

## **Media Framing on Headline News of the COVID-19 Issues in Malaysia: A Study of Malaysiakini and Astro Awani**

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### **Abstract**

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic that hit the world in the early 2020 until 2021, society still currently face with the dreadful situation and its control precautions even though various vaccines have emerged to treat this infectious disease. The world community is also served with a variety of sensational and hot news headlines about the COVID-19 pandemic. This study aims to examine news headlines available in Malaysiakini and Astro Awani, framing the coronavirus in its coverage of the COVID-19 virus pandemic. The objective of this study is also to investigate the major frames of these two online news portals in terms of their reporting approaches on COVID-19. The research adopted a qualitative content analysis for the data collection process. For data analysis, the researcher read and code the study based on the scheme from Entman, which consists of four main categories, namely economic consequences, human interest and impact, attribution of responsibility, and health severity. A code sheet was created to capture all relevant story information, including news organization, publication date, story title, story narrative, frame definition, and tone. The findings provide exposure for the community to stay cautious and vigilant with headlines posted by online news portals, especially on sensitive issues like the pandemic. Furthermore, Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) could act upon any news outlets that publishes such provocative and misleading news headlines to the public with the help from National Union of Journalists Malaysia (NUJ) to monitor each registered journalist to adhere to journalistic ethics in news reporting to ensure the information remain true and authentic.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Media Framing, News Headlines, Malaysiakini, Astro Awani.

### **Introduction**

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic that hit the world in the early 2020 until 2021, society still currently face with the dreadful situation and its control precautions even though

various vaccines have emerged to treat this infectious disease. The world community is also served with a variety of sensational and hot news headlines about the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Gunasekaran (2018), the selection of headlines in local newspapers is to trigger sensational news excessively with the primary aim to attract the interests of readers, in particular, one that will usually cause people to feel afraid, panicked, and worried about what is displayed on a newspaper. At this point, there are several newspapers in the form of online portals, which have more followers than the traditional newspapers' establishments. An annual survey of news reception across Malaysia in 2020 found that Malaysiakini was ranked at the top in weekly access with 45%, while Astro Awani came in second place with an average weekly access of 35% (Digital News Report, 2020).

The emergence of local news portals of late has sparked concerns among the local community as the news headlines being published are more sensational, controversial, and overhyped. Indirectly, it will have implications on the readers with such headlines being published (Gunasekaran, 2018). For example, the inaccurate selection of headlines in a Harian Metro newspaper report led to the assumption that the deaths were caused by vaccine injections. However, the newspaper has apologized for the confusion that has caused concerns to any affected parties and/ or individuals since the news hovered on social media (Metro, 2021).

According to Newman et al (1992), there are four types of news frames that are used in framing news stories, which are economic consequence, human impact, moral, and conflict frames. Therefore, this study will use a news frame borrowed from Newman as it is relevant to the topic as well as the current situation of the COVID-19 pandemic occurring in Malaysia. Hence, the framing of a headline is crucial because it can influence and attract the interests of readers. Therefore, this study will focus on the framing of headlines concerning the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Literature Review**

The COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia is part of the occurrence of the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic that is still hitting the world due to severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). The medical response to the outbreak in Malaysia was supervised by the Director General of Health, Tan Sri Dr. Noor Hisham Abdullah under the Ministry of Health in two consecutive governments. Preparations to store equipment, track and monitor cases, and treat COVID-19 patients were reported to have begun as early as January 6, 2020, following a World Health Organization (WHO) report on an outbreak of "pneumonia of unknown cause" in late December 2019 in Wuhan city, Hubei (Director of General Health Malaysia, 2020).

Therefore, the government and the media in general have paid full attention to the issue of COVID-19 until the emergence of several fake articles about COVID-19 that triggered concern and public fear, which ultimately affected the business sector, which in turn also affected the national economy (Idris, 2020). In fact, the spread of false news on social media about the curfew also worsened the situation, causing some people to buy necessities in excess of the usual amount or volume (Hassan, 2020; Sualman 2020).

According to Hirneisen (2020), the influence of media on societal perceptions and reliance on media for information during disease crises is an evident event whereby it establishes that

media has sufficient power to influence societal behaviors, such as fear and anxiety with some unauthentic information. Gerlach (2016) found that media reporting can contribute to public perceptions, awareness, and panic during disease outbreaks by using the framing theory. Therefore, this study will examine news headlines available in Malaysiakini and Astro Awani, framing the coronavirus in its coverage of the COVID-19 virus pandemic.

Malaysiakini is a Malaysian online media who publishes reports, covered in four languages, namely Malay, English, Mandarin, and Tamil. Launched on 20 November 1999, among the sections available in Malaysiakini were 'Main', 'News', 'Columns', 'Opinion', 'Editor's Mind', 'Special Report', and 'Others'. It attracts over 37 million views a year and receives the recognition of being the No.1 in terms of popularity in Malaysia ranking by Digital News Report in 2020 (Nain, 2020). In 2013, the parent company of the Malaysiakini Portal also had a separate entity called, KiniBiz business portal, which would report international business news and had its own YouTube channel, KiniTV. The headlines in Malaysiakini are more focused on the latest issues and matters related to politics in Malaysia. The English version of MalaysiaKini.com required users to subscribe to their packages offered to enjoy the privilege of reading English contents, while the Malay version is publicly free.

Astro Awani is a 24-hour paid television news channel in Malaysia, owned by Astro AWANI Network Sdn. Bhd. and operated by Astro. It went live on the 6th September, 2007 and was aired on the channel 501 (SD). In 2009, it replaced Astro News, which ended its broadcasting on March 1st. With the slogan '#1 24-hour News Channel in Malaysia', Astro Awani presents the latest news and informative programs including current affairs, lifestyle, documentaries, interview shows as well as local and international magazines (Astro Awani, 2021).

Astro Awani ranked first as the Most Trusted News Brand in Malaysia, based on the Annual Survey by the Reuters Digital News Research Institute 2020, followed by Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM) in second place, while The Star ranked in the third place (Astro Awani, 2021). As for the online news category, Astro Awani was ranked in the second place, and Malaysiakini continued to excel in the first place. Therefore, this study will examine these two online news portals to see the extent of the framing of COVID-19 headlines trends from January 2020 to December 2020.

According to Janssen (2010), media framing in a news item is the idea that an article is constructed in a particular way to convey a particular message, the way journalists organize information, to determine which information should be included, and how it should be organized and framed. Whereas Sofian & Hussein (2014) in Bullock et al (2001) defined framing as an important component in the study of news selection and interpretation. Framing affects how a story is presented and in turn affects the audience's perception and the concept of framing is deemed to be extremely 'powerful' that it is often not realized that this framing process is undergoing and in turn influences the audience's assessment of responsibility and causes.

Therefore, this theory is seen as suitable for the study because the researchers want to determine how headlines of news that have been selected are displayed to the audience through words, propositions, photos, pictures, and have them placed on the front or back pages. This theory can also explain and analyze the four types of news frames studied in this

study, such as economic consequence, human impact, moral, and conflict frames found in Malaysiakini and Astro Awani on the main topics related to COVID-19.

### **Methodology**

This study uses content analysis to look at the framing of COVID-19 pandemic news headlines for online news portals Malaysiakini and Astro Awani. This study also uses a pragmatic approach and content analysis as an additional method. According to Bryman (2012) in Mutua & Oloo (2020), content analysis is the most appropriate research method for studying news contents that provide results of both qualitative and quantitative methods. This study uses purposive sampling that examines political news headlines over a period of time from online news portals, Malaysiakini and Astro Awani. According to the Reuters Digital News Research Institute (2020), Malaysiakini ranked first as a News Brand in the Most Trusted Online category in Malaysia, while Astro Awani ranked second. This shows that these two online news portals have their own substantial following and are relevant to the study. This research has chosen a period of 12 months from January 2020 to December 2020. This period was chosen because this was the period where the COVID-19 pandemic crisis was at its peak. The selection of the time period taken was to investigate the initial reactions and response the outbreak one month before and after the World Health Organization's declaration of the disease outbreak as a global emergency on January 31, 2020. The three researchers will read and code based on the scheme from Entman (1993), which consists of four main categories, namely economic consequences, human interest and impact, attribution of responsibility, and health severity. A code sheet was created to capture all relevant story information, including news organization, publication date, story title, story narrative, frame definition, and tone.

### **Results and Discussion**

The results of this study are weighed using two research questions destined to understand media framing on headlines news of the COVID-19 issues in Malaysiakini and Astro Awani. These research questions are: (1) "What is the tone of headlines in COVID-19 issue in Malaysiakini and Astro Awani?" and (2) "What were the major frames of two news portals online in their reporting regarding COVID-19?"

#### *Number of Articles*

An overall of 2,185 articles were found in both online portals. With the Malaysiakini portal currently numbering at 643, while Astro Awani's platform comprised of 1,542 articles with the headline COVID-19 throughout January 2020 until December 2020.

#### *Story Narrative*

The aggregate number of narrative-shaped articles in both portals is 1,828. According to Allen (2014), narrative is a story that has beginnings, middles, and endings. It involves the mind and heart of the reader. This narrative-shaped story takes readers deeper into a story, helps the reader fully visualize what a reporter or subject is experiencing, and adds to the importance of the topic at hand (Pratt, 2021). For the current Malaysiakini portal, the story is in the form of 600 narratives, while Astro Awani numbered at 1,228. Here is an example of the story narrative available on the Malaysiakini and Astro Awani portals:

*"Kementerian Kesihatan Malaysia mengesan kes jangkitan novel koronavirus*

*(2019-nCoV) yang pertama di negara ini. Menteri Kesihatan Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad berkata ujian pengesanan dan pengesahan melibatkan tiga individu itu diperolehi dari pihak Makmal Kesihatan Awam Kebangsaan (MKAK) Sungai Buloh lewat malam semalam. Beliau memberitahu sidang akhbar bahawa tiga pesakit itu mempunyai kaitan dengan bapa dan anak dari Wuhan, China, yang telah disahkan positif dengan virus itu di Singapura tiga hari lalu” – (MalaysiaKini, 2020)*

**Translation:** *"The Ministry of Health Malaysia detected the first novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) infection in the country. Minister of Health Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad have told that the detection and confirmation test involving the three individuals was obtained from the Sungai Buloh National Public Health Laboratory (MKAK) late last night. He told the press conference that the three patients were related to a father and son from Wuhan, China, who had confirmed positive for the virus in Singapore three days ago" – (MalaysiaKini, 2020)*

*"Dua kes baharu Novel Koronavirus (2019-nCoV) dikesan di negara ini, ujar Menteri Kesihatan, Datuk Seri Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad. Kes pertama melibatkan seorang lelaki warga China berusia 63 tahun dan seorang rakyat Malaysia berusia 41 tahun dari Selangor. Lelaki rakyat Malaysia berkenaan mempunyai sejarah perjalanan ke Singapura dari 16 hingga 23 Januari 2020, bagi menghadiri mesyuarat yang turut dihadiri oleh beberapa delegasi antarabangsa termasuk negara China"- (Astro Awani, 2020)*

**Translation:** *"Two new cases of the Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV) are detected in the country, said Health Minister Datuk Seri Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad. The first case involved a 63-year-old Chinese man and a 41-year-old Malaysian from Selangor. He has a history of travel to Singapore from 16 to 23 January 2020, to attend meetings which are also attended by several international delegates including China " - (Astro Awani, 2020)*

### **What is the tone of headlines in COVID-19 issue in Malaysiakini and Astro Awani?**

Analysis have shown that both Malaysiakini and Astro Awani portals are neutral in terms of tone of headlines, and both platforms amounted to an aggregate total of 1,412 articles. Malaysiakini has 294 articles with such tone, while Astro Awani has 1,118 neutral tone of headlines. The tone is referred to as a sentiment, courage, impact, or textual polarity (Soroka et al., 2015). Tone of headlines focuses on covering the elements of positive, neutral, or negative (Rosenson, 2015). Neutral can also be defined as neutral, not good, or not bad (Boukes et al., 2020). Here is the example of neutral tone of headlines in the Malaysiakini and Astro Awani portal:

*"New SOPs for election" - (Malaysiakini, 2020)*

*"CMCO to preserve green zones" - (Malaysiakini, 2020)*

*"Vaccine waiting for clinical trial data" – (Malaysiakini, 2020)*

*"Kuarantin di pusat isolasi, bukan di rumah" - (Astro Awani, 2020)*

*"PKPD bukan seluruh Sabah" - (Astro Awani, 2020)*

*"PKPB wajar dilaksanakan" – (Astro Awani, 2020)*

### **What were the major frames of two news portals online in their reporting regarding COVID-19?**

#### **Economic Consequences**

Analysis has shown that there is a frame 'Economic Consequence' in both Malaysiakini and Astro Awani portals. Malaysiakini have total of 177 articles, while Astro Awani amounted to 365 articles, with both platforms amounted to a total of 542 articles. According to Valkenburg et al. (1999) and Dan & Raupp (2018), the economic consequence framework presents an event or the problem, in which it will bear against individuals, groups, institutions, territories, or countries. News is often framed in terms of real economic effects and it has the potential to affect readers.

Here is the quotation of the Economic Consequences framework for both Malaysiakini and Astro Awani portal:

*"Kementerian Kesihatan akan memohon peruntukan tambahan daripada Kementerian Kewangan untuk berdepan coronavirus, kata menterianya Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad. Dzulkefly berkata, kementeriannya antara lain menimbang untuk menambah jumlah pengimbas suhu di pintu masuk dan keluar utama sebagai salah satu langkah mengesan mereka yang tiba di Malaysia, yang sudah menunjuk tanda-tanda dijangkiti virus itu" - (Malaysiakini, 2020)*

**Translation:** *"The Ministry of Health will apply for additional provisions from the Ministry of Finance to deal with coronavirus, said its minister, Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad. Dzulkefly have mentioned that his ministry among others was considering increasing the number of temperature scanners at the entrance and the main exit as one of the measures to detect those who arrived in Malaysia, who had shown some signs and symptoms of the virus"*

*"Kerajaan memaklumkan penularan coronavirus baharu (2019-nCoV) tidak memberi kesan kepada unjuran ekonomi negara buat masa ini. Menteri Hal Ehwal Ekonomi, Datuk Seri Mohamed Azmin Ali, bagaimanapun berkata ia akan memberi kesan terhadap ekonomi negara dalam tempoh jangka panjang jika wabak itu tidak ditangani dengan baik" - (Astro Awani, 2020)*

**Translation:** *"The Government has informed that the spread of the new coronavirus (2019-nCoV) has no impact on the country's economic projections at this time. The Minister of Economic Affairs, Datuk Seri Mohamed Azmin Ali, however said it would have an impact on the country's economy in the long run if the outbreak was not handled properly" - (Astro Awani, 2020)*

#### **Human Interest**

In addition, both Malaysiakini and Astro Awani portals show that there is a 'Human Interest' in their news reporting. The total was 2,098, with Malaysiakini having 596 articles, while Astro Awani retaining 1502 articles. According to Hove et al. (2014), inclosing human interest means its impact on the lives of those affected. The following is a snapshot of the Human-Interest framework for both Malaysiakini and Astro Awani portals:

*"Pihak berkuasa kesihatan mengesan mutasi virus COVID-19 di negara ini yang lebih agresif. Menurut Ketua Pengarah Kesihatan Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah, salah satu mutasi yang dikesan adalah pada Kes-26 yang setakat ini telah menjangkiti 120 yang lain. Difahamkan ada 30 mutasi setakat ini. Di Institut Kajian Perubatan (IMR) kita laksanakan pengasingan dan kultur virus. Kita dapati Kes-26 contohnya,*

*ada satu mutasi. Dan mungkin sebab mutasi ni jadikan virus lebih ganas telah merebak dan jangkiti 120 orang”- (Malaysiakini, 2020)*

**Translation:** *The authorities have detected the COVID-19 virus mutations in the country which are more aggressive. According to the Health Director-General Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah, one of the mutations detected was in the case of no. 26 who had previously infected 120 people. It is understood that there are 30 mutations so far. At the Institute of Medical Research (IMR), we have implemented virus isolation and culture. For example, we have found that in 26<sup>th</sup> case, there is one mutation, and maybe because the mutation transforms the virus to be more violent and has spread and infected 120 people” - (Malaysiakini, 29th April 2020)*

*“Seorang lagi pelakon Hollywood dilapor menjadi mangsa jangkitan COVID-19. Andrew Jack yang membawa watak General Ematt menerusi filem Star Wars meninggal dunia pada usia 76 tahun akibat komplikasi koronavirus” - (Astro Awani, 2020)*

**Translation:** *"Another Hollywood actor was reported to be a victim of COVID-19 infection. Andrew Jack, who brought General Ematt's character through the Star Wars movie died at the age of 76 due to Coronavirus complications" - (Astro Awani, 2020)*

#### *Attribution of Responsibility*

Through an analysis that has been conducted, an overall of 719 articles have been discovered showing the frame of “Attribution of responsibility” in news reporting for both Malaysiakini and Astro Awani portals. Of these, Malaysiakini has 243 articles, while Astro Awani has 476 articles. According to Krishnatray & Gadekar (2014), attribution of responsibility refers to the problems and risks of a person's actions, and one must be responsible for finding a way out. Here is a screenshot of the Attribution of responsibility frame for both Malaysiakini and Astro Awani portals:

*“Kementerian Kesihatan (KKM) menyerahkan kepada Majlis Keselamatan Negara (MKN) untuk memutuskan jika tindakan perlu diambil terhadap warga asing yang didapati tidak memiliki dokumen sah, ketika menjalani ujian saringan COVID-19. Ketua Pengarah Kesihatan Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah berkata, KKM fokus terhadap merawat pesakit dan kegiatan mengesan kes positif” - (Malaysiakini, 2020)*

**Translation:** *"The Ministry of Health (MOH) submitted to the National Security Council (MKN) to decide if action should be taken against foreigners who were found to have no valid documents, while undergoing COVID-19 screening tests. Health Director General Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah said the MOH focuses on treating patients and detecting positive cases” - (Malaysiakini, 2020)*

*“Semua kilang yang dibenarkan beroperasi tetapi gagal mematuhi garis panduan Kementerian Kesihatan (KKM) akan berdepan tindakan tegas termasuk penutupan premis. Ketua Pengarah Kesihatan, Datuk Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah menegaskan, semua kilang tersebut wajib mematuhi prosedur operasi standard (SOP) yang ditetapkan bagi memastikan tiada penularan jangkitan COVID-19 dalam tempoh terdekat” -(Astro Awani, 2020)*

**Translation:** *"All factory that are allowed to operate but fail to comply with the guidelines on the Ministry of Health (MOH) will face decisive action including the shutdown of the premises. Health Director-General Datuk Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah stressed that all of these factories were obliged to comply with the*

*standard operating procedure (SOP) set to ensure that there was no contagion of the COVID-19 infection in the near future"-(Astro Awani, 2020)*

### *Health Severity*

The last frame of "Health Severity" shows an overall of 1,882 articles having such a nature for both Malaysiakini and Astro Awani portals. Of the total, Malaysiakini has 572 articles, while Astro Awani has a total of 1,310 articles. According to Dan & Raupp (2018), Health Severity means the impact of health risk on human life as a whole. Here is a frame of Health Severity, quoting from both the Malaysiakini and Astro Awani portals:

*"Sejak kes-kes terawal COVID-19 dilaporkan di Malaysia, orang awam menyuarakan keinginan mereka untuk tahu tempat tinggal atau tempat kerja mereka yang didapati positif wabak itu. Gesaan itu semakin kuat dengan jumlah kes yang semakin meningkat, dan khabar angin berkenaan lokasi yang telah dijangkiti virus itu mula tersebar. Ketika ditanya berkenaan perkara ini, Ketua Pengarah Kesihatan Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah bertegas mengatakan kakitangan perubatan tidak boleh mendedahkan maklumat seumpama itu. Jika pesakit mahu dedahkan (maklumat mereka), mereka boleh berbuat demikian, tetapi kakitangan perubatan (tidak akan melakukannya), katanya - (Malaysiakini, 2020)*

**Translation:** *"Since the earliest cases of COVID-19 are reported in Malaysia, the public voices their desire to know their place of residence or workplace that is found to be positive for the epidemic. The call is stronger with the growing number of cases, and rumors of the virus-infected location began to spread. Asked by this, Health Director-General Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah insisted that medical staff could not disclose such information. If the patient wants to expose (their information), they can do so, but medical staff (will do it), he said"- (Malaysiakini, 2020)*

*"Seorang jurucakap kementerian luar negeri China pada Khamis mendakwa tentera Amerika Syarikat (AS) mungkin telah membawa virus pembunuh coronavirus ke bandar Wuhan sehingga mencetuskan wabak. Ia bagi membalas dakwaan pegawai-pegawai AS yang menuduh negaranya lambat bertindak balas dan tidak telus terhadap penularan virus itu yang pertama kali dikesan di Wuhan akhir tahun lalu. Pada Rabu, Penasihat Keselamatan Negara AS Robert O'Brien mendakwa ketidaksediaan China telah merugikan tempoh dua bulan untuk membendung virus berkenaan daripada merebak. Dalam satu kenyataan menerusi muat naik di laman Twitter yang ditulis dalam Bahasa Inggeris, jurucakap Kementerian Luar China, Zhao Lijian mendakwa AS tidak telus dalam laporannya berhubung jangkitan itu" - (AstroAwani, 2020)*

**Translation:** *"A Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman on Thursday claimed that the US military might have brought the Coronavirus virus to Wuhan town to trigger an epidemic. It was to respond to the allegations of US officials who accused his country of slow response to the virus was first detected at Wuhan later last year. On Wednesday, US National Security Advisor, Robert O'Brien claimed that China's immunity was detrimental to a two-month period to curb the virus from spreading. In a statement through uploads on Twitter sites written in English, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman, Zhao Lijian, claimed that the US was not transparent in its report on the infection" - (Astro Awani, 2020)*



## Conclusion

As a conclusion, this study found that both Malaysiakini and Astro Awani portals are neutral in terms of tone of headlines, and both platforms amounted to an aggregate total of 1,412 articles that can be classified as either "not good" or "not bad". This also suggests that the news headlines do not reflect any particular tone, whether positive or negative, but simply neutral in nature. Besides, the tone of headlines in both online news portals is considered being general and does not favour any interests. This study also revealed that there are four major frames of these two online news portals in terms of their reporting approaches to the COVID-19 pandemic. The first frame is economic consequences, referring to the news that is often framed in terms of real economic effects, in which it has the potential to affect readers. The second frame is human interest, which refers to the news that is framed in terms of the impact on the lives of those affected. The third frame is attribution of responsibility, relating to the news that is framed regarding the problems and risks of a person's actions, and one must be responsible for finding a way out. The fourth frame is health severity, which comprised news that is framed to be related to the impact of health risks on humans' lives. In addition, the major frames displayed in the news are indeed aimed at important information that the public needs to know about COVID-19. In terms of recommendations for researchers on how to conduct research in the foreseeable future, these include a comparative study for major online news sites in several countries to see the different angles in terms of framing displayed in online news. In addition, researchers can also view more online news portals and identify the differences in how a headline is framed in a newspaper.

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