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**FRAMING NEWS ON GLOBAL TERRORISM: A MALAYSIAN  
CASE**

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***Abstract***

The purpose of this study is to report on the findings of the quantitative content analysis, where *Utusan Malaysia* news coverage of global terrorism issues was analysed by using a frame analysis to identify the common portrayal of the related issues. The study discovers that 1) a majority of the headlines of the global terrorism articles were positively-framed, 2) a majority of the articles on global terrorism had all framing functions, 3) a majority of the articles on global terrorism were written by *Utusan Malaysia* journalists, and 4) a framing bias existed in the *Utusan Malaysia*'s news reporting of global terrorism issues. Presenting headlines of global terrorism in a positive tone is a wise method for issues associated with the Muslims since the emphasis is on solving the problems through negotiations and discussions without harming the image of Islam. *Utusan Malaysia* had played informative and educative roles, and thus, the media, in general, need to continuously play these roles, while respecting the sensitivities of every religion in order to gain the world's peace and harmony.

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## 1. Introduction

In the English language, terrorism is defined as ‘the use of violent action in order to achieve political aims or to force a government to act’ (Hornby, 2015). On the other hand, in Arabic, the term violence or terrorism is closely known as *hirabah* and *baghy*. *Hirabah* refers to the *muharibin*’s (armed gangs) acts of ‘conflict, disobedience, fighting, disbelief, banditry, striking terror among the passers-by, and spreading corruption in the land’ (ElSayed Amin, 2014). Meanwhile, *baghy* refers to the *bughah*’s (combatants) acts of disrupting peace and causing transgression (Tabassum, 2011).

*Hirabah* is focused on criminal activities without any political purpose in it, but it can turn into an act of terror if it is used by certain groups as a way to achieve their goals. Meanwhile, *baghy* is an action of insurgency and there is a political element in the movement, but it can also turn into an act of terror if the rebellion party makes the civil society as a goal to threaten or suppress their opponent (Khairunnas & Fikri, 2010).

Looking back at the history, the term terrorism first appeared and became popular in the 18<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of terror of the French revolution, where the main purpose was to designate violent acts of the government to ensure observance of the people (White, 2012). However, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, that is, ever since the 11 September 2001 bombing of the World Trade Center in New York, United States of America, terrorism has been largely associated with the Muslims.

The accusation of the Muslim groups and Islam on the incident was widely spread through most Western media, and this has badly affected the Muslim society worldwide, leading to the long-lasting negative impression on the Muslims and continuous accusation on the Muslims regarding future terror attacks. More recently, a total of 12 Muslims has been blamed for a series of attacks in and around Barcelona, Spain, which happened from 17 to 22 August 2017. The sequence of events became widespread in the Western media, such as *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph*, *BBC News*, *ABC News*, *CNN*, *New York Times*, *Fox News*, and *CNBC*, creating greater resentment towards the Muslims. It is therefore obvious that the media plays a prominent role as information transmitter and by providing and portraying messages in certain ways to the public, the media is able to become an agent of change that could shape the public’s perception and opinion.

Hence, this study aims to report on the findings of quantitative content analysis, where Malaysian newspaper coverage of global terrorism was analysed using frame analysis to identify the common portrayal of the related issues, in the hope that a more ethical and responsible way of reporting news, particularly on global terrorism can be proposed, so that global peace can be attained.

## 2. Problem Statement

Islam has often been associated with violence and terrorism (Ahmad Khasasi & Salleh, 2015; Wright, 2016). In fact, the term *jihad* has also been given a negative meaning and being construed as terrorism (Khairunnas & Fikri, 2010). According to Ibn Taymiyyah, *jihad* is the fact of *ijtihad* (submission of all efforts to the maximum) in producing anything favoured of Allah SWT in the form of faith and every good work, rejecting everything that Allah SWT dislikes – in the form of disbelief, wickedness, and disobedience. For instance, in Islam, the killing of women and children in the war is forbidden (Sahih al-Bukhari, Vol. 4, *Hadith* 257). Besides that, in Islam, the killing of non-Muslims is

forbidden under certain circumstances (Sahih al-Bukhari 3166, Book 58, *Hadith* 8). Moreover, Islam encourages the Muslims to have friendly relations with the non-Muslims (Surah Al-Mumtahanah [60]:8-9). Hence, Islam is actually a religion which highly honours peace and values of humanity, as well as values of divinity (Wasid, 2011; Ahmad Khasasi & Salleh, 2015).

However, misunderstanding towards Islam occurs due to the actions of Muslim radical groups who engage themselves in terrorism based on their ideological reasoning that *jihad* is a means of struggle to uphold oneness of God (Khairunnas & Fikri, 2010; Wasid, 2011; Hassan, 2016). The verses of the Qur'an and the *hadiths* of the Prophet Muhammad SAW regarding *jihad* has been misconstrued by these groups to the extent that they had named their group as *al-Jihad al-Islami*, *al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad*, and so on (Khairunnas & Fikri, 2010). The term *jihad* in the *hadiths* is not restricted to war, but may also include the humans' battle with their evil lusts (Sahih al-Bukhari, Vol. 4, *Hadith* 45).

*Jihad*, as a religious order (Ahmad Khasasi & Salleh, 2015; Hassan, 2016), is present in the real space in order to affirm human values so that they remain in harmony with the spirit of survival and crave for peace instead of bringing damage to the universe (Wasid, 2011). If *jihad* continues to be misconstrued as war only, then it will add to the negative image of Islam (Khairunnas & Fikri, 2010; Wasid, 2011).

## 2.1. News Framing of the Media

According to Entman (1993), frames determine what aspects of an issue people notice, how they come to understand this issue, and how they choose to act upon it. More specifically Entman, (1993) defines framing as a selection of some aspects of news issues and making them more salient in the form of text by promoting a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation. The term salient implies that frames make certain aspects of news issues more influential that it leads the audiences into understanding and remembering a news issue better, and eventually, evaluating it. Entman, (1993) suggests that frames in the news can be examined and identified 'by the presence or absence of certain keywords, phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematic facts or judgements'.

In the case of global terrorism, Jørndrup (2016), in her study, uses Entman's four framing functions (i.e. problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, treatment recommendation) to scrutinize the unfolding events of Copenhagen shootings in February 2015, as framed by the Danish television channel *DRI*. Her study summary that *DRI*'s framing of the shooting as 'terror attack' had transformed the news coverage into a 'news media' media event, abandoning the journalistic norm of critical approach and leaving the media to become a national disappointment. Jørndrup's (2016) findings echo to de Buitrago's (2013) study which finds that 'attack type' is a factor shaping media discourse across different media in Europe. De Buitrago (2013) suggests that journalists should focus on comprehensive and inclusive reporting and avoid simplified and inflammatory competing for divisions along cultural, religious, or ethnic lines. De Buitrago (2013) adds that coverage should clearly differentiate between perpetrators and a societal group sharing a religious or another background. For instance, statements on the terrorists' Muslim background should be placed in a separate context from statements on the lack of integration of Muslim immigrants to avoid creating a dangerously false link and

making it look as if all Muslims are potential terrorists, leading to resentment of Muslims (De Buitrago, 2013).

Sultan's (2016) study of the media framing of Islam or Muslim, terrorism, and the West discourse since the September 11<sup>th</sup> incident discovers that the mass media plays a manipulative role in covering news on terrorism by using frames. Sultan (2016) adds that the continuity of negative stereotyping in news coverage has caused Islamophobia (a hatred or fear of Islam or Muslims, especially when feared as a political force), leading to anti-Muslim sentiments in the West. Thus, Sultan (2016) summarizes that the media and terrorism is a dangerous symbiosis against Islam.

Meanwhile, Yusof et al.'s (2013) study of the frames used by the *Time* and *The Economist* magazine regarding terrorism, Muslims, and Islam reveals that a majority of their coverage was of negative stereotype, whereby they emphasised that Islam caused violence, Muslims are terrorists, and leadership in Muslim countries is in catastrophe. Likewise, Dafrizal et al.'s (2013) study of the trend of Malaysian and Indonesian prime newspapers' coverage of terrorism issue finds that negative pattern was dominant since most news coverage on global terrorism were obtained from the news agency, *Agence France-Presse* (AFP).

The negative stereotyping pattern in news reports highlighted in previous studies actually shows that framing bias existed when it comes to the issue of terrorism due to the regularity of negative slant in the influential media (Entman, 2010). In this sense, frames may be subject to political aims (Entman, 2010). Nevertheless, mainstream news organisations have denied this allegation and stated that 'they ensure equal treatment to competing frames and preclude their news reports from slanting' (Entman, 2010). Thus, informed by the media framing theory, this study explores how a selected Malaysian mainstream newspaper frames the issues on global terrorism in order to determine the presence or absence of framing bias in news reporting.

### 3. Research Questions

This study was designed to answer the following questions:

- 1) What are the tones of the headlines of global terrorism issues in *Utusan Malaysia*?
- 2) What are the framing functions used in covering issues on global terrorism in *Utusan Malaysia*?
- 3) What are the references of the global terrorism news article in *Utusan Malaysia*?
- 4) Is there a framing bias in the *Utusan Malaysia*'s news reporting on global terrorism issues?

### 4. Purpose of the Study

Below are the specific objectives of this study:

- 1) To analyse the tones of the headlines of global terrorism issues in *Utusan Malaysia*.
- 2) To analyse the functions of frames used by the *Utusan Malaysia* in their coverage of global terrorism issues.
- 3) To ascertain the references of the global terrorism news article in *Utusan Malaysia*.
- 4) To determine the presence or absence of framing bias in *Utusan Malaysia*'s news reporting on global terrorism issues.

## 5. Research Methods

In this study, a Malaysian Malay language newspaper *Utusan Malaysia* was selected as a sample due to its various achievements ever since its establishment in 1939. A census sample was rendered to identify newspaper articles on global terrorism which were published in *Utusan Malaysia* from January to December 2016. Census sampling helps in identifying all articles related to a given subject over a period of time, and thus, it is often the most valid for researchers wanting to look at a large number of articles related to a particular issue or event (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2014). The one-year time frame of January to December 2016 was chosen for analysis in this study due to its relevance to the present situation, which is in line with the Malaysian government's efforts in preventing the Malaysians from taking part in any activities associated with violent extremism or terrorism through the formulation of Prevention of Terrorism Act 2015.

The digital archive from the *Utusan Online* website was used to compile global terrorism-related newspaper articles within the one-year time frame. By using the keywords 'global terrorism' and 'global violence', 33 articles related to global terrorism issues were culled for content analysis of *Utusan Malaysia*'s news coverage. These 33 articles of global terrorism issues appeared either in the section of *Berita Nasional*, *Berita Wilayah*, *Berita Luar Negara*, or *Rencana Utama*.

The framing analysis of this study involves examining the headline of newspaper articles. The headlines were analysed in this study due to their function in indicating the topic and summary the main content of the news text and their ability to help the reader grasp the meaning of the text (Bonyadi & Samuel, 2013). The headlines of newspaper articles on global terrorism issues were analysed in terms of the slants or tones to identify the portrayal of global terrorism issues. The slants or tones can be described in the following manner:

- 1) Positive tones refer to the presentation of headlines in a calming tone. Positive headlines provide the readers with a glimpse of information which shows that problems regarding global terrorism can be solved through proper decision-making and actions by related bodies.
- 2) Negative tones refer to the presentation of headlines in an alarming tone. Normally, negative headlines make readers feel uneasy and worried when the headlines concerned with decisions and/or actions which can negatively affect the image of Islam.
- 3) Neutral tones refer to the presentation of headlines in a balanced tone. Neutral headlines contain neither positive nor negative tone.

Besides that, Entman's (1993) four framing functions, that is, defining problems, diagnosis of causes, making moral judgements, and suggesting remedies were used in this study to evaluate news frames in *Utusan Malaysia*. These framing functions play significant roles in identifying possible effects framing may have in news coverage of global terrorism issue. The following are brief explanations on the roles of each framing functions:

- 1) Defining problems is meant to describe the meaning of issues concerning terrorism and to build an understanding of the issues on terrorism among the public.
- 2) Diagnosis of causes functions in identifying the factors that correlate with problems regarding terrorism.

- 3) Making moral judgements functions in stressing awareness of the possibility of side-effects that might trigger from acts of terrorism, so as to act as prevention.
- 4) Suggesting remedies are meant to share any treatments or measures that can be used as a solution to overcome terrorism.

Moreover, the story origin or references of the global terrorism news article will also be analysed in this study. The original writers of the terrorism news article may be journalists from *Utusan Malaysia* itself or invited writers of *Utusan Malaysia* or journalists from the news agency, such as the *Malaysian National News Agency (BERNAMA)*, *AFP*, and *Reuters*.

All the gathered data were compiled into tables, and then, were summed up as frequencies and calculated as percentages for a clearer view. Hence, all the gathered data were analysed descriptively through tables. Meanwhile, the examples taken in as positive, negative, and neutral headlines, as well as framing functions were translated into English.

## 6. Findings

Of the total of 33 articles on global terrorism published in *Utusan Malaysia* in the year 2016, a majority appeared in the news section (54.55%) compared to 45.45 percent which appeared in the *Rencana* section.

### 6.1. Tones of Headlines

Table 1 shows the types of tone, whether positive, negative, or neutral of the articles' headlines of global terrorism issue. A majority of the headlines were framed in a positive tone (54.55%). Meanwhile, 24.24 percent of the headlines were neutrally-toned. The remaining 21.21 percent were negatively-toned, whereby nearly half of them (42.86%) were obtained from the foreign news agencies. This discovery echoes to that of Dafrizal et al.'s (2013), de Buitrago's (2013), Yusof et al.'s (2013), Jørndrup's (2016), and Sultan's (2016) study, in which, the foreign media was found to be highly prone towards covering news on global terrorism in a negative tone.

In *Utusan Malaysia*, positive headlines were mostly presented in the form of giving suggestions for solutions. For instance, "The true meaning of *jihad* must be explained in the mosques" (*Utusan Malaysia*, 4 March 2016). On the other hand, negative headlines were presented in an alarming manner which concerned actions or decisions of certain groups that can leave a bad impression. For instance, "Abu Sayyaf threatened to behead another hostage" (*Utusan Malaysia*, 17 May 2016). Neutral headlines were mostly mere statements and brief information about issues concerning global terrorism. For instance, "Geopolitical justification" (*Utusan Malaysia*, 15 May 2016).

**Table 01.** Percentage of headlines of articles on global terrorism in *Utusan Malaysia* based on type of tone, 2016

Tones	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Positive	18	54.55
Negative	7	21.21
Neutral	8	24.24
Total	33	100.00

## 6.2. Framing Functions

Table 2 shows that a majority of the articles on global terrorism in *Utusan Malaysia* have a significant presence of the framing function of defining problems and making moral judgements (25.42% respectively), followed by the diagnosis of causes and suggesting remedies (24.58% respectively). The following are some examples of framing functions on global terrorism issues in *Utusan Malaysia*:

- 1) Defining problems: “Malaysia today reminded the world that the fight against terrorism cannot be won by force alone but may be able to be constrained by the construction of the network at all levels of the society to address the stream of extremist thoughts.” (*Utusan Malaysia*, 25 September 2016).
- 2) Diagnosis of causes: “The battle took place following the 300 men charged with killing nine police officers at the border of Myanmar and Bangladesh. The authorities accused the Rohingya people of carrying out the attack by the language that is spoken by them.” (*Utusan Malaysia*, 16 October 2016).
- 3) Making moral judgements: “We do not want the same tragedy to happen among Islamic countries as was the case in other Muslim countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria which ultimately caused us losses. If tolerance exists, certainly this conflict can be resolved and does not require the intervention of major powers and international institutions.” (*Utusan Malaysia*, 12 January 2016).
- 4) Suggesting remedies: “... the fight against terrorism cannot be won through military and punitive measures alone. Thus, Malaysia has integrated de-radicalisation and rehabilitation programs in an effort to change the way people think and rehabilitate the individuals of radical and extremist affiliation.” (*Utusan Malaysia*, 26 September 2016)

**Table 02.** Percentage of framing functions in global terrorism articles in *Utusan Malaysia*, 2016

Framing Functions	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Defining problems	30	25.42
Diagnosis of causes	29	24.58
Making moral judgements	30	25.42
Suggesting remedies	29	24.58
Total	118	100.00

Table 3 shows that a majority of the articles on global terrorism in *Utusan Malaysia* have all framing functions (84.85%). Meanwhile, only five articles on global terrorism in *Utusan Malaysia* had three framing functions (15.15%).

**Table 03.** Percentage of the amount of framing functions in global terrorism articles in *Utusan Malaysia*, 2016

Amount of Framing Function(s)	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
0	0	0.00
1	0	0.00
2	0	0.00
3	5	15.15
4	28	84.85
Total	33	100.00

### 6.3. References

Table 4 shows that a majority of the articles on global terrorism in *Utusan Malaysia* were written by the *Utusan Malaysia* journalists (69.70%). Meanwhile, six (18.18%) of the articles on global terrorism in *Utusan Malaysia* were obtained from news agencies. Three (9.09%) of the articles on global terrorism in *Utusan Malaysia* were written by invited writers. Only one (3.03%) article on global terrorism in *Utusan Malaysia* was taken from a speech text.

**Table 04.** Percentage of global terrorism references in *Utusan Malaysia*, 2016

References	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
In-house journalists	23	69.70
Invited writers	3	9.09
BERNAMA	1	3.03
AFP	3	9.09
Reuters	2	6.06
Others	1	3.03
Total	33	100.00

## 7. Conclusion

*Utusan Malaysia*'s headlines of global terrorism articles which had been presented in mostly positive tone is a wise method, particularly when the issue comes to groups associated with the Muslims since it emphasises on solving the problems through negotiations and discussions without harming the image of Islam. Thus, in this case, framing news stories in a negative tone to gain more attention from the public is inappropriate because previous studies related to terrorism have shown that this method has largely contributed to the bad image and impression of Islam today.



The study indicates that *Utusan Malaysia* has played informative and educative roles by framing problem definitions, causes diagnoses, moral judgements, and remedies suggestions with regards to global terrorism issues. Thus, the media need to continuously play these roles because issues on global terrorism are still problematic, and the problems associated with global terrorism issues are not going to be resolved immediately as long as members of the society remain ignorant.

Besides that, it is best that Malaysian journalists do their own research and investigation before writing a story, as what had been done by the *Utusan Malaysia* journalists in covering the news on global terrorism. This echoes to de Buitrago's (2013) suggestion that journalists should focus on comprehensive and inclusive reporting. It is important because there are risks in relying solely on the foreign news, as only those innocently-affected people being labelled as terrorist are able to understand the sensitivities related to the issues, particularly when it comes to religion.

Overall, there is a framing bias in the *Utusan Malaysia*'s news reporting of global terrorism issues, as expected so since Entman (2010) has stated in his study that it is difficult to avoid from being unjust in reporting news when there are competition and frequent changes to facts according to the situation. However, the presence of framing bias in the *Utusan Malaysia*'s news reporting of global terrorism issues does no intentional harm to the image of Islam and other religions because they were portrayed in a positive manner. In fact, as a multi-racial country, the Malaysian media should respect the sensitivities of every religion to maintain peace and harmony.

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