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Crisis Reporting and Journalistic Sourcing in Malaysian News

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Abstract

The media plays vital role in the tapestry of our lives and its function is heightened during times of crisis. Information presented by the news media in particular influence public perception especially when dealing with unprecedented events such as a health crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the global community and brought huge impact in various aspects of our lives. This study analyses types of source-selection adopted by two online newspapers in regard to the COVID-19 reporting in Malaysia. It collects data from The Star Online and Malaysiakini as representatives of one mainstream and one alternative online news. Data for this study were gathered from March to June 2020 which is during the nation's initial lockdown of the pandemic outbreak in Malaysia. Findings from this study expand current literature on journalistic-sourcing practices. Additionally, this study provides further understanding on the role of sources in health crisis reporting from mainstream and alternative news media.

Keywords: News source; Journalists; Covid-19; Crisis reporting; Malaysiakini; The Star Online

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Introduction

Global crises is described as crises whose origins and outcomes cannot be confined inside the borders of particular nation states and require cooperative responses from civil societies and systems of governance that are no less transnational in scope (Cottle, 2011). News events pertaining to COVID-19 exemplify global crises reporting that emerge during the pandemic. What was initially viewed as a form of pneumonia which began in China grew extensively to a global concern when the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared it as a pandemic in March 2020 (World Health Organisation, 2021a). COVID-19 has impacted individual lives and livelihood in all corners of the globe. New norms and challenges emerged as the world begins to understand more about the virus and methods to contain its spread. Accordingly, the world is given voluminous information with the development of new understanding about the virus. Information about the COVID-19 pandemic were highlighted through news, blogs and opinion pieces via many media platforms since the pandemic has effected numerous aspects of lives - from health, society, economy, politics, the environment and many more (Parvin, Ahsan, Rahman, & Abedin, 2020).

It is contended that news contains values and ideology (JingJing, 2006). A study on news framing is important in scholarly works pertaining to media and journalism to understand how news media informs its public. Framing plays a role in influencing how the public forms an opinion of a news event and this is especially crucial as the world population deal with a major health crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Framing is also another aspect of news reporting to understand journalistic norms and practices.

News sourced and contents highlighted by journalists make up the news narrative of a particular event. Selection of news sourced by the news media is vital to the creation of information and knowledge gained by its news consumers. It has been argued that the media is powerful to shape our understanding and create powerful forces at individual and societal levels during critical incidents (Parvin et al., 2020). Similar to all news reports, crisis reporting requires news media to ensure its reports are correct, objective and balance. Thus selection of news sources makes a vital contributing factor in news reporting of an event, especially one that involves health and mortality.

Malaysian News Publication

The composition of its peoples as a multiracial nation is reflected in the multi-language media the nation offers. The broadcasting media be it radio or television channels offers its programmes in multi-languages. In the printing press and online news portals, news too is disseminated in multi-languages. Newspapers in Malaysia are available in various languages with English and Malay-language mediums dominating others. Among the English-language based newspapers operating are The New Straits Times, The Star, The Sun and several others. Meanwhile, with Malaysiakini pioneering other newer online press since the introduction of the web into the country, more alternative online-based news portals have mushroomed which includes Free Malaysia Today, The Vibes, Malaysia Chronicle and many others.

Circulation of the printing press in Malaysia is decreasing and this follows a global trend brought forth by digitalisation and new media. To sustain its business, Malaysian printing presses have also offered its readers alternative platform for news consumption. Thus, there are two forms of news publications in Malaysia. Firstly, news organisations which originate from the printing press which has evolved into multiplatform such as The Star Online and secondly, news organisations that birthed from the virtual world, such as Malaysiakini.

The news media play many roles. It plays the informative role where it informs the public of any event happenings and it also plays the role of educating the public on certain news issue. The news media is also influential in shaping public perception of a given issue. During any given crisis, news media's role become more crucial than ordinary times because the news media becomes the focal point for public to be updated of latest news. The news media's role is especially heightened during health crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic as news consumers would seek for new information and development about the virus. Taking the COVID-19 pandemic as a point in focus, this research has selected two online news portals to analyse. The two online news portals selected for this study are The Star Online and Malaysiakini. The Star Online is selected to represent mainstream newspaper and Malaysiakini is selected to represent alternative news outlet.

The Mainstream and Alternative Press in Malaysia

Meanwhile, the Malaysian traditional news media belong to the mainstream and is heavily politically linked. It has been contended that within the media landscape in Malaysia, it is common for politically affiliated

parties to become media owners (Abdul Latif, Wan Mahmud, & Salman, 2013). Democratisation of information is only made possible with existence of choice for public to consume their information. Thus alternative media acts as providers of substitute news which belong to 'the other'. Development in the digital technology has benefited Malaysia with the rise of alternative news portals which are mainly online-based. Alternative news provides news consumers with a substitute form of reporting and its content differs from those which are provided by mainstream media. This includes type of news reported, narrative presented, words emphasized and sources quoted.

Presence of mainstream and alternative news media provide news consumers with wider and diverse views of issues brought up in the news media. Previous study argues that media freedom in Malaysia is heavily controlled by ownership and legislation (Fong & Md Sidin, 2013). Alternative news media in Malaysia are more often (than the mainstream news media) to be subjected to legal issues such as censorship and suspension of license, among many others. Yet, its existence along with mainstream news media show democratisation of information is practiced in the nation, to a certain degree.

The Star Online

The Star is one of Malaysia's popular English-language mainstream newspapers. Previous study contends that the mainstream media in Malaysia is more often a mouthpiece of the government (Anuar, 2012) and often encompass large commercial or state-run organisations (George, 2007). The Star which was established in 1971 is one of the largest circulations in Malaysia. It is politically affiliated to one of the components of Barisan Nasional (BN) - the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA). BN has been the longest ruling political party in Malaysia since independence. In light to changes in media technology that has pushed news organisations towards platformisation, The Star has started to offer its readers online content through its The Star Online website to provide similar news for its online platform consumers.

Malaysiakini

The news portal Malaysiakini offers its readers content in four different languages – English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil. This is to enable wider consumers from various communities in Malaysia. Malaysiakini.com is Malaysia's pioneer online news portal that was established in 1999. It was established with a strong belief on the need for media independence that will contribute to a country's progress where the media would play a role in holding government accountable for any wrongdoings. The news outlet has been subjected to numerous legal restrictions since its establishment but remain to be one of the most popular news outlets

in the nation. One study suggests 45% of readers visit Malaysiakini website for more than three days per week (Newman, Fletcher, Schulz, Andi, & Nielsen, 2020) while a survey conducted by Reuters Institute for Journalism Studies places the news portal among the top trusted brand in the nation (Reuters & Naim, 2020).

Journalists and Its News Sources

What began as an expected form of severe pneumonia, the COVID-19 virus turned to be deadly and evolved into a pandemic. Yet, scientists and health experts were nescient about the virus at the initial stage upon its discovery. The rise of infected cases globally became worrying to everyone and journalists play a crucial role in selecting the right sources to be interviewed and quoted in their news reporting. Identifying the right source is crucial towards maintaining credibility of the news piece and image of the news organisation. It is also important especially with the rise of 'infodemic' – a condition wherein information of truth, false, disinformation, misinformation and rumours all compounded into one. This term was defined by the WHO following the increase of false or misleading information since the outbreak which has resulted to the deterioration of trust and credibility on health officials which undermines public perception on the COVID-19 response (World Health Organisation, 2021b). In the initial stage of the pandemic where various information about the virus was in its nascent, reliance on the news media was high. It is argued that with the shortage of institutional reporting and COVID-19 results, all industries in Malaysia and all strata of society depend on the media (Parvin et al., 2020).

Journalistic sourcing plays a fundamental role in news production (Munnik, 2018). Sources selected by journalists help make the public informed about a particular news event and especially important during a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Works produced by journalists give impact to the public at large (Hoxha & Hanitzsch, 2018) as the media is contended to have a proactive role in shaping actions of the mass populations and influence policy actions (Parvin et al., 2020). Selection of sources by journalists is very crucial in times of a health crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. It also reflect on journalists own perception of what is important, credible and true (Chyi, Lewis, & Zheng, 2016). Selection of sources which journalists identify in their news reports will have an influence to the shaping of opinion about the issue reported. Two groups of sources are categorised; the knowns and the unknowns where the earlier include elites and official sources (i.e. government leaders and official spokespersons) and the latter are

people who are non-elites who come into the media limelight due to their connection to a particular event (i.e. eyewitness) (Gans, 1980).

Throughout the world, the public were informed about the developments of COVID-19 virus through various platforms from social media to credible (and non-credible) news outlets. It is crucial for journalists and news organisations to produce correct, accurate and balanced news at all times, especially during health crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic as information distributed help shape public opinion on the given issue. One way for journalists to ensure balanced reporting is through representation of sources from various sectors and perspectives. This will also lead to a reporting that is fair wherein voices from various parties are represented in the issue narrative. Yet, journalists are likely to turn to institutional sources and commonly reference sources in their search for information (Hermida, 2013). Therefore, saliency given by journalists to selected news sources plays a crucial role in influencing the type of information which informs the public.

This study intends to identify which news sources were frequently sourced by two Malaysian news portals in the process of making public informed about the COVID-19 pandemic. The next section will provide a summary of basic measures taken by Malaysia to curb the COVID-19 pandemic spread in the initial months of discovering the virus in the country.

Malaysia's Preventive Measures to Curb the Pandemic

Reports on COVID-19 in Malaysia appeared in January 2020 through imported cases from Chinese nationals visiting the country. While the virus spread was low, the nation was going through a government transition when infected cases began to increase. The sudden resignation of the then Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohammad lead to the collapse of the ruling government and the nation was left without a government until a new premier, Muhyiddin Yassin took office.

Under the leadership of Muhyiddin Yassin, a special task force was implemented to overcome the crisis. The Malaysian National Security Council, an agency under the Prime Minister's Department is given the task to effectively curb the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country through collaborations with other department and agencies including the Ministry of Health. A variation of lockdowns was imposed, the first called the Movement Control Order (MCO) from the 18th March till 31st March 2020.

Over the course of time, other forms of lockdowns were introduced which are the Enhanced Movement Control Order (EMCO), Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO) and Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO). Also, regions and states throughout the nation were categorised through colour-coding to indicate the level of severity spread from green (for no infected case), yellow (20 or lower cases), orange (21 to 40 cases) and red (41 or more cases). These colour coding determine type of lockdown imposed by the government (i.e. EMCO, CMCO, RMCO) with designated rules imposed depending on lockdown type. The Malaysian National Security Council further outlines the standard operating procedures (SOP) to be followed depending on type of lockdown imposed on an area. Failure to comply with the SOPs will result to imposition of penalty. Additionally, some universal rules were emphasised throughout the nation, regardless of lockdown or area. They include compulsory mask wearing and social distancing. The next section will explain research methodology for the study.

Methodology

Identification of types of news sourced by the two news portals help create greater understanding on the ways in which the Malaysian public are informed about the pandemic. This study focuses on how sources play vital role in news production. The Star Online and Malaysiakini were chosen for several reasons. It was reported on Malaysia's Media Consumption Report that The Star Online and Malaysiakini were the top two most read online newspaper for 2019 (VASE, 2019). The Star and Malaysiakini were also among the nation's trusted news brand for 2020 with the earlier rated at 65 percent while the latter at 60 percent trust rate (Reuters & Naim, 2020). Further, the two news portals were selected as representative of a mainstream and an alternative news portal in Malaysia. While The Star Online is known as a mainstream news portal with political affiliation to BN, Malaysiakini as mentioned previously is an alternative news portal that fights for independent journalism. It is contended that while mainstream media are structurally tied to the centres of power, alternative media espouse values and visions that are outside the mainstream and tend to challenge dominant ideologies (George, 2007). Since mainstream and alternative news have different agendas, selection of the two news portals enables researcher to compare and contrast news sources in both online news portals.

News articles were collected partly from Malaysia's initial lockdown. Data were collected from 18th March up until 26th June 2020. This resulted to a total of 1,005 news articles from both news portals. A

total of 680 articles were analysed from The Star Online while Malaysiakini had 325 articles. The research identified sources during this period of data collection. Sources include the following:

- i. Individuals: e.g. Director General for the Ministry of Health, Prime Minister, Minister of Defence and other Ministers in the Malaysian government.
- ii. Entity: e.g. Ministry of Health, The Malaysian National Security Council, other ministries, local authorities, local news agencies, religious bodies, etc.
- iii. Experts (local): e.g. Medical scholars, scientists, health agencies, etc.
- iv. Experts (international): e.g. WHO and its representatives, world experts, renowned health bodies and universities, etc.
- v. Others: e.g. students, random public and any others that are not listed in any identified categories

Two keywords were identified in data collection. They were 'COVID' and 'COVID-19'. This enables data gathering process of narrowing down search to relevant articles out of many other news events reported in the two online news. The findings from this study are explained next.

Findings

The following section presents news sources extracted from The Star Online and Malaysiakini. This research has grouped sources into five categories which consists of 'individuals', 'entity', 'international experts', 'local experts' and 'others'. The experts' category is divided into two: international and local experts to provide distinction between the two. This is to enable researcher to separate analysis on local and international experts and to analyse any occurring factor of news values (i.e. proximity which may be adopted by journalists in their news reporting on COVID-19 in Malaysia.

As previously mentioned, a total of 1005 articles were grouped into the five categories of news sources. Findings suggest 'individual source' is the most sourced for both news organisations. A total of 790 news articles were reported within the individual frame with 614 news articles from The Star Online and 176 news articles from Malaysiakini. Sources from individuals make up the highest number sourced by both news portals. Among individuals frequently sourced include the Malaysian Director General for the

Ministry of Health, Tan Sri Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah, the Minister of Defence, Dato' Sri Ismail Sabri Yaakob and the Prime Minister, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin.

The Malaysian Director General for the Ministry of Health and the Minister of Defence are two individuals often sourced since these two individuals conduct daily press conferences to update Malaysians on the COVID-19 status in the country. As this study took place at the initial stage of COVID-19 spread, there were a lot of discoveries on the development of the virus. This has ranged from its name origin, virus name, geographical spread, characteristics of the virus, methods of prevention and many more. Overtime the Malaysian Director General for the Ministry of Health reports on the number of infected cases and deaths in the country. Meanwhile, the Malaysian Minister of Defence conducts press briefings to inform Malaysians about imposition of SOP, penalties, various forms of lockdown, among many others. Since Malaysia went through sudden leadership transition during the initial spread of the virus, the Prime Minister informs the public on the formation of the new cabinet, formation of members of the National Security Council – the special team in-charged of curbing the spread of disease and the nation's economic stimulus packages among others.

The second highest number of sourced category is 'Entity'. This applies to both The Star Online and Malaysiakini. A total of 450 news articles were reported within the individual frame with 317 news articles from The Star Online and 133 news articles from Malaysiakini. Entities include among others, news from The Malaysian National Security Council, the Ministry of Health, other ministries such as the Ministry of Finance, local authorities such as the local council, local news agencies such as the Malaysian National News Agency (BERNAMA), religious bodies, associations such as the consumer and the Association of Banks in Malaysia among many others. The banking associations were sourced to get the banking industry's perspective about the current economic state of the country especially since the government introduced a six-month loan moratorium from April 2020. The six-month moratorium was granted from all banks in Malaysia on all loans or financing payments to ease the public. Meanwhile, as a multiracial and multi-religious nation some religious bodies such as the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM), Christian Federation of Malaysia and other religious associations were referenced in dealing with re-arrangement of religious gathering and management of the dead due to the pandemic.

Other categories sourced include 'Local and International experts' and 'Others' that are not categorised in any of the earlier categories. Local experts include Malaysian health experts, academics and

local researchers. Meanwhile, international experts include renowned experts such as the Director General of World Health Organisation (WHO) Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus and his team of experts from the WHO whom often conducted press conferences in the initial stage of the pandemic spread. Besides representatives from the WHO, other international scientists and health experts from renowned world institutions such as the Johns Hopkins University were sourced. 15 articles were quoted from The Star Online for 'international experts' category while 19 articles were grouped in 'local experts'. Comparatively, Malaysiakini had a total of two sources for 'international experts' and eight for 'local experts' for the duration of this study.

Finally, the 'Other' category is grouped for news sources that are not in any of previous groups mentioned above. They include among others the general public and students from all age groups affected by the changes in education due to the pandemic. Findings suggest the 'other' group is more frequently grouped from The Star as compared to Malaysiakini with 40 articles versus six in Malaysiakini.

Findings from this study also reveal the sequence of news sourced category for COVID-19 reporting in the first few months of its spread in the country for The Star Online are as follow: Individuals (614 articles), Entity (317 articles), Other (40 articles), Local experts (19 articles) and International experts (15 articles). Meanwhile, the sequence for news sourced from Malaysiakini for the first few months of COVID-19 reporting in Malaysia are as follow: Individuals (176 articles), Entity (133 articles), Local experts (8 articles), Others (6 articles) and International experts (two articles). This sequence reveals while 'Individual category' is the highest news source for both The Star Online and Malaysiakini, 'International experts' are the least sourced sequence for both news portals. This suggests the importance of proximity in news values of both news organisations. Opinions of individuals in leadership and administrative role for the nation are highly more valued as compared to views by others outside the nation. This is partly due to the fact that as much as perception of international experts carry weight, views and actions by local leaders leading the internal health crisis is a lot more crucial and valued to overcome the spread of the pandemic. It signifies the importance of societal leaders as credible sources in news production.

In times of crisis, particularly health crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, it is crucial for news organisations to source their information from credible individuals and individuals who are seen as societal leaders such as the Director General of Health, Malaysia and relevant ministers leading the country to overcome the pandemic. This finding correlates with previous study which argues journalists are likely to

ascribe credibility to elite sources who are usually experts of a particular field, representatives from certain industry as well as political leaders (Paulussen & Harder, 2014). Another study on war reporting further reveals Malaysian journalists tend to quote sources from individuals with power and authority such as army generals and ministers to add to the believability of their news story (Ibrahim et al., 2011).

Table 1 Types of news sources obtained from The Star Online and Malaysiakini in the initial months of the pandemic in Malaysia.

NO	MONTH / NEWS SOURCES	MARCH	APRIL	MAY	JUNE	TOTAL
1	Individuals (The Star)	72	152	115	99	438
	Individuals (Malaysiakini)	56	53	38	29	176
2	Entity (The Star)	63	49	55	17	184
	Entity (Malaysiakini)	58	69	2	4	133
3	International experts (The Star)	5	5	3	0	13
	International experts (Malaysiakini)	2	0	0	0	2
4	Local experts (The Star)	4	3	3	1	11
	Local experts (Malaysiakini)	3	5	0	0	8
5	Others (The Star)	9	12	11	2	34
	Others (Malaysiakini)	3	3	0	0	6
	Total (The Star)	153	221	187	119	680
	Total (Malaysiakini)	122	130	40	33	325
	TOTAL	275	351	227	152	1005

Conclusion

This research looks into sourcing during crisis reporting. While crisis, particularly health crisis reporting is generally complex by nature, the COVID-19 pandemic is one unprecedented crisis that takes on a different scale. Demand in news on the virus increased particularly online platforms (Pavlik, 2021) when the world population went into lockdown. Since the nature of the virus is complex, the world including scientists and experts were left scouring for information to understand more on its complexity. Source-use patterns in journalistic content reflect choices bound by journalistic norms and routines (Miller & Kurpius, 2010). Analysis of sourcing preference between the selected one mainstream and one alternative online news suggests even though mainstream and alternative media differs particularly in their institutional ideologies,

journalistic norms on source-selection remain similar for both in health crisis reporting as exemplified in the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders and authorities became sources of information for journalists to quote as they decide future direction which the nation needs to proceed in an unprecedented time.

The 'Individuals' category remains the most popular and highly sourced by both selected mainstream and alternative news outlets. The public wants good journalism based on facts, are accurate and truthful in their reporting (Pavlik, 2021). Meanwhile, previous study argues the source selected by journalists gives voice and status to individuals who are chosen (Miller & Kurpius, 2010). Within the context of this study, individuals such as the Malaysian Director General for the Ministry of Health and key ministers were highly sourced because they are important individuals leading the nation to curb the spread of the virus. Sources are one of the determining factors to what is perceived credible in a news piece. Important individuals who are widely known may be considered newsworthy (Strömbäck, Karlsson, & Hopmann, 2012) in the eyes of journalists selecting their sources because they hold certain status in society which builds on the credibility image. Therefore, similarities between both news outlets to the preferred sourcing of information were due to the fact that individual sources such the Malaysian Director General or the Minister of Defense were most referenced at the period under study because the public are bound by ongoing rules and restrictions included in the SOPs and daily development of the virus spread which are usually mentioned by these individuals during their daily press conferences.

Although local and international experts are knowledgeable and considered known in their respective fields, findings from this study further suggest that opinions from individuals with power to make impactful decisions in the lives of its public are more valued by journalists than other groups of known individuals. As much as Malaysia obtains information about the virus from international experts such as the WHO officials, journalists place more weight on prominence and proximity of the news source. This is because decisions made by individuals of authority will impact the society within which they operate. Therefore, this study corresponds with previous works that elite individuals are the preferred group to be sourced in any news events because of their status as individuals with knowledge, power or authority and their decision-making privilege.

Limitations and Recommendations

This study is limited in its scale. It is based on two Malaysian online newspapers with one being represented by mainstream while another by an alternative news outlet. Future studies may analyze deeper into the role

of sources from wider selection of news outlets. Additionally, a comparative study can be developed and analyzed between mainstream and alternative news of other nations in regard to their reporting on COVID-19 pandemic. This would enable scholars to delve deeper into the study on journalistic-sourcing particularly in times of crisis reporting.

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