

Framing the Malaysian Brain Drain: A Comparison between the Reporting Styles of *The Star Online* vs *Malaysiakini*

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ABSTRACT

The brain drain phenomenon, otherwise known as human capital flight or human capital outflow, is an issue widely covered by both the mainstream and the alternative media. A 2011 World Bank report stated that Malaysians residing overseas are likely to have reached one million in 2010, a third of this figure (approximately 335,000) estimated as a result of the brain drain. This paper compares the reporting style of *The Star Online*, a mainstream English language online news portal with that of *Malaysiakini*, an alternative news portal using content analysis. This study employed framing as a theoretical framework to observe how the two news portals portrayed the brain drain phenomenon and related issues as well as the most prominent frames used in their news reporting.

Keywords: brain drain, framing analysis, human capital outflow, emigration, online media

1. INTRODUCTION

While migration of skilled labor from Malaysia is not a new phenomenon, it has been getting more coverage by both mainstream and alternative newspapers and of late, online news portals especially between 2008 and 2012.

The term “brain drain” according to Tyson (2011) refers to the fact that entrepreneurial skills and talents moving out of a country can stunt productivity. According to Jauhar and Mohd Yusoff (2011), the most common type of brain drain is the outflow of professionals from developing countries to the developed nations, more often than not, at the expense of the developing countries. In Malaysia, the brain drain phenomenon has captured the media headlines of both sides of the media who have created varied representations of this issue regarding the ruling government and its policies; economic factors such as migration, remission, exchange rates, job opportunities, the capabilities, training and retaining of talent; and measures taken to prevent or reverse the brain drain in the minds of the mass media consumers. As

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mentioned by Jauhar and Mohd Yusoff (2011), Malaysian professionals are much sought after because they are able to “adapt themselves anywhere in the world, are multi-lingual and inexpensive”. While there is still an ongoing debate over the economic impact of migration and brain drain, the exodus of Malaysians is a “headline grabber, often portrayed as a serious limiting factor for economic development and having detrimental impacts on productivity” (Tyson, 2011: 89). This study compares the thematic focus of the articles and news frames employed by a Malaysian mainstream online news portal, *The Star Online* (which is available online for reading at no charge) with an alternative news portal, *Malaysiakini*, (Malaysia’s first subscription-based) in portraying the brain drain issue.

1.1 Research Objectives

This paper examines the media coverage of the outflow of human capital, also known as brain drain, in particular highly skilled workers from Malaysia to other countries. Consequent to the World Bank report which highlighted Malaysia’s dwindling pool of skilled talent to other economies (*Malaysiakini*, 28 April 2011), TalentCorp, an initiative by the Prime Minister’s Department, was established to address this issue. Backed by the ruling government to attract local talent who are now abroad, TalentCorp has received much media attention since its inception in 2011. While migration of skilled labour to countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States and Singapore has been ongoing since the 1980s, this phenomenon was only recently thrust into the limelight after the World Bank report. The first objective of this study was to examine the coverage of the brain drain issue between 2010 and 2012 and to determine the news sources of the articles. This study also looked at the news frames that have been adopted by the online news portals based on Semetko and Valkenburg’s (2000) model of five generic frames.

The outcome of this research is a comparison of a mainstream and an alternative news portal style of reporting on the brain drain issue including extent of coverage by word count, sections in which these news stories were classified and presented, sources of information and the dominant frames observed.

1.2 Research Questions

The following research questions were raised for the purpose of this study:

- RQ1: What is the extent of coverage undertaken by the mainstream English language online news portal *The Star Online*, in comparison with the alternative news portal *Malaysiakini* in their respective coverage of the brain drain issue?
- RQ2: Who and what are the news sources used and attributed by both *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini* in their respective coverage of the brain drain issue?
- RQ3: What are the news frames adopted and employed by *The Star Online* as well as *Malaysiakini* in their respective coverage of the brain drain issue?

1.3 Significance of the Study

Studies that compare media coverage by a perceived pro-government news portal against another which is regarded as an alternative news portal are important because very often audiences regard and use only one or the other as a source of information and as a basis of making decisions. This study hopes to provide a better and clearer understanding of the news reporting style of these online news portals and how it is tackled by those in the corridors of power with their hidden agendas. It also hopes to shed some light on the concerns and attitudes of the audiences of these news portals when perceiving “better opportunities”, given the political and socioeconomic background.

Prior to this study, there was no published research that looked specifically at news coverage and/or media attention of the brain drain issue in Malaysia. Previous studies only looked at the brain drain issue in Malaysia from the sociological, economic and human resources perspectives. On another note, a study on the media portrayals of labour migration focused solely on the inflow of foreign labour into Southeast Asia in general, with a section dedicated to Malaysia (Magpanthong and McDaniel, 2011).

Content analysis was employed in this study. The research findings provided information on the existing news frames applied to the news coverage on the activities surrounding the discussions and measures at alleviating or reducing brain drain in Malaysia.

2. BACKGROUND OF STUDY

This section serves as a background to contextualise the issues discussed in the later sections.

2.1. *The Prime Minister’s Department’s New Economic Model (NEM) and the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP)*

Datuk Najib Razak assumed office as the sixth Prime Minister of Malaysia on 3 April 2009, following the resignation of his predecessor, Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi on 2 April 2009. A month later, on 2 May 2009, he announced the government’s plan to develop the New Economic Model (NEM) that is intended to accelerate the transition of Malaysia into a high-income country by 2020.

On 30 March 2010, the economic model was unveiled where the goal, as stated by Chin (2010), was to “transform the Malaysian economy to become one with high income and quality growth over the next decade.” To drive this economic progress, Najib Razak stressed that the NEM will be “guided by three principles ie. high income, sustainability, and inclusiveness” (*The Star Online*, 31 March 2010). High income refers to “higher wages throughout the economy as growth is derived from capital, greater productivity through the use of skills and innovation, improved coordination, stronger branding and compliance with international standards and Intellectual Property Rights; while the commitment to sustainability aims to marry “high and sustained growth” with “environmental stewardship” (*The Star Online*, 31 March 2010). The third principle of inclusiveness would focus on “fostering a sense of belonging and

engagement in the NEM, ensuring that no one was left out in contributing to and sharing in the creation of wealth.” This would be done by engaging Malaysia’s talents in our effort to build a competitive economic workforce. According to this report in *The Star Online* (31 March 2010), to achieve these three-fold principles, Najib Razak proposed a series of eight reform initiatives encapsulated in the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP) driven by the Performance Management and Delivery Unit (PEMANDU) within the Prime Minister’s Department.

According to the National Economic Advisory Council (2011a), the ETP, once successfully implemented, will more than double Malaysia’s gross national income per capita to over RM48,000 (equivalent to USD15,000) in 2020. The ETP encompasses two key components: 8 Strategic Reform Initiatives (SRIs) and 12 National Key Economic Areas (NKEAs). The SRIs are policy measures to “remove structural barriers to growth” and address shortcomings in the economy. One of the SRIs focuses on “developing quality workforce and reducing the dependency on foreign labour” through better education and skill training programmes to meet the needs of a knowledge economy (NEAC, 2011b).

2.2 Talent Corporation Malaysia (TalentCorp)

Talent Corporation Malaysia Berhad (TalentCorp) was established under the Prime Minister’s Department on 1 January 2011 to ensure Malaysia has sufficient talent to support its economic growth and transformation.

TalentCorp exists to ‘formulate and facilitate initiatives to address the availability of talent in line with the needs of the country’s economic transformation’ by focusing on three strategic thrusts, namely to: (i) optimise Malaysian talent, (ii) attract and facilitate global talent, and (iii) build networks of top talent. Its mission is “to build effective partnerships and make a difference in addressing Malaysia’s talent needs to enable the country to reach its aspiration of a high-income nation” (TalentCorp, 2011). This is in line with the NEM which was formulated by the National Economic Advisory Council (NEAC) established by the Prime Minister’s Department to drive Malaysia’s transformation into an advanced nation by 2020. As reported in NEM (National Economic Advisory Council, 2009), the country is losing skilled talent needed to drive future economic growth with reference to the 350,000 Malaysian adults working abroad in 2008; over half of which have tertiary education according to the Ministry of Human Resources (MOHR).

Much like its counterpart Talent Capital Singapore, TalentCorp has developed recapture programs such as REP to facilitate the return of Malaysian professionals from overseas with the purpose of overcoming the shortage of professional and technical expertise in Malaysia, and creating a world-class workforce (TalentCorp, 2011). A scheme of benefits introduced to attract Malaysia talents working abroad includes optional flat tax rate of 15% for employment income for five years, tax exemption for all personal effects brought into Malaysia, two locally-assembled or manufactured completely-knocked-down vehicles tax-free, and Permanent Resident eligibility for foreign spouse or children.

TalentCorp, headed by its Chief Executive Officer, Johan Mahmood Merican, operates directly under the Prime Minister's Department and liaises with various stakeholders such as the Public Services Department (PSD), PEMANDU, government-linked corporations (GLCs), various ministries (finance, MOHR, education, home affairs and immigration), strategic planning units as well as private and non-governmental sectors (Tyson, 2011). TalentCorp's targets and goals need to compliment and, more importantly, reconcile with the Najib administration's reform agenda which includes the Tenth Malaysia Plan, the National Key Results Areas (NKRAs), the NKEAs, the NEM, the ETP and the Government Transformation Programme (GTP) (another program launched in tandem with the ETP with at least 131 Entry Point Projects (EPPs) (Ahmad, 2010; Tyson, 2011).

2.3 The World Bank

The World Bank Institute, headquartered in Washington, DC, is an international financial institution established in 1944 originally to facilitate post-war reconstruction and development but now has evolved to its present-day mandate of worldwide poverty alleviation (World Bank, 2012a). The World Bank is not a bank in the traditional sense but "a unique partnership to reduce poverty and support development" and is made up of two institutions—the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) which focuses on reducing poverty in "middle income and creditworthy poorer countries" and the International Development Association (IDA) which focuses specifically on the world's poorest countries (World Bank, 2012b). The World Bank helps governments in developing countries reduce poverty by providing them with financial aid and technical expertise needed for education, health, infrastructure, communications, government reforms, and other development needs (World Bank, 2012c).

Malaysia was once identified by the World Bank in *The East Asian Miracle: Economic Growth and Public Policy* as one of the eight "high-performing" Asian economies that had achieved the highest growth rates in the world from 1965 to 1990 (Zaharom, cited in Khattab, 2004).

In an official 2011 report (World Bank, 2011), World Bank reported that the number of Malaysians residing overseas is likely to have reached one million in 2010, of which approximately 335,000 can be attributed to brain drain. A World Bank official said that more than half of the diaspora was concentrated in Singapore, Australia, Brunei, United Kingdom, United States, Canada and New Zealand.

2.4 Mainstream Media Ownership and Legislative Controls in Malaysia

Malaysia's news media is owned or indirectly controlled by political parties which "constitute of the ruling coalition, *Barisan Nasional* or National Front (BN) (Kenyon and Marjoribanks, 2007). As early as the 1960s, the leadership of United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the dominant party of the ethnically-based BN, bought a controlling stake in *Utusan Melayu* (a Malay language daily) and by the mid-1980s, UMNO acquired controlling stakes in most major English-, Malay-,

and Chinese-language dailies. UMNO's partner in the BN, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) owns *The Star Online* newspaper while other smaller component parties control papers of smaller circulation within their demographic audience (Brown, 2005).

The Star Online is an English daily newspaper with an online presence at www.thestar.com.my and is accessible free of charge. In the wake of the 2011 World Bank Report, *The Star Online's* weekly which regularly publishes its weekly business section called the *Biz Weekly* in the printed version, had six articles relating to brain drain with a special cover story on the issue.

Apart from issues of ownership, a number of legal measures are also in place to restrict media freedom in Malaysia. One them is the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984 (PPPA) (Brown, 2005; Khattab, 2004). Brown (2005) stated that the PPPA has remained central to the BN regime's control of the print media. According to Rajaratnam (2009), the PPPA imposes "restraints in relation to these activities, and prescribes strong penalties for their breach, including jail sentences", and as stated by Brown (2005), gives "the Home Minister 'absolute discretion' in awarding and revoking permits and disallowing any judicial review of the process."

Since the PPPA is not applicable to the Internet and the Multimedia Bill of Guarantees and the Communications and Multimedia Commission Act 1998 have stipulated that the Internet will not be censored, *Malaysiakini* was established in 1999 without a permit and is today Malaysia's only independent online newspaper (Khattab, 2004). As a commercial Internet newspaper, the site receives an average 120,000 visitors a day which compares respectably with the circulation of mainstream newspapers such as *The Star Online* and *The New Straits Times* (Brown, 2005). The influence of *Malaysiakini* was to the extent that within two years, in 2001, *Malaysiakini* and its editor earned the number 18 spot in *Asiaweek's* Power 50 list of influential communicators across all of Asia (Brown 2005).

2.5 Literature Review

There have been several studies on brain drain from as far back as the 1960s (Grubel and Scott, 1966; Baldwin, 1970; Bhagwati and Hamada, 1974; Miyagiwa, 1991) and due to the nature of the topic, most of these studies focused on experiences from specific countries and regions such as Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America (Docquier et al, 2007; Beine et al, 2008), Turkey (Tansel and Gungor, 2003) and Malaysia (Tyson, 2011; Hugo, 2011).

Most studies offered a sociocultural, political and economic viewpoint (Tyson, 2011; Hugo, 2011; Docquier et al, 2007; Beine et al, 2008) that tied the changing political and economic circumstances in with the movement of the diasporas for better economic opportunities through equal opportunities employment, increase in income and remittance back to the home countries; the perceived political stability and opportunities in education and industry of the host countries and likewise the perceived political instability or oppression back in the home countries; and the

tolerance, integration and ultimately, ease of assimilation of the new skilled migrant labor in the host countries.

Hugo's (2011) study on migration and development in Malaysia shed some light specifically on Malaysia as among the countries most influenced by international migration globally, not only as a major immigration destination but which had also, particularly in recent years, experienced significant emigration. Hugo (2011) further mentioned that during the last four decades, Malaysia has experienced consistent economic growth and improvements in welfare which has elevated Malaysia's status as a 'middle-income' country (United Nations Development Programme, cited in Hugo, 2011). This economic growth can be attributed to the utilisation of low-waged, unskilled foreign labour to meet labour shortages in sectors such as construction and manufacturing.

Similarly, in the last four decades, economic intervention by the government through the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) and the New Development Policy (NDP) provided preferential treatment for ethnic Malays to achieve a more equitable distribution of wealth. As a result, the Malays (*Bumiputera* or sons of the soil) were given preferential treatment in access to education and employment over their Chinese and Indian counterparts and this has led to the marginalisation of highly-skilled non-*bumiputera* groups who represent the majority of emigrants from Malaysia. The race-based structuring of opportunities in Malaysia remains a barrier which prevents these emigrants from returning to their homeland. In addition, Hugo (2011) mentioned that for Malaysia to make the transition to a high-income country, it needs to significantly increase the skill level and productivity of its workforce.

Tyson (2011) suggested that brain drain, or the global brain flow, is cyclical in nature and observed at different times in the changing political and economic landscape. In some cases, the expansion of educational needs led to the brain overflow, which resulted in surpluses in university graduates that the home economy could not readily absorb, as highlighted in Baldwin (1970) and Dore (1976).

Portes (1976) emphasised that brain drain is conditioned by the asymmetric and unequal structure of the global system where global brain flow are explained by political and economic imbalances, and the exchanges between developed and developing countries. The highly skilled emigrants, in essence, move towards countries where conditions for scientific, technological and professional work are easier to access (Tyson, 2011; Portes, 1976).

Jauhar and Mohd Yusoff's (2011) study examined the push and pull factors that cause brain drain, their relationship with each other, and the propensity of Malaysian professionals to leave their homeland. These researchers suggested that some of the "push" factors include lack of promotion prospects, career dissatisfaction, limited job opportunities, low occupational income, and less satisfying social and cultural life while the "pull" factors from the host countries include better work environment, greater job availability, better educational opportunities and international exposure.

As stated earlier, most of the existing studies looked at the political and economic

spectrums as the causes and effects related to brain drain and very few studied the use and manipulation of the brain drain issue by the media for political mileage in their news stories. News stories when presented through different frames serve to influence its readers into a particular context while suggesting the issue by selecting, emphasizing, excluding, and elaborating (Tankard et al., 1991). A comparison between the mainstream and alternative media, specifically online, on their coverage of the brain drain issue remains largely unexplored.

2.6 Theoretical Framework

This study employed framing theory as the theoretical framework. Gamson (1989) suggested that a frame is a central theme which aids in clarifying relevant events and suggests what the issue is. Framing, therefore can be regarded as an extension to agenda setting as suggested by McCombs et al. (cited in Scheufele, 1999). The reason being, once selected, journalists choose to report an issue using this news frame.

According to Gamson (1989), when events are embedded in a frame and they are organized by the frame, through the selection of relevant facts and leaving out those that are not, it gives them coherence. Additionally, Tankard et al. (1991) (cited in Severin and Tankard, 2010) defined a frame as an important organising idea which is applied on news contents to provide a context and to suggest the issue through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration.

According to Entman (1993), to frame a described item is to lend perceived reality to a text in such a fashion so as promote selected meanings to them. This will make interpretation and recommendations easier to convey.

In recent development, the framing theory has overtaken agenda setting and cultivation theory as the most common research approach in the field of communication science (Bryant and Miron, 2004). While agenda setting is a theory of limited media effects that references there is a strong correlation between the emphasis that mass media place on certain issues and the importance attributed to these issues by the mass audiences (McCombs, 2005), framing is based on the assumption that the way an issue is characterised in news reports can have an influence on the way it is understood by the audiences and how different presentations of essentially identical decision-making scenarios influence people's choices and their evaluation of the various options presented to them (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007). Evidently, news frames are able to influence an audience's perceptions of a specific issue, in this case, the brain drain.

Tankard (2008) pointed out that several news features convey frames which are headlines and kickers, subheads, leads etc. Wong (2004) highlighted four key dimensions of framing that could be studied: presentation of news item (through their size and placement) news topic items (or key issues that are included and discussed in the frame) cognitive attributes (or the specific details of issues which are included); and affective attributes (which refer to the tone of the picture in the frame).

3. METHODOLOGY

The key objective of this research was to compare and contrast the coverage of the brain drain issue and the approach in using frames by the mainstream English daily

news portal, *The Star Online* and a key alternative daily news portal, *Malaysiakini*. The study employed content analysis.

3.1 Content Analysis

The methodology used in this research was content analysis. Content analysis, broadly defined by Holsti (1969), is any technique used for making inferences through the objective and systematic identification of specified characteristics of messages. Krippendorff (2004) defined content analysis as a technique which is used in research to arrive at replicable and valid inferences from texts or other meaningful matter to the context in which they are used.

The rationale for selecting these two online news portals was firstly, *The Star Online* is a long-established and popular English daily tabloid-format newspaper. *The Star Online* is published online where the content is available free of charge. *The Star Online* is 42% majority-owned by Huaren Holdings Sdn Bhd, the investment arm of the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), a race-based political party which is a component party of the BN government (Siow, 2009). For this study, we can assume that this newspaper and its online portal is representative of the government's views on the issue. Song (2007) found that the mainstream news media serves as an institution of social control by imposing frames that marginalise causes that challenge the values of the mainstream society.

In contrast, *Malaysiakini* was selected mainly due to the general perception of its contrasting reporting to that of the mainstream media. *Malaysiakini* is a political news portal which publishes articles in English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil. *Malaysiakini* receives no funding from the ruling central or state governments and is owned by a non-government entity. *Malaysiakini* receives foreign grants from Washington-based National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and other international donors (*The Star Online*, 22 September 2012). Due to its online-only content, *Malaysiakini* has largely remained free from government regulation and is regarded as hardcore pro-opposition for covering subjects and viewpoints which are deemed taboo by the mainstream media. When compared with *The Star Online*, the alternative media is perceived to serve as a communication outlet for movements and causes that are ignored or marginalised by the mainstream media (Song, 2007).

The sample for this study was taken from the respective news portals' published articles from January 2011 to December 2012, which were the months before, during and after the World Bank report in 2011 and before the announcement of Malaysia's 13th General Elections which was to be held on 5 May 2013. The units of analysis were articles including straight headline news, business news, education news, published opinions, letters and emails. The articles were procured through the database search using keywords such as "brain drain", "human capital flight", "migration" and "human capital outflow". The sample consists of 44 articles from both news portals (with *The Star Online* contributing 25 articles and *Malaysiakini* 19 articles).

This study employed five generic news frames developed by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) which was earlier explored in Valkenburg, Semetko and De Vreese (1999) as the basis of comparison. The five frames proposed by Semetko and Valkenburg are:

- i. Conflict: this frame focuses on the conflict elements of the issue, for example, argument between individuals, groups, parties, institutions, as a means of capturing audience interest;
- ii. Human interest: this frame brings an individual's story and gives an emotional angle to present the issue or problem and is used for its ability to trigger an emotional impact on the audience;
- iii. Economic consequences: this frame reports an event, problem or issue in terms of the consequences it will have economically on an individual, group, institution, region, or country;
- iv. Morality: this frame puts the event, problem or issue under the focus by relating the news in the context of moral values or religious beliefs; and
- v. Responsibility: this frame highlights news by way of attributing responsibility for its cause or solution to the government (or individual or institution) and its ability in solving the issue.

3.2 Coding

The articles selected for analyses were coded into categories. The extent of coverage was measured from three angles: (1) number of articles; (2) types of articles (which can also determine the article length); and (3) size and length of articles (measured by average word count per article).

Five types of news sources were categorised:

1. Ruling coalition parties: consisting of leaders and representatives from the *Barisan Nasional* or National Front (BN) which forms the central government in Malaysia and consists of United Malays National Organization (UMNO), Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) and all BN-held and -related ministries and departments of the central government.
2. Opposition parties: consisting of leaders and representatives from *Pakatan Rakyat* or People's Alliance (PR) which comprise of *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* or People's Justice Party (PKR), *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* or Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party (PAS), the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and all PR-held state governments including that of Penang, Kelantan, Selangor and Kedah.
3. Professionals: representatives from professional bodies and chambers of commerce and industry.
4. Non-governmental organisations: third-party organisations which are perceived as not related or linked to the government or the opposition.
5. Common civilians: individuals who speak on behalf of themselves through opinion pieces or letters to editors.

This study used a deductive, priori coding approach whereby categories were established based on a theoretical and/or conceptual rationale before the data were collected. The data were treated with the commonly adopted generic news frames

suggested by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000). The five frames are conflict, economic consequences, human interest, morality, and responsibility (as described earlier).

4. FINDINGS

The results of the study are presented with basic information such as frequency and percentage breakdown of the variables.

4.1 Coverage of News

Table 1 reveals that *The Star Online* paid more attention to the brain drain issue (25 articles) in comparison to *Malaysiakini* (19 articles). *The Star Online* has also published a higher number of words (18,927) with an average of 757 words per article compared to *Malaysiakini*'s total of 10,203 (an average of 537 words per article).

While the coverage of both these news portals were mainly in the form of straight news, *Malaysiakini* published a higher percentage despite its lower number of articles.

Twenty-four percent of *The Star Online* articles were covered and categorised under the business news section.

Table 1. Coverage of news

	<i>The Star Online</i> (n = 25) %	<i>Malaysiakini</i> (n = 19) %
Type:		
Straight news	44	78.94
Business Section news	24	0
Education Section news	4	0
Letters / Emails	4	10.52
Opinions	20	10.52
Metro (City & Community) News	4	0
Average number of words	757 words	537 words

4.2 Sources of News

Table 2 indicates that both *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini* relied on representatives from professional organisations (financial, economic, human resources) as their most important news sources. On the other hand, while *Malaysiakini* had, within the time frame and in the context of this issue, been more balanced in getting news sources from both the ruling coalition parties and the opposition parties, *The Star Online* never utilised information from opposition parties as news sources. Other sources included non-government organisations with specific interests and civilians.

Table 2. Source of news

	<i>The Star Online</i> (n = 25) %	<i>Malaysiakini</i> (n = 19) %
Ruling coalition parties	28	26.32
Opposition parties	0	26.32
Professionals	56	31.58
Non-governmental organisations	4	5.26
Common civilians	12	10.53

4.3 Framing of News Articles

4.3.1 *The Star Online*

The Star Online covered the economic consequences frame more frequently at 56% followed by the responsibility frame. Using the economic consequences frame, *The Star Online* reported that in addition to the ETP and NEM being in place to boost economic growth, the crux of Malaysia's transformation would be a revamp of the education system and policies of inclusiveness. This discontentment with Malaysia's lack of inclusiveness had resulted in non-Bumiputeras making up the bulk of the diaspora (*The Star Online*, 30 April 2011a).

In another article, the lead paragraph posed the question on whether "the global downturn of the economies of the United States and UK would prompt Malaysian talents to return" with an observation that while the country had not optimised its human resources to achieve faster growth, the human capital base has been eroded by a rise in talent outflow from the country (*The Star Online*, 30 April 2011b). On the same day, the economic consequences frame was again employed where brain drain was reported to have created a vicious cycle that had trapped the country into an undesirable equilibrium with low levels of human capital, brought in by lowly-skilled immigrants, which depresses the wage levels coupled with a large technology gap which hampers both productivity and innovation (*The Star Online*, 30 April 2011c). Two more articles published on 30 April 2011 which were also packaged together as a special pullout business edition (Biz Weekly) in the printed version, seemed to carry the same message; for Malaysia to succeed in becoming high-income, it will need to develop, attract and retain talent, but talents are leaving elsewhere including the highly-skilled for better economic prospects and a less ethnically- and religiously-polarised environment (*The Star Online*, 30 April 2011d; *The Star Online*, 30 April 2011e). It was also reported in a published letter that medical specialists who refused to return home to work in Malaysia stated three reasons: concerns for the future of their children, concerns about professional growth and the lack of research funding or emphasis in Malaysian institutes and hurdles of bureaucracy or red tape where one's credentials will be questioned or not recognised due to the existing different medical systems (*The Star Online*, 22 September 2011).

Through the frame of responsibility, it was reported that the 15% income tax

incentive offered by the Government to encourage more Malaysian professionals working abroad to return is a right step in curbing brain drain and was endorsed by the Malaysian Employers Federation (*The Star Online*, 13 April 2011). TalentCorp reported that it needed to expand its network and provide an appealing proposition to attract talents into key sectors such as finance, telecommunications, electronics and oil and gas.

The frame of responsibility was once again evident when *The Star Online* reported further that TalentCorp was taking initiatives such as matching Public Service Department scholars with suitable local organisations and implementing the Residence Pass which is intended to facilitate foreign talent to commit and contribute to the country's development on a long-term basis (*The Star Online*, 13 July 2011).

Additionally, *The Star Online* had also used the responsibility frame for one of its story on an NGO that had suggested to the Penang government (ruled by the opposition party DAP) to build affordable housing to retain talents from migrating. While this article had elements that may qualify it as adopting a conflict frame, the key point here is the suggestion on how the state government should explore the development of affordable housing as a possible solution in addressing brain drain (*The Star Online*, 3 October 2012).

The morality and conflict frames were equally utilised with both receiving 12% of the coverage respectively. In the frame of morality, *The Star Online* presented an article that talked about how the Malaysian diaspora can help the country by countering inaccurate and negative portrayals of Malaysia in the economic sphere and help publicise Malaysia as a tourism destination, business hub and centre for education excellence but went on to report that the best contribution would be for the Malaysian diaspora to come back and serve the nation (*The Star Online*, 16 March 2012).

The conflict frame prevailed in 12% of *The Star Online*'s reporting. There was a report where a MCA party member told DAP to come up with remedies to stem the brain drain instead of finding fault with MCA over the Public Service Department scholarship distribution. The report went further to question the actions of the opposition-controlled state governments to prevent brain drain. This was in response to Lim Guan Eng's (DAP secretary-general and Penang Chief Minister) comments in an online news portal who expressed DAP's disappointment that 86 top SPM scorers were not given a place to study overseas, and this might hasten the brain drain of young talents (*The Star Online*, 3 June 2011). Similarly, in another reporting using the conflict frame, the Penang state government was urged by a BN member to find new ways to arrest brain drain in the state by creating more high-paying jobs, stating that those earning high salaries were reluctant to return to the state. In the report, the BN member went on to suggest that tourism and other services sectors can be improved to create more jobs and not to rely too much on manufacturing (*The Star Online*, 9 November 2012).

The conflict frame emerged again in a Parliament report whereby in response to S.K. Devamany's (a deputy minister in the Prime Minister's Department) report about a million Malaysians estimated to be working abroad, several elected representatives

demanded to know how many had returned. He was unable to give a concrete figure but assured that Southeast Asia had become the focus of human capital in view of the economic downturn in Europe and the United States. A member of the opposition responded that he was not satisfied with the answer provided regarding the figures of returning expatriates and went on to question why TalentCorp had not provided any figures for this (*The Star Online*, 31 October 2011).

During the time frame from which the sample was taken, *The Star Online* did not publish any news reports using the human interest frame.

4.3.2 *Malaysiakini*

In contrast, *Malaysiakini* had adopted the conflict frame in 47.37% of the brain drain issue coverage. It reported that from the outset, despite pressure from Malay rights non-government organisations (NGOs) for the ETP to continue with policies benefiting the *Bumiputeras* (the ethnic group comprising of Malays and other native Malaysians), TalentCorp remained adamant that its operations will be merit-based. TalentCorp CEO Johan Mahmood Merican was asked to explain to Perkasa's (a right-wing Malay NGO) insistence that economic transformation efforts must provide the majority share of the benefits to the Malays. Johan Mahmood Merican (despite himself being Malay) responded that since Malays had the same access to education and economic opportunities, the previous selective measures were no longer relevant with the passage of time and development, and that the shift in policy was to ensure that they were competitive in their own right (*Malaysiakini*, 2 Mar 2011).

The conflict frame also emerged in statements where the opposition parties, in particular the DAP, had derided Najib Razak's dismissal of the World Bank report by claiming that the Prime Minister was in denial over the report even though the Prime Minister was well aware of the issue. Tony Pua, a DAP parliamentarian cited Najib's own GTP document which highlighted that "... there was a sense of deprivation, discrimination and resentment felt by the non-*Bumiputeras*, which was attributed to the overzealous attitude and approach in implementation by some officers in certain agencies" and that there exists "a widening of the income gap within the *Bumiputera* community leading to rising discontentment". Pua commented that these factors have "pushed many Malaysians, especially professionals, to work and reside overseas, in economically more advanced countries with attractive pull factors" which include higher income, wider exposure and opportunities, better quality of life and education for children. In addition to this, the DAP parliamentarian also criticised TalentCorp saying it is "doomed to fail" if the government continues to "not recognise the impact of 'social injustice' on talent leaving the country" (*Malaysiakini*, 30 April 2011).

Two weeks later, *Malaysiakini* covered another article using the conflict frame where another opposition party, PKR fired another round of salvo when one of its state assemblypersons, Nik Nazmi hit out at the BN federal government for perpetuating discriminatory practices that have alienated all races and which do not provide much opportunity as it is drawn along racial lines. In the article, Nik Nazmi mentioned

that his Malay and native Malaysian housemates from his student days chose not to return to Malaysia, and added that brain drain cannot be stopped by the formation of yet another government corporation. Nik Nazmi referred to the World Bank report where 60 percent of the respondents ranked social injustices as the biggest factor for emigration, and special attention must be given to overhaul fundamentals like the education system and affirmative policies (*Malaysiakini*, 10 May 2011).

The conflict frame was again seen in the article on 3 November 2011 which reported on the Penang Chief Minister, DAP's Lim Guan Eng, blaming the lack of integrity among national leaders for the brain drain suffered by the country. This article was a write-up of his speech at the World Chinese Economic Forum where he made a comparison between his state government and its predecessor (the BN-led state government) and how his government had turned a deficit budget to a surplus budget for three years running (prior to 2008, when the opposition was elected as the state government in the 12th General Election, the state government was led by the BN coalition for 11 terms). Lim's statement had reportedly upset a member of Gerakan (a component party of BN) who rebuked Lim during the question-and-answer session for using an international event as a political rally to which Lim responded that he "did not criticise anyone" in his speech (*Malaysiakini*, 3 Nov 2011).

Another frame that was prevalent in *Malaysiakini*'s news coverage was the economic consequences frame (21.05%). It reported that the rising trend in brain drain is attributed to low confidence in career prospects, wages and inclusiveness in the country. In the article, World Bank senior economist, Phillip Schellekens was quoted as saying this was detrimental to the country which is aiming to achieve high-income status in less than 10 years (*Malaysiakini*, 28 April 2011). Another demonstration of the economic consequences frame was seen in the reporting of Jobstreet.com's survey of 700 respondents on their interests in working abroad and the reasons behind them. The lead paragraph of this report indicated that money, career growth and education for the next generation were the main factors behind the brain drain. In this article, 42% cited better income as the key reason for their interest in working abroad, 24% cited career advancement and 13% were thinking ahead with regards to their children's education (*Malaysiakini*, 20 June 2011).

Malaysiakini had reported DAP's Lim Guan Eng in the frame of economic consequences when he expressed his concerns that Australia's new work visa policy for graduates, where foreign students will soon be eligible for work visas lasting two to four years after graduation, will spark a massive brain drain from Malaysia (*Malaysiakini*, 18 June 2012).

On the other hand, the economic consequences frame was used also in the reporting of the early success of TalentCorp, largely through its REP in convincing 450 Malaysians to return to work in Malaysia and that this figure was on track in meeting and surpassing the performance of previous brain-gain programmes. The news source for this article was PEMANDU which is led by Idris Jala who also added that the economic crisis in Europe could be an opportunity for Malaysian investors to move

their money from Europe and invest in Malaysia (*Malaysiakini*, 2 November 2011).

Some reporting using the responsibility frame was found in one of *Malaysiakini*'s coverage of TalentCorp's Johan Merican who mentioned that in addressing the brain drain, the country should have a sustainable pipeline of leaders and innovation labs for intensive knowledge to reduce the gap between university outputs and industry needs, and that measures are already being taken by the government, namely the Higher Education Ministry, through means of high-end internship programmes (*Malaysiakini*, 6 May 2011). In the same way, the responsibility frame that suggests the government's responsibility and ability in solving a particular problem (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000; Chew et al, 2011) was demonstrated in an article where the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, Datuk Idris Jala, defended the government by stating that it should not be faulted entirely for the brain drain and that employers should also share the responsibility. In the said article, Datuk Idris Jala went on to explain that the government had set up TalentCorp to plug the brain drain and convince Malaysians to return home as well as provided some examples of measures that were being taken to meet this objective (*Malaysiakini*, 5 July 2011).

In the morality frame, *Malaysiakini* reported that Dr Yusef Orgler, an American professor at the College of Asia Pacific Studies at Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University in Japan, was quoted as saying that a certain group that holds power with no proper power-sharing or becomes "chauvinistic" about their power can be one of the reasons that drives people out of a country. He was reported as using the Iran example where the government has a "conservative, almost psychotic interpretation" of Islam with existing laws and rules that is driving people out. The report drew a parallel with Malaysia's race-based policies which is often blamed for the phenomenon of brain drain (*Malaysiakini*, 15 July 2011).

There was only one *Malaysiakini* article reporting that used the human interest frame which looked at the opposition party questioning the transformation programme's success in addressing brain drain when it pointed out that a local corporate figure like former Petronas Chief Executive Officer, Hassan Merican had departed to Singapore to be appointed as Chairperson of Singapore Power Limited in June 2012. The article also mentioned about Hassan's involvement with other foreign firms upon his leaving Petronas in 2010 (*Malaysiakini*, 16 February 2012).

Table 3. News frames in use

	<i>The Star Online</i> (n = 25) %	<i>Malaysiakini</i> (n = 19) %
Conflict	12	47.37
Human interest	0	5.26
Economic consequences	56	21.05
Morality	12	10.53
Responsibility	20	15.79

5. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The results demonstrate that *The Star Online* had published more articles relating to brain drain than *Malaysiakini*. *The Star Online*, with a higher number of articles and higher average number of words per article, indicated that the mainstream news portal had given more attention to the brain drain issue compared to *Malaysiakini*. *The Star Online* started its reporting on brain drain on 10 January 2011 which was only nine days after the Prime Minister's Department had set up TalentCorp, while *Malaysiakini* only started its reporting in early March 2011.

It is noted that while the majority of news sources of *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini* were representatives of professional organisations (56% and 31.58%, respectively) lending the news portals a perception of credibility, *The Star Online's* next highest news sources were political parties of the ruling coalition (28%). It is glaringly evident that *The Star Online* totally omitted any reporting of opposition political parties. Voices of dissent criticising the government's handling of the brain drain were also altogether shut out from the mainstream media. The heavy dependence of the mainstream media on political parties aligned to the ruling BN federal government allows these parties and its members to act as opinion leaders in defining the issue. Biased reporting through selection of news sources maintains the gatekeeping function of the media. In contrast, *Malaysiakini's* second highest news sources was a tie between the political parties of ruling coalition and the opposition parties (26.32% respectively). Despite its limited resources and access to official sources and, by default, restricted to reporting only opposition activities, as mentioned by Brown (2005), *Malaysiakini* appears to be more balanced in their reporting having news coverage from both sides of the political divide.

The Star Online used economic consequences as the most salient frame in the reporting of the brain drain issue highlighting the causes and effects of the brain drain, the path that led the country to this state, and the consequences of the push factor. Additionally, *The Star Online* also chose to discuss the issue through the responsibility frame by highlighting the curative measures taken by TalentCorp and the ruling government in addressing the brain drain. Taking into consideration these two frames, the mainstream news portal serves the correlation function where findings show that *The Star Online* interprets issues and provides solutions to the public, and these solutions form the public's attitudes (Oh et al, 2006).

The Star Online had also used the conflict frame by portraying the questions posed by the opposition parties in negative light. Representatives and notably key leaders of the opposition parties were framed as demanding, unsatisfied, complaining, fault-finding, uncooperative, and not doing enough for the cause of bringing back talents from abroad.

Contrastingly, *Malaysiakini* had employed conflict as its dominant frame in reporting. As highlighted by Brown (2005), the independent media (of which *Malaysiakini* is a *de facto* member by virtue of not being a government-controlled media) is "pro-opposition" by default, and with their limited resources and access to official sources, is confined to reporting opposition activities. *Malaysiakini* classified

most of its news articles as straight news which tend to question those in power and authorities by forcefully pursuing the bottom line without opposing the government (Steele, 2009). In this regard, *Malaysiakini* also performs the function of surveillance through the “check and balance” system on the ruling government. This check and balance is exhibited through the negative portrayals of the ruling government as incompetent and ill-prepared for the implementation of the proposed initiatives of TalentCorp and the ruling government at large. Furthermore, these initiatives were either subtly or overtly regarded by the alternative media as a failure of the ruling government to address and provide solutions to the brain drain of skilled labour.

Malaysiakini evidently illustrated the use of the economic consequences frame to emphasise that brain drain was attributed to low confidence in career prospects, the need for better income and plans for better education of children, and social injustice. It adopted a more balanced style of reporting by using sources from both sides of the political divide. This is demonstrated, for example, in the straight news coverage of TalentCorp’s (which is linked to the ruling party’s Prime Minister’s Department) Chief Executive Officer, Johan Mahmood Merican. In contrast, balanced reporting is clearly lacking in the reporting styles of *The Star Online* which had totally omitted the dissenting voices of the opposition parties and those critical of the policies and initiatives set up by TalentCorp.

Media framing by the respective news portals as shown through this study is divisive in nature between the two sides of the political divide. The angle in which the issue is played out or news is presented is dependent on the dominant frame used by each portal. Both media used frames to underline the shortcomings and weaknesses of the other side of the political divide. This study was however limited to the articles published by the two portals for two years (January 2011 to December 2012) and did not take into consideration the long-term consequences of the initiatives by TalentCorp, its successes or failures or the frames that were employed by these two media given a wider time frame. This study serves as an initial exploratory study into the reporting of the Malaysian brain drain including the angles taken by the mainstream and independent/alternative media in Malaysia.

Appendix: List of Articles

(i) *The Star Online*

Total articles: 25 (16 in 2011 + 9 in 2012)

No	Date	Title	Type of article	Word count
1	10 Jan 2011	Exam for docs won’t cause brain drain	News	361
2	26 Feb 2011	Reversing the ‘Brain Drain’	Opinion	881

3	13 Apr 2011	Incentive will curb brain drain, say employers	News	300
4	30 Apr 2011	Migration of talent—how can Malaysia stem the tide?	Business (StarBiz)	2,261
5	30 Apr 2011a	The big picture on skilled labour market	Business (StarBiz)	372
6	30 Apr 2011b	The ‘vicious cycle’ of brain drain	Business (StarBiz)	950
7	30 Apr 2011c	Talent Corp CEO: Need to change business model	Business (StarBiz)	959
8	30 Apr 2011d	Reversing the brain drain	Opinion	791
9	30 Apr 2011e	Can Malaysia reform fast enough to meet challenges?	Business (StarBiz)	898
10	26 May 2011	A lesson from brain drain’s gain and pain	Opinion	749
11	3 June 2011	Find solution to stem brain drain, DAP told	News	239
12	13 July 2011	TalentCorp joins forces with companies to manage talent	News	477
13	15 July 2011	See the cup as half full	Opinion	504
14	13 Sept 2011	PM hopes ‘world’s best medical curriculum’ will halt brain drain	News	255
15	22 Sept 2011	Red tape major block to brain drain solution	Letter	520
16	31 Oct 2011	MPs want to know how many of 1 mil M’sian expats have been lured back	News	385
17	16 Mar 2012	Leveraging on Malaysian diaspora	Opinion	1,083
18	12 Aug 2012	Making it in medicine	Education	1,000
19	11 Sept 2012	Talent scarcity an issue for budget	News	395
20	15 Sept 2012	Economic progress needs more than just infrastructure	Business	1,343
21	23 Sept 2012	Are Malaysian salaries enough to draw our talent back?	News	1,490
22	3 Oct 2012	Cheaper houses can curb brain drain	Metro	402

23	15 Oct 2012	Australia, Britain, US and China have biggest number of S'poreans	News	334
24	9 Nov 2012	Create high-paying jobs to plug brain drain, Penang urged	News	321
25	2 Dec 2012	Women not at work	News	1,657

(ii) *Malaysiakini* Articles

Total articles: 19 (14 in 2011 + 5 in 2012)

No	Date	Title	Type of article	Word count
1	2 Mar 2011	Talent Corp to be based on merit	Interview	719
2	28 Apr 2011	More skilled Malaysians leaving, says World Bank	News	630
3	30 Apr 2011	DAP: Najib 'in denial' over World Bank report	News	597
4	6 May 2011	'Check on brain drain for M'sia advantage	News	369
5	10 May 2011	Nik Nazmi: Discrimination hurting all races alike	Opinion	309
6	25 May 2011	Abolish PSD's racial quotas, urge NGOs	News	565
7	13 June 2011	PM's Dept sees silver lining in brain drain	News	333
8	20 June 2011	Survey: 80% of M'sians want to work abroad	News	252
9	5 July 2011	Brain drain: 'Don't blame gov't alone'	News	448
10	15 July 2011	Chauvinism cause of brain-drain, says don	Opinion	809
11	13 Sept 2011	Muhyiddin: Malaysian diaspora an asset	News	421
12	2 Nov 2011	Early gains for TalentCorp as 450 come home	News	332
13	3 Nov 2011	Guan Eng: Leaders of no integrity lead to brain drain	News	561
14	3 Nov 2011	TalentCorp – pouring water into a leaky bucket	Letter/ Email	1,264

15	16 Feb 2012	Guan Eng: Transformation plan fails to stem brain drain	News	337
16	21 March 2012	98 Malaysian academicians abroad demand voting rights	News	614
17	27 March 2012	Nor Mohamed: Talent abroad can still contribute to country	News	413
18	18 June 2012	'Death knell for brain drain reversal'	News	431
19	19 June 2012	Brain drain actually good news for BN	Letter/ Email	799

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