the responsibility of the RF issue.

Excerpt 11: MPPP

The council is fully aware of the initiatives taken by TRB on these awareness campaigns and we fully support them.

The local government activates themselves as being aware and supportive of the initiatives undertaken by TRB (see Excerpt 11: MPPP). The repetitive use of the adverb "fully" signifies, firstly, the acknowledgement of TRB's efforts and, secondly, the high level of commitment they have in working with TRB in addressing the issue. Again the representation is such that it seems as if the local governing bodies are in an organisational structure whereby their role is that of 'support' rather than of leading the initiatives. TRB is activated through circumstantialisation with the verb phrase "taken by TRB" for taking the initiative although the sentence structure is passive as they are still the doer while the local government is the 'supporter' of TRB's initiatives. The local council is activated but in a lesser degree as they only play a supporting role in the initiatives while TRB's activation is more specific

as they are the agent responsible for these awareness programs. The 'other' for the local government is TRB and HA though they are part of the same stakeholder group and this is attributed to the dissimilar objectives of the respective departments/agencies.

Excerpt 12: MPPP

Here, TRB and the telcos **need to** "turun padang" (go and meet the people on the ground) through these awareness campaigns to reach out to the residents and explain to them and give them the correct information to reduce their fears on radiation". Both TRB and the telcos **must play a big role in these awareness campaigns**. As for the HA, **I'm not too sure of their role**." In fact, TRB and the telco companies should not just leave the **dirty job** of dealing with the protesters to the local council. They **should** play an active role in educating the public and creating awareness on this issue.

TRB and HA's participation is passivated in Excerpt 12: MPPP, as these organisations are seen to be not proactive enough in addressing the issue on RF. This passivation is established by highlighting the conditions that they did not fulfil in tackling this problem through the modal verbs "need to", "should" and "must". It implies that TRB's initiatives lack rigour as the message is not filtered down to the residents effectively in alleviating their fears on RF. They are blamed for not addressing the concerns of the protestors and for shifting this responsibility to the local councils. With the adverbial phrase "not too sure", HA's role is passivated as it infers that their position in the health debates on RF is unclear.

In addition, the adjective phrase "dirty job" signifies that dealing with protestors is an unpleasant job which the local council is forced to do alone. So the representative has activated the local government as the sole and reluctant agent who is left to deal with the protestors. This puts TRB and HA in a bad light as they are important social actors in this controversy. Therefore, the local council feels that these powerful bodies cannot be trusted to pull their own weight in the addressing of this problem together. Instead, they are represented as shirking their duties which is an unfitting depiction of such respected organisations. Hence, the local government sees TRB and HA as powerful bodies that are not doing enough in handling the conflict. This is a dent to their credibility as it infers that they lack initiative in carrying out their duties responsibly. It also indicates that these significant players in this controversy are not upholding their responsibility.

The findings suggest that the representation of 'self' is always positive and differs based on the areas of jurisdiction but the 'other' are mostly passivated in terms of credibility. Credibility is determined by trust, commitment and competence and each agency under this stakeholder group are clear about their responsibility, power and authority in addressing the RF conflict. This is evident as each agency represents themselves as a trusted body on RF, as a monitoring and supporting agency to others in the coalition, and as custodians of safety and compliance. Yet, they are passivated as the other, though they are part of the same stakeholder group, for lack of commitment. Obviously, trust, which is the foundation for risk communication initiatives, is lacking as the various social actors in this stakeholder group lack honesty and openness in dealing with the RF conflict. On the one

hand, the government bodies validate the roles they play in dealing with this contestation. On the other hand, they deflect blame by accusing the other for not stepping up to the plate in addressing the public's concern on RF exposure from telecommunication structures. Hansson (2015) also highlights that deflecting blame legitimates some actors and disempowers/delegitimises others. This infers that blame avoidance by these government decision makers who are interdependent in this contestation inhibits effective risk communication.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The representations hint that the administrative set-up in these government bodies is bureaucratic and hierarchal. The distribution of responsibility, power and authority is clear, but there are ambiguities in the coordination and implementation of risk communication initiatives. This lack of interagency coordination does not provide a remedy to the health debates as clearly the agents responsible for safeguarding public health are not speaking in one voice, leading to inept risk communication efforts. The inference is that each agency is looking after their self-interest and representing themselves positively to gain public trust while the other partners are passivated for not doing enough to address the contestation on the health debates. The other is not excluded from the risk communication initiatives but the representation indicates lack of initiative in decision making. The lack of pro-activeness in the risk communication initiatives impacts the way the public evaluates this stakeholder in terms of credibility, responsibility and competence. Managing risk ultimately depends on the public's trust of risk managers which is the government stakeholder group. Therefore this stakeholder group needs to see beyond safeguarding their management roles and to avoid the blame game. Instead, the government bodies involved in risk communication need to be on the same page and execute their plans in harmony.

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