



Dear *Free Malaysia Today* — Your words matter: COVID-19 and its subtle rhetoric

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ABSTRACT

Content from alternative news media often challenges the status quo and is sometimes viewed as a platform for the oppressed or minorities. Similarly, alternative news media in Malaysia are often viewed within similar roles. This research aims to analyse other roles played by alternative news media in Malaysia in light of the crisis reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic. Numerous studies have studied issues of identity representations as framed in the news media. This research identifies sentiments of Islamophobia in Malaysia by looking into the framing of COVID-19 coverage from headlines produced by *Free Malaysia Today* for 90 days. Thematic analyses were employed whereby 139 headlines and sub-headlines were collected, analysed and categorised according to themes. While this study acknowledges the counter-hegemonic role played by alternative news media as part of journalism practice in a democratic nation, the research highlights the need for more studies on alternative news media to understand its characteristics in various media systems. This is due to the salience in the responsibility frame found which indicates other underlying societal discontentment and divisions in Malaysia. Findings from this research provide a foundation for future research on the role of alternative news media in a country.

Keywords: ***Headlines, alternative news media, news organisations, Islamophobia, framing***

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 virus which was first discovered in Wuhan, China developed into an unprecedented health crisis that brought the world to a standstill in 2020. The complexity and intense spread of the virus left many anxious and confounded which led to moral panic and anger towards certain communities (Arumugam, 2020; Haynes, 2020). For example, there have been numerous reports of xenophobic nature in global news where some ethnicities were blamed for the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic (Haynes, 2020).

Meanwhile, a Malaysian report suggests racially charged comments with heightened sentiments of anti-Islam/Malay occurred at the onset of the pandemic (Chin, 2020). Previous scholarly works argue that prejudices against Muslims were pervasive in Western societies where Muslims were generally framed negatively (Von Sikorski et al., 2017; West & Lloyd, 2017). Fred Halliday's study on Islamophobia, argued that although racist acts appear to be targeting Muslims, it does impact largely on ethnic minorities (Massoumi et al., 2017). Muslims are often held accountable for criminal and terrorist acts committed by other followers of the religion (Munnik, 2018) and are viewed negatively (Hassan & Omar, 2017). Additionally, a previous study which analysed the coverage of *Wall Street Journal* and *The Telegraph* on Muslims in Malaysia and Indonesia, suggest a biased coverage about the community (Hassan & Omar, 2017).

Numerous scholarships about media framing, minority groups and the cognate are common (Bleich et al., 2015). However, limited research exists on the framing of Muslims from the perspective of news media operating in a Muslim-majority nation. This could be partly due to the assumption that news media outlets operating in Malaysia, where the dominating religion and population are Islam and Muslims respectively, would be more receptive of the group as compared to the coverage of Muslims in the Western media. Yet, one study on the coverage of two national mainstream English-language newspapers in Malaysia presented the coverage of Islam and its communities in four dimensions which included a tacit projection of Islam as an obstacle to religious and ethnic harmony and the portrayal of Islam and Muslims as intolerant and violent (Merican, 2005). This study aims to build on the previous finding from Merican (2005) from the perspective of an alternative news portal.

Another study pertaining to the discourse of Islam as a religion and Muslims as followers of the religion in Malaysia looked at the representation of *hijab* (a garment which covers the head and chest of a Muslim woman) in the Malay media (Hassim et al., 2016). Despite a growing body of research on comparative studies of mainstream and alternative media practised in Malaysia (Abdul Hamid & Che Mohd Razali, 2015), most are within the parameters of media and political polemics (Yang & Ahmad Ishak, 2013; Ting et al., 2020). This study intends to analyse the narrative of Islam and the Malay Muslims as represented by an alternative news media in Malaysia. The research question for the study is: How are sentiments of Islamophobia against the Malay Muslim community framed in the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Malaysia: A multi-religious, multi-ethnic nation

Malaysia is a nation of 32 million and consists of many races, religions and ethnicities. Three main races in the country are the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians. Upon her independence from the British occupation in 1957, the inauguration of the Federal Constitution made Islam the state religion (Abdul Hamid & Che Mohd Razali, 2015).

Even though Islam is the official religion in Malaysia, religious tolerance is practised in all communities where other houses of worship and religious symbols are openly practised by non-Muslims in the country. It is important to note that while the Chinese, Indians and other non-Malays are free to practice their faiths, the faith upheld by the Malays, however are subjected to the Malaysian Constitution. This research will not indulge into the Malaysian Constitution pertaining to race, religion and the rights of an individual on his or her faith (or non-faith) but aims to highlight that the Malaysian Constitution as stated in Article 160 (2) identifies Malays as “*a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language and conforms to Malay custom*” (Federal Constitution: Incorporating All Amendments up to P.U.(A) 164/2009, 2009). This means that due to the definition within the Constitution, the Malays are Muslims, by which it means a majority of the Malays in Malaysia are by default, Muslims. Hence, in Malaysia when one refers to an individual as a Malay, one can assume that the Malay is also a Muslim. Additionally, the admixture within Malay communities is a result of various Malay ethnic groups in Malaysia. Due to the complexity of the overlapping identities, this research conceptualises the Malays and the Muslim communities in Malaysia as Malay Muslims.

The sanctity of Islam as the official religion in Malaysia is sometimes obscured by political parties. The politicisation of Islam in Malaysia has resulted in a wedge between the Muslims and non-Muslims (Abdul Hamid & Che Mohd Razali, 2015) although subtly, since communities of diverse backgrounds living peacefully is still observed. Race and religious tensions in the country is not uncommon since independence. The country has witnessed racial tensions in the past, upon gaining independence from the British occupation in 1957 that led to racial riots on the May 13, 1969. In recent years, there have been other racial and religious tensions such as on the demolishing of an Indian temple by the authorities which lead to the death of a 25-year-old Malay-Muslim firefighter in 2018. The reasons for racial conflicts in the nation are extensive, complex and thus a brief explanation would not do justice to the whole issue. It is beyond the limits of this article for the researcher to expand further. These incidences are mentioned to provide examples of events pertaining to racial disharmony and religious tensions in Malaysia that has occurred in the past to contextualise the complexity of Malaysia’s racial and ethnic diversity. Knowledge of this complexity is the foundation to the comprehension of the next section, the variations of Malaysian news media.

An overview of the mainstream and alternative media

Malaysia is a quasi-democratic nation described as a nation that sits between democracy and authoritarianism (Yang & Ahmad Ishak, 2013). As with other sections of legislation guiding the nation, policies set within its news media system are reflected by two areas: the nation’s history as a British colony and the need to maintain unity among its diverse population. Although racial partisan is more profound in political parties than in other sectors operating in the nation, politically sensitive or controversial topics that could cause ethnic, racial or religious tensions are either usually avoided or superficially reported. It is a well-known fact that journalists working for any mainstream media in the nation is restrained in what they can report. Thus, self-censorship is practised by journalists and mainstream news outlets to avoid any repercussions that could land the journalist or the news outlet in trouble.

Further, various media ownerships in Malaysia are politically affiliated. For example, *The Star*, one of Malaysia’s mainstream English-language newspaper is owned by the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), one of *Barisan Nasional*’s (BN) components — a political coalition that has ruled the longest in Malaysian history. A previous study

contended that newspapers are published in various languages to cater to the different major ethnic groups in the country with vernacular newspapers playing a central role in shaping the political and social reality of the nation (Yang et al., 2020).

Media freedom of the mainstream media is set by the government where its operations are heavily curtailed by ownership and legislation (Yang & Ahmad Ishak, 2013). As a result, the mainstream media is often viewed as a mouthpiece representing the government, uniform, hierarchically organised and implicitly known as being elitist and exclusive (Holt et al., 2019). Alternative media, on the other hand, is characterised as democratic, open and operates in a non-hierarchical structure with close ties to social movements. Although the correlation between elitism and exclusivity may not distinguish the Malaysian mainstream media as much as in developed nations such as the United Kingdom (UK), the alternative news media in Malaysia is a platform to the voice of non-mainstream opinions and is viewed as an agent of change for the Malaysian media.

The presence of alternative media offers different perspectives of issues covered by the mainstream media for the Malaysian public. For example, *Malaysiakini.com*, the nation's first online news portal was established in 1999 and became the first online news portal that provided a gateway to the diversity of political discourse in Malaysian media. It opened a platform to the views of the alternatives including issues brought forth by opposition leaders to dominate the news headlines. Meanwhile, *Free Malaysia Today (FMT)* was established in 2009 and is described as an independent, bilingual news portal.

Islamophobia and framing of the news media

According to Entman (1993), framing refers to selecting some aspects of an issue and making it more salient than others through four methods. Works by political scholar Entman have been widely cited in journalism studies for the definition on framing (Wahl-Jorgensen & Schmidt, 2019). The four methods identified are: to define the problem, to identify the cause of the problem, to make moral judgements and to suggest solutions to the problem (Entman, 1993). Reports on Islamophobia in light of the spread of COVID-19 occurred worldwide (Awan, 2020; Chib, 2020; Ravi, 2020). This corresponds with previous studies which argued that media coverage on Muslims and Islam as being mostly negative (Bleich et al., 2016; West & Lloyd, 2017). Further, the vocabulary choice signifying anti-Muslim prejudice was rampant among Western media (West & Lloyd, 2017). In a study of Muslim portrayal in the British and American press, Nisar and Bleich (2020) suggested that the understanding and analysing of tone of articles associated to minority groups can contribute to societal discussions on the extent of racism and xenophobia in the United States (US), UK and beyond.

The media plays a vital role in the representation of identity groups in societies. The alternative news media prioritises different news values and publish content that is politically and/or socially counter-hegemonic in its epistemological foundations (Holt et al., 2019). Acknowledging the prevalence of the anti-Muslim narrative in mainstream media in the UK, a report to tackle Islamophobia described the need for media to emphasise on the positive images of the Muslim community and to normalise images of Muslims within media and broadcasting in the UK (Muslim engagement and development [MEND], 2019). While the study of Islamophobia is growing, an universal definition has yet to be adopted. Islamophobia is described as a structural form of racism (Massoumi et al., 2017) while in the European Islamophobia report, Islamophobia is defined as anything that is rooted in racism and constitutes a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness (Bayrakli & Hafez, 2019). A similar conceptualisation of Islamophobia is applied in this study.

The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia

The outbreak of COVID-19 in Malaysia happened during a government transition in the nation. Muhyiddin Yassin, the then Prime Minister of Malaysia took office on March 1, 2020 upon the sudden resignation of his predecessor Tun Dr Mahathir Mohammad on February 24, 2020. Mahathir's resignation from all political posts in February 2020 left the nation in a political turmoil and without a government for almost two weeks. Due to the global pandemic, Mahathir Mohamad was later re-appointed on the same day as the interim Prime Minister while the nation waited for a new premiership and a new government. A nation without a government facing a pandemic crisis was catastrophic. Upon his official appointment as Prime Minister, Muhyiddin Yassin's first focus on the new government was to form a special taskforce to handle the pandemic in the country.

The nation's initial COVID-19 cases were classified as "imported cases" since it consisted of Chinese nationals visiting the country. The media first reported the case of infection on January 25, 2020. As part of its strategy to manage the spread, the Malaysian Health Ministry identified and segregated the source of spread into clusters. Most patients were from the Sri Petaling Mosque cluster, a cluster that consisted of Muslim worshippers and missionary groups (*tabligh*) who attended a gathering at the Sri Petaling Mosque, in Kuala Lumpur. The media reported that the Sri Petaling Mosque gathering had become a source to hundreds of locally transmitted COVID-19 cases in Malaysia. Until April 10, 2020, the Sri Petaling cluster remained the highest group of contracted cases, equivalent to 40% of all COVID-19 cases. Initial reports referenced the cluster as "the *tabligh* cluster". Over time, voices across social media platforms commented that the rise of the pandemic in the nation was due to the *tabligh* group. This implied negatively on the image of the Islamic missionary group (*tabligh*) and indirectly on the Malay Muslims in Malaysia.

METHODOLOGY

Analysing the underlying tones in headlines enhances the comprehension of group portrayals as presented by the news media (Bleich et al., 2015). The importance of news events and the agenda of a news outlet is hinted through various cues provided by journalists through the headlines, word selection and topics that are emphasised in daily news reports. This study focuses on headlines rather than news articles due to several factors.

Firstly, the range of platforms to obtain news is diverse and wide-ranging with mobile news consumption being one of the most popular platforms for many. As such, in a highly mobile media usage environment, headlines are the first section of a news report that consumers see while scrolling through their mobile phones. In a fast-paced environment where readers do not spend much time reading every section of online news, headlines are made catchy to attract the interest of news consumers. "Catchiness" requires headlines to be concise. As Chomsky explains, "The very idea of concision is a fine technique for imposing the propaganda of those who are powerful" (Post, 2018) while Van Dijk (2009) argued that ideological influences by news organisations are presented through rhetorical figures such as metaphors, hyperboles and euphemisms. Thus, news organisations proffer their ideologies by condensing headlines with rhetorical figures which can negatively influence their readers. Readers who are uninterested in a certain topic tend to only read the headline and these readers may likely be influenced by the tone presented (Nisar & Bleich, 2020). This suggests that the use of headlines is important in attracting readers to read an article.

Secondly, a headline is argued to often be the primary way to engage a reader to an article (Kuiken et al., 2017; Abdul Latif & Ying, 2020). The push for speedy news delivery has pressured news organisations to compete for more readers. To increase the number

of “click-through rate” for news stories, headlines are written strategically (Wilding et al., 2018) and this is partly achieved through catchy and informative headlines. Additionally, headlines which are more popular depend on several factors which include word length, absence of a question, absence of a quote, containing a signal word, containing personal or possessive pronouns, containing sentimental words and others (Kuiken et al., 2017).

Thirdly, headlines are short and telegraphic with an ambiguous tone (Bleich et al., 2016) as well as the implicit first level of news framing seen by readers, especially when scrolling through news portals or news feeds via social media platforms. The framing process is embedded and manifested via texts which may influence one’s thinking (Entman, 1993).

Fourthly, wire editors skim through hundreds of headlines and adopt the gatekeeping role of selecting the most prominent headlines to be published (Nielsen, 2014). Therefore, apart from attracting readers to the news article, headlines too can become a gatekeeper that either attracts or hinders a news wire editor from selecting a news piece.

Fifthly, headline analysis on identity groups is a common method to gauge the portrayals and perceptions of groups in the public discourse which supplements other media studies that focus on full texts or public opinion polls (Bleich et al., 2015).

Sixthly, it is common for studies on news framing to use headlines as a unit of analysis such as the study on the framing of headlines and gun violence in the United States, the framing of COVID-19 in German and Indonesian press and the effects of terrorist events on Muslim portrayal in *New York Times* (Bleich et al., 2016; Kartika et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2019; Nisar & Bleich, 2020). Further, a recent study on the framing of Malaysian politics by mainstream news selected headlines as one of its units of analysis (Abdul Latif & Ying, 2020). Similarly, this research adopted the study of framing of an issue through headline analysis. Data was collected from February 7 till May 7, 2020 for a total of 90 days.

Within the scope of this pandemic, only headlines and sub-headlines pertaining to COVID-19 were selected. A total of 139 headlines and sub-headlines were included with the condition that the headlines appear in the online news portal’s search results when selected keywords are typed in the news portal’s search box. The findings include types of headlines from news, op-eds, letters, and others. Although columns, for example, do not represent the views of the news organisation per se, it does carry weight on the perception of an organisation’s image and agenda which may influence a reader’s point of view over an issue. Therefore, this research included all types of headlines for analysis.

As previously mentioned, the Malaysian media consists of various languages that caters to different demographics in the nation. *FMT* offers its content in two main languages — Malay and English. A recent survey of the Malaysian press revealed that the top four online newspapers frequently read in Malaysia are *The Star Online* (76%), *Malaysiakini* (65%), *The Malay Mail Online* (38%) and *FMT* (36%) (VASE, 2019). Scholarships on *Malaysiakini* as a representative of alternative news in Malaysia are numerous (Yang & Ahmad Ishak, 2013), yet there are limited references on *FMT*. Therefore, this study selected *FMT* to expand and diversify the scholarly works on alternative news media in Malaysia.

The English language press functions as an inter-ethnic medium in Malaysia because it transcends racial groupings in the nation (Yang & De Rycker, 2017). Therefore, only the English version of the news portal was selected for study based on the assumption that the English version is the “neutral” language read by most ethnicities – the Malays, Chinese, Indians and other minorities.

A corpus of words and phrases informed the researcher on the derivation and understanding of either positive or negative characterisations of Islam. These words were selected to draw boundaries with regard to articles which should be included and excluded. Relevant articles were extracted from respective news portal’s online service using the following predefined Islamic-related keywords in the word-search: “*Tabligh*”, “*Tahfiz*”,

“*Sri-Petaling*”, “Mosque” and “Muslims”. The word *tabligh* refers to a Muslim missionary group that encourages the Muslim community to practise their religion according to the Quran and practices of the prophets, particularly Prophet Mohammad (peace be on him) in matters of daily life such as rituals, practices, and behaviour.

Meanwhile, *tahfiz* is an Arabic word that means to memorise, or the process of reading, listening, and reciting. It is commonly referred to one who memorises the Quran and commonly is a graduate of Islamic school. Therefore, taking this word in the local and cultural context, it refers generally to students who belong to any of the Islamic schools in the country. *Sri Petaling* was selected because Sri Petaling Mosque was one of the major clusters reported while the words Mosque and Muslims were selected for their relevance to the topic researched.

In their work, Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) identified five frames which are conflict, human interest, economic consequences, morality and responsibility. Semetko and Valkenburg’s frames have been used in previous studies on news framing due to the comprehensive framing analysis (Spiegel, 2013; Wang, 2015). Media framing studies within the Malaysian context have also adopted Semetko and Valkenburg’s frames such as the framing of religious disputes in Malaysian newspapers (Yang, 2011) and inter-ethnic conflict in Malaysia (Yang & Ahmad Ishak, 2013). Since this study builds on similar areas of research, it adopts similar used frames and operational definitions, which were adopted and modified from Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) as well as Yang and Ahmad Ishak (2013). They consist of the following:

1. Conflict – emphasises conflict and disagreement between individuals, groups, parties or institutions as a means of capturing audience interest; dichotomises or labels the good and bad; news item refers to two sides instead of more than two sides of the issue/problem.
2. Consequences – reports an event, issue or problem in terms of the consequences it has on individuals, groups, parties, institutions or the country; reports the outcome of a court case.
3. Responsibility – presents an event, issue or problem in such a way as to attribute responsibility for its cause or solution to either the government or to an individual, group, party or institution.
4. Moral – puts the event, issue or problem in the context of religious tenets or moral prescriptions; emphasises on collaboration and fellowship.
5. Human interest – puts forth a human face or an emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue, or problem; refers to an effort to personalise the news, dramatise or emotionalise the news to capture and retain audience interest

Meanwhile, past studies have argued that ideological influences of racism lie in the 12 facets of news and journalistic discourse. They include the hiring of journalists, news values, beats and sources, selection, salience, topics, perspectives, formats, order and foregrounding, quotation, news actor and event description, style and finally rhetoric (Van Dijk, 2009). Words and phrases that carry any of the 12 ideological influences on racism were grouped into the framing themes of conflict, consequences, responsibility, moral and human interest.

FINDINGS

Findings suggest negative connotations for the words ‘*tabligh*’, ‘*tahfiz*’ and ‘*Sri Petaling*’. The existence of style (through the selection of words, sentence and other lexical items in negative connotations) and rhetoric (properties of news emphasised or de-emphasised by

well-known rhetorical figures, such as metaphors, hyperboles and euphemisms negatively or positively depending on the targeted group) by Van Dijk (2009) are represented in this study. Table 1 summarises the findings.

Table 1. Findings for each frame

Frame	Number of headlines
Responsibility	63
Conflict	33
Consequences	19
Moral	13
Human interest	11

Some examples of headlines and sub-headlines for the responsibility frame which carried negative connotations are discussed next.

Sri Petaling, the epicentre of COVID-19 (March 30, 2020)

Thousands of participants have come forward for screening since the routine tabligh gathering last month at the Sri Petaling Mosque, the base of the Muslim missionary movement which has drawn public attention for its link to the huge spike in COVID-19 cases.

The word epicentre is used as part of news dramatisation to indicate that the COVID-19 central point of spread in Malaysia occurred from Sri Petaling Mosque where the Muslim congregation took place. The headline tacitly placed the Muslims as being responsible for the spread of the pandemic. While the sub-headline explains the COVID-19 situation due to the spread from the congregation, the way the sentence was structured, “*the base of the Muslim missionary movement which has drawn public attention for its link to the huge spike in COVID-19 cases*” implies that the nation was focused on the Muslim congregation which was responsible for the rise of the COVID-19 infection in Malaysia. Such statements could be seen as sensitive and a form of subtle racial or religious incitement in a multiracial society.

Another example of the responsibility frame that was used in a headline is ***I am tabligh, we are all tabligh*** (April 7, 2020):

It’s not your fault if you get the infection, but it is your fault if you ignore advice, pass it on, and someone dies.

This headline belongs to an opinion piece published on the *FMT* portal. Although *FMT* has a disclaimer that opinion pieces published do not reflect the organisation’s point of view, the organisation’s agenda can be reflected from its selection of opinion pieces. The headline clearly places the *tabligh* group as responsible for spreading the virus in Malaysia. Ironically, the content does not blame the *tabligh* group per se but provides a comparison to a Hindu mass gathering where the author explained no one was susceptible to the virus – be it a Muslim or a Hindu. It is interesting to note that *FMT* selected the following section as its description — “*It’s not your fault if you get the infection, but it is your fault if you ignore advice, pass it on, and someone dies*” — where the author described his wife’s advice as a doctor.

Findings from this headline may indicate a lack of sensitivity, misconstruction of the author's words by the news organisation or a hidden news agenda especially when the news editor decided on the earlier excerpt rather than the author's words which promotes cohesion and unity as the following:

"They (the tabligh group) were both unaware that the disease was spreading that quickly or that they could have contracted it by attending the event. If they knew they faced that kind of risk, they would not have attended. It was not their fault. We must stop ostracising or demonising them for doing so."

While headlines may not represent the context of an article, it does provide a brief explanation to the content of a story. The findings above corroborate with a previous finding which argues that there is greater impact on the performance of a headline through the adoption of negative sentimental words and starting with personal or possessive pronouns (Kuiken et al., 2017). "Sensationalisation" is common practice in news organisations and headlines are written to captivate readers to the article. Selection of words or phrases that incite hate and disunity especially in a multiracial nation as Malaysia is a concern. Other examples include the following: **12 tabligh members nabbed on return from Sulawesi** (March 22, 2020)

They were caught by security forces in a boat off Tawau waters and sent to quarantine.

The word "nabbed" connotes a wrongdoing of a person and indirectly implies that the *tabligh* members who attended a religious event in Indonesia were committing a crime.

Conflict is the second highest frame identified in this study. Examples include the following:

Officials deny report of tabligh member's sickly child (March 22, 2020)

22 new Covid-19 cases reported in Sabah, total now 158.

Sri Petaling Mosque unconvinced Covid-19 case originated at tabligh convention (March 12, 2020)

The mosque committee says the health ministry has not proven this to be the case as the persons infected could have caught it elsewhere.

Examples of the consequences frame in headlines include:

143 tahfiz students, 5 teachers quarantined in Perak (April 8, 2020)

The health department says they have been in contact with a positive Covid-19 case from the tabligh cluster.

Lockdown in Hulu Langat after 71 tahfiz school infections (March 29, 2020)

4,000 residents in 7 kampungs at Sungai Lui will not be allowed out for two weeks until April 13.

132 Sri Petaling tahfiz students placed in quarantine station (March 23, 2020)

Hazmat team carries out sterilisation and disinfection for transfer to Institut Sosial Malaysia hostel.

The conflict and consequence frames that mostly report on COVID-19 cases from the *tabligh* congregation did not contain negative connotations of the group which could be deemed insensitive to the readers. Additionally, most frames that fall under the category of moral or human interest are more neutral in their description of the Muslims community, with the exception of one:

Understanding the tabligh movement beyond Covid-19 (March 18, 2020)

They sport long beards and loose gowns – Is that all Malaysians know about members of tabligh... apart from the coronavirus, of course?

This headline and its sub-headline have an indirect connotation that the *tabligh* are a group of people unknown to many Malaysians. While this could be true, particularly among the non-Muslims, the description of “*long beards and loose gowns*” is prejudicial and generalised to any Muslim with such outlook and attire. It is contended that texts could make bits of information more salient through its placement, repetition or by associating them with culturally familiar symbols (Entman, 1993). Placing such description of attire and outlook is biased and frames the *tabligh* group to a certain generalisation in the minds of readers.

Additionally, the sentence ends with “*apart from the coronavirus*” which implies that Malaysians commonly do not know much about the *tabligh* group other than the fact that they were the cause of COVID-19 spread in the nation. This is also a biased and prejudiced statement of a news organisation. It is the duty of the news media not to incite prejudice in its reporting and such depictions does not reflect on the objective role of the organisation.

Findings also suggest most headlines with the keyword search “Mosque” and “Muslims” contain either positive or neutral description towards the Muslims. However, further analysis suggests such headlines, particularly with the word “Muslims” in the headline, are referenced to Muslims outside of Malaysia. Out of 24 headlines and sub-headlines found with the word “Muslims”, only four were in direct reference to the Malay Muslims context, and only 14 out of 47 headlines with the word “Mosque” were about the Malay Muslims. Headlines and sub-headlines that carried either neutral or positive representations of “The Other Muslim” (i.e., the non-Malay-Muslim) include the following:
Unprecedented virus lockdown as Muslims mark sombre Ramadan (April 25, 2020)

This year, strict lockdowns limit iftar meal gatherings – a centrepiece of the holy month.

Parking lot prayers: Muslims in Jaffa and Jerusalem improvise for Ramadan (April 28, 2020)

Worshippers now gather outdoors to pray after the pandemic forced mosques to close.

Death in the Holy Land: Coronavirus changes burials for Jews, Muslims (April 2, 2020)

Bodies are no longer washed or shrouded.

Islam as a religion is an integral part of the Malay culture. Islam gained its foothold in the region of Southeast Asia around the thirteenth century, and since Malaysia’s independence, the politicisation of the religion by some of the nation’s leaders that Islam is the vanguard national identity (Abdul Hamid & Che Mohd Razali, 2015) led to the

discontentment of others, particularly the non-Muslims in Malaysia. While other race and ethnicities are free to practise their respective faiths, social issues on race, ethnicity and religion are considered sensitive and complex topics within the Malaysian media. Discourses about the complexity of Islam as the official religion of the nation and the rights of the Malay Muslims embedded within the Constitution in a multi-racial and multi-ethnic nation is viewed to contradict with the notion of “an ideal democracy” lauded by some political leaders. Studies contend that the relationship between Islam, Malay and Bumiputra (natives of the land) privileges; compatibility between Islam and democracy; and relevance of Islamic laws in progressive Malaysia often emerge as major fault lines in discourses pertaining to the role of Islam in public space (Abdul Hamid & Che Mohd Razali, 2015).

Religious and racial conflations often occur in discourses on Islamophobia (MEND, 2019). However, within the context of this study and taking into consideration the complex and overlapping identities represented by the Malay Muslims in Malaysia, the findings suggest no indication that *FMT* is fuelling the Islamophobia rhetoric in its news reporting. However, one cannot deny there are subtle negative connotations in some of these headlines. With regard to the negative headlines presented particularly with reference to the Malay Muslims, the saliency on the responsibility frame found in this study contradicts the positive or neutral approach adopted in headlines that represent “The Other Muslims”. The pattern of representation, particularly of the *tabligh* group is salient and negatively framed. Findings from this study suggest that the prevalence of the responsibility frame, the use of nomenclatures and sentence structures with subtle negative connotation coalesce to produce a negative perception that the *tabligh* group who are Malay Muslims, were irresponsible and the main cause for the escalation of the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

A news organisation’s decision to either play up or downplay a news event is both market-driven and a reflection of its organisational ideology. The alternative news media is usually seen as a beacon of light towards a progressive, democratic media system of a nation and is argued to position themselves as correctives of the mainstream news media (Holt et al., 2019). While this study acknowledges various benefits brought forth by alternative news media, the findings aim to highlight the possibility of introducing its institutional agenda, some of which may bring negative repercussions to the society. While the alternative news media may be the voice of the under-represented, further studies may need to consider whose voice and agenda is being carried by these news outlets.

The news media sets the agenda for public discourse. Journalists play a vital role in influencing the news media narrative through their journalistic works. Narratives on the Malay Muslim communities, and the non-Malay/non-Muslim communities in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious nation are vital towards social cohesion and unity. While the alternative media is often seen to represent the voice of the dissent, findings from this study suggest the need for wider research on the role and perception of alternative news in a different media system and governance. Scholarly work on racism contends that the press can contribute to being part of the problem (Munnik, 2020) such as news organisations with far-right leaning. The rise of news consumption (Pavlik, 2021) is welcoming and since online journalism has been celebrated in Malaysia by those who crave for alternative perspectives (Yang et al., 2020), it is vital that the alternative news media do not carry any subtle agenda that could incite hate or division among its readers. The *FMT* online news

portal may not be biased towards the Muslims per se, yet the findings may indicate other underlying societal discontentment and divisions. This could be due to the blurry line to distinguish Muslims and the Malay Muslims due to overlapping aspects of religion and race into one identity – that of the Malay Muslim communities in Malaysia.

While elements of Islamophobia are weakly represented, it is too early to presume that its rhetoric does not simply exist due to the position of Malaysia being a Muslim majority population. As an advocate to society, the media needs to be just, and narratives imposed on Islam and the Muslim communities is vital especially in contemporary times where this community tends to be subjected negatively worldwide.

This research echoes previous research which suggests with the rise of populism, comparative studies of alternative news media in different media systems is needed to provide a deeper understanding on the characteristics of alternative news media (Holt et al., 2019). Findings from *FMT*, an online alternative news portal in Malaysia partly fill this gap. Further research could be conducted to analyse the various roles that alternative media play in other nations with different media systems. In summary, this study provides a new perspective and groundwork for future researchers on the subtle depictions of community groups in a nation with diverse backgrounds.

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