

## Islam-related News Credibility in Selected Nigerian and Malaysian Newspapers

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### Abstract

Accuracy is a value fundamental to journalism, but journalists are often blamed for inaccurate reporting. News is the primary content of newspapers, and it is the responsibility of reporters, editors, and publishers to be well-informed of its formation, since it is they who might eventually be accountable for it. The inaccuracy of the media messages that results in the negative image of Islam and Muslims is related to 'news value' – the extent to which the messages are made more attractive and different from what is presently prevalent in the society. This study aims to investigate the credibility of Islam related news in selected Nigerian and Malaysian newspapers. Two daily newspapers were chosen from each of the selected countries using purposive sampling. *Punch and Vanguard* were selected from Nigeria while *The Star* and *New Straits Times* were selected from Malaysia. News articles that are directly related to Islam or Muslims were gathered from the selected newspapers using internet-based search from November 2015 until September 2016. The newspapers produced 599 different Islam-related articles within this period. The study showed that out of 599 news articles published in the selected newspapers, 306 news articles reported Islam on correspondence, and 224 were reported from news agencies, 30 from other media organizations while the sources of 39 news articles were unidentified. Nigerian newspapers reported more Islam-related news on correspondence than Malaysian newspapers. Meanwhile, Malaysian newspapers reported more stories from news agencies and other media organizations. Journalists should ensure accuracy in their writing through verification of facts and credible sources. Credible reporting sources would help reduce biases in news reporting.

**Keywords:** Accuracy, credibility news content, Nigeria, Malaysia

### Introduction

Second-hand news information might be inaccurate because it has been indirectly sourced. Despite reputation for a series of editing processes in newspapers, at times copies pass

through almost unchanged and finally published (Pearson, Brand, Archbold & Rane (2001). Hrvatin and Petkovic (2004) argued that presently, an effective mechanism to safeguard people's right to obtain quality and credible information is not in place. The newspapers that were established as voice for the voiceless became a victim of media policy which treats journalism and journalistic content as a postscript to commercials. The inaccuracy of the media messages that results in the negative image of Islam and Muslims is related to 'news value' – the extent to which the messages are made more attractive and different from what is presently prevalent in the society (Azweed et al., 2017; Pędziwiatr, 2010).

The world, particularly the Middle East and some other countries, is currently in a quandary of terrorism and events so sanguinary that draws attention of many righteous people. This is because the masses could be left susceptible to the messages disseminated via the media against Islam (Hassan, Azmi, & Abubakar, 2017a). Dart and Allen (2000) explained that many news producers maintain that they are open to good religion-news stories, but few of them demonstrate quality standard of news reporting as they give to covering other aspects of life. Newspapers are one of the significant sources of news, and emerging technology promises even more options for expanding their reach. Nevertheless, the newspapers tend to highlight prejudice in news descriptions of religion.

Some authors argue that the media in developing countries depend largely on the western media as sources of Islam-related news (Hachten, 2005; Asmal, 2008). This might be due to the fact that the media, particularly in developing countries, have limited budget to have access to first-hand news stories. Therefore, this study aims to examine the credibility of Islam related news in selected Nigerian and Malaysian newspapers. The study contributes to the previous related studies on Islam and the media by focusing mainly on the credibility of Islam-related news, particularly in Muslim nations. Since most of the studies on media and Islam focused on Muslim-minority nations, it would be interesting to see how newspapers report Islam-related news in the Muslim-majority nations. This contribution is needed in providing independent and better journalism standards across the world.

### **Media Content Accuracy**

In reporting events, the news media obtain information from reporting sources such as news agencies, correspondence reports, or other forms of media. Reference source in news reporting can be influential and can affect the credibility of news. It refers to the use of other forms of media to background an issue or to verify information. Newspapers are an important reference material for other forms of media, alongside with the Internet for its ease of search and indexing functions. Materials from both newspaper and the Internet can get into news stories on other form of media. However, some media outlets simply duplicate what others have disseminated while others insert slight or huge amount of original information, perhaps contributing current issues to the story which propels it onward in the news agenda. Though news sense of some media outlets may at times coincide, several media outlets consistently draw upon information from other forms of media in their news production (Pearson et al., (2001).

Generally, the newspaper content including editorials and other opinion articles need to be backed by facts and credible sources. Though opinion editorials are meant to influence public opinion, promote critical thinking, they have to be built based on facts and objectivity as a reporter would. Eltantawy (2007) noted that opinion writers require sound research, accurate facts and credible sources to justify their conclusions and claim. This indicates that credibility of news sources is essential for the entire media content disseminated to the audience. The

author argued that the biases and widespread generalizations in many of news stories could be an issue in the increased reliance on parachute journalism. This kind of journalism could be the reason why several journalists rely on weak sources. They mostly distort context and provide a confused and somewhat twisted version of the truth. According to the author, diversification of sources would help eliminate distortions in news reports. Similarly, writers including columnists should ensure accuracy in their writing. They should verify their facts, conduct thorough research and contact credible sources so as to support their arguments.

Pearson et al. (2001) found that news on public radio, public television, and newspapers was more credible than news in other forms of media. News on commercial radio was less credible than news in other forms of media. Main elements of credibility identified in the study were accuracy, consistency, honesty, objectivity, balance, reliability, and lack of bias and sensationalism. Newspapers were viewed as significantly one of the most credible sources of news. This might be due to the fact that they have more time to verify the information and make corrections. Reporters only need to present both sides of the story and leave the audience to judge. Of most public concern is sensationalized reporting. Sensationalism occurs more frequently than bias and inaccuracy, especially in commercial media. Despite the fact that some studies found print news to be more credible than other forms of media, recent studies are likely to suggest that many, but not all applications of bias, inaccuracy and sensationalism can be found in newspapers and may affect audience perception.

Media reporting sources should be authentic and accurate as the society depend on the media for information (Hassan, Azmi, & Abubakar, 2017b). As exemplified by Allen (2014), if journalists use extracts from religious scripture such as the Qur'an and the Bible, they have a responsibility to ensure that sources are checked thoroughly and that any scriptural references are fully explained within the historical and political context in which they were revealed. This is because questions might be raised about whether the agenda of the journalists and the newspapers take superiority over the truth and whether journalists have sufficient knowledge about the subject matter they are reporting. Shadid and Van Koningsveld (2002) also noted that the time-pressure under which reporters constantly operate mostly forces them to resort to the most accessible, mostly secondary sources which are already filled with prejudices. The media usually report to obtaining information from international news agencies (Ibrahim, Mustaffa, Kee, & Ahmad, 2011). This results in an increased amount of negative news.

### **Theoretical Approach**

This study is guided by Framing theory which is accredited to Goffman (1974). Framing theory postulates that meaning resides mainly in the news messages disseminated to the audience. According to the theory, journalists create news frame by the way they chose certain bits of information and overlook others and how they construct news to direct the audience attention toward particular issues. The frame refers to the way in which the story is constructed. It is viewed as the news approach or the perspective of the story. The manner in which the media report news events might influence how the audiences perceive the events because they form their views based on how the story is constructed (Potter, 2012; Freyberger, 2013). As a theory of media effects, Framing theory defines the effect of news approaches on the audience's opinions. News approaches include the interpretive and sociopolitical contexts from which the media cover an event or topic and the news conceptualization within a particular context. The media may decide to cover an event in a negative way, but the consequence is that, the public being exposed to only the negative

phase of the event, will form negative views of such event (Fourie, 2001). For guidance and support of arguments, the suppositions of Framing theory are considered in this study.

### Method

Content analysis is used in this study as it focuses on media content characteristics. It offers specific analysis of media content to yield usable results. Content analysis has numerous advantages. It is used to examine communication through text using both quantitative and qualitative analyses; it enables familiarity with text which can allow for analysis of specific categories from the coded text; and it offers insight into multifaceted model of language use and human thought. Content analysis is considered a comparatively method of research based on evidences, as against Discourse Analysis (Weaver, 2007). Cohen (2007) asserted that “content analysis takes texts and analyses, reduces and interrogates them into summary form through the use of both pre-existing categories and emergent themes in order to generate or test a theory” (p. 476). In this study, only news articles directly related to Islam or Muslims were chosen. The news sources were studied from the text structure of the news and context of reportage. Only Islam-related news articles in the selected newspapers between November 2015 and September 2016 were examined. Purposive sampling method was used to collect relevant articles in the selected newspapers.

Cross-tabulation was used to comparatively analyze the news sources in Nigerian and Malaysian newspapers. Both newspapers have similar historical origin, which can be traced to the British colonial period. Muslims are predominant in both countries, having had earlier interaction with Muslims particularly from Arab nations (Ridgeon, 2013; Saidu, 2014). Since much research on media and Islam focuses on Muslim minority nations, it would be interesting to understand how the media, particularly newspapers, report Islam-related events in the Muslim majority nations. Comparative analysis is recognized to be the most useful way in describing particular phenomena happening in different nations and comparing issues involving two different countries (Gardner et al., 2008). Dart and Allen (2000) also posited that the best way to analyze issues related to news reporting is compare how various media outlets have handled the issues. This study focuses on newspaper articles because newspaper readers have a rational control level over their news reading as they have the chance for news consumption at any time. Although the news articles are qualitative in nature, they can finally be computed to obtain usable results. It is evidently shown in the study conducted by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) that content analysis can be categorized as mainly a quantitative and qualitative research technique.

In this study purposive sampling was used to select the news articles. It refers to a method of non-probability sampling in which the researcher takes judgments regarding the elements to be included in the sample. Purposive sampling allows researchers to choose a sample suitable for the purpose of the study (Neuendorf, 2002; Palys, 2008). Altogether, four newspapers – two from each country – with the highest popularity were chosen for analysis. For comparison purpose, *Punch and Vanguard* were chosen from Nigeria while *The Star* and *New Straits Times* were chosen from Malaysia. The chosen publications are the major national daily newspapers published in English language (Abbott 2011; International Media & Newspapers 2016; Thomas 2014; Answers Africa 2017). Sample of the news articles was collected between November 2015 and September 2016. This period signifies the present situation in the media coverage of Islam, in which relevant events occur across the world. Specific time frame provides manageable size of data for analysis. Given the huge number of news articles, a sampling technique was employed to gather relevant articles for the study. Rather than using

simple random technique, purposive sampling was used. This technique has the advantage of generating samples more suitable for the study.

An internet-based search for news articles on Islam-related events was conducted. The purpose was to discover relevant news articles in the selected newspapers. The internet-based search was performed using the respective websites of the chosen newspapers. The words 'Islam' and 'Muslims' were used as the search keywords. Every news article recognized using this search process was utilized for the purpose of content analysis. Any article that directly reports about Islam or Muslims satisfies the inclusion requirement. All news articles in the selected sample were carefully studied for relevance. The study focused on straight news and feature stories.

Newspaper articles – straight news and feature stories – from the selected newspapers were the units of analysis in this study. A coding procedure was employed to produce valid results. The reporting sources for Islam-related articles were categorized into four: 1) correspondence report, which makes it possible for the newspaper to have direct access to firsthand news story through its reporters; 2) news agency, which serves as a source from which the newspapers purchase news stories, whereby the latter depend on the former to gather and distribute news worthy stories to them; 3) other media organizations, which can either be other electronic or print media that serve as a reporting source for the newspapers; 4) and a situation whereby the source of news is not identified in the newspaper article at all. In this case, the credibility of that particular news might be questioned due to unidentified sources. This is because credibility of the media reporting sources is of enormous importance (Pearson et al., 2001). Differences among the variables were measured using chi-square test with 99 percent confidence level. This information is depicted in the following table.

### **Coding Procedure**

Before the analysis begins, all judgments on the dimension and coding procedures of the variables should be made (Neuendorf (2002). Coding characteristics consisted of the reporting sources stated section 3.0, which comprise correspondence, news agency, other media organizations, and unidentified sources. At the earliest data coding stage in this study, all the collected news articles were summarized. Subsequently, a database was finally generated for easy interpretations. Every single element of the news articles was studied to identify the reporting sources. This allows the researchers to recognize the sources used in reporting Islam-related events. Framing theory supposes that reality is constructed through multifaceted and mutual relations among people and cultural products such as news articles (Eltantawy, 2007). In this study, the data were coded by means of hierarchical coding technique. This coding technique produces sufficient amount of data that can be used to relatively represent information in a few numerals (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). An additional coder was employed to confirm reliability of the data analyzed in this study. To measure the level of agreement between scores on the news reporting sources, Cohen's kappa test was employed for the categorical elements. Cross-tabulation was used to comparatively analyze the reporting sources. According to Michael (2001), cross-tabulation refers to a combined frequency distribution of items using two or more categorical variables.

### **Findings**

The selected newspapers published different amounts of articles within the data-gathering period. Nigerian and Malaysian newspapers published 247 and 352 Islam-related news articles respectively. *Punch* and *Vanguard* from Nigeria produced 103 and 144 articles while

*The Star* and *New Straight Times* from Malaysia produced 193 and 159 articles respectively. The overall of 599 Islam-related articles were considered for analysis. The following table presents detailed information regarding the reporting sources used in the selected newspapers

Table 1

*Reporting sources for Islam-related events in the selected newspapers*

Reporting sources	Nigerian newspapers		Malaysian newspapers		Total
	N	%	N	%	N
Correspondence	153	61.9	153	43.4	306
News agency	48	19.4	176	50.0	224
Other media	12	4.8	18	5.1	30
Unidentified	34	13.7	5	1.4	39
Total	247	100	352	100	599

Chi-square = 0.001\*

As shown in table 1, Nigerian newspapers reported more (61.9%) Islam-related news events using correspondence report against Malaysian newspapers, which reported 43.4%. Nonetheless, Malaysian newspapers reported more Islam-related events (50.0%) from news agencies than Nigerian newspapers, which reported 19.4%. Moreover, Malaysian newspapers reported more Islam-related news (5.1%) from other media than Nigerian newspapers, which reported 4.8%. In this regard, Pearson et al. (2001) found that reference source, which refers to the use of other forms of media to background an issue or to verify information in news reporting can be influential, and can affect credibility of news. It was also evident that while unidentified reporting sources of Islam-related articles in the Nigerian newspapers amounts to 13.7%, only 1.4% of reporting sources were unidentified in Malaysian newspapers. Significant difference ( $P < 0.05$ ) exists between the newspapers on reporting source of Islam-related news events at one percent significance level. For all the articles, 306 were reported using correspondence reports, 224 were reported from news agencies, and 30 were reported from other media organizations while reporting sources of 39 articles were unidentified. Nigerian newspapers reported more Islam-related news using correspondence than Malaysian newspapers. This indicates that Nigerian newspapers have more access to firsthand Islam-related news events. It can also be seen that Malaysian newspapers are more dependent on news agencies and other media organization for news stories. This might be due to lack of enough budgets or correspondents to report firsthand news events, which can possibly influence the media's evaluation of news before publication. Pearson et al. (2001) argued that second-hand news stories might be hideously inaccurate since they have been indirectly sourced. Accuracy is a value fundamental to journalism. But journalists are often blamed for inaccurate reporting. Though news reports may at times coincide, several media outlets draw upon information from other forms of media in their news production. Wang (2003) opined that the use of sources in news reporting is very important in analyzing media content.

### Discussions

In analyzing the reporting sources of Islam-related events from the point of view of framing theory, the findings showed that significant difference exists between Nigerian and Malaysian newspapers. While reporting sources in Nigerian newspapers are more of correspondence

reports, Malaysian newspapers depend largely on news agencies. This shows that the dominant reporting sources in all the newspapers were correspondence and news agency. This might be due to the fact that the media, particularly in developing countries, have limited access to first-hand global news stories (Hachten, 2005; Asmal, 2008). The Malaysian newspapers' dependence on news agencies in this study is consistent with the findings reported by Ibrahim et al. (2011), that greater amount of the news reported by Malaysian newspapers came from international news agencies compared to the Malaysian national news agency – Bernama. Their findings showed that *New Straits Times* reported 67.8% while *The Star* reported 82.2% of their news stories from the international news agencies, including Reuters, Associate Press (AP) and Agence France Presse (AFP). Due to financial restraints on the ability to have international correspondents in foreign countries, these international news agencies deviously become superfluous sources of information for Malaysian newspapers. The authors argued that the judgmental writing found in Malaysian newspapers is not the work of local gatekeepers, but that of the international news agencies.

A survey conducted by Reuters Institute in 2016 concluded that Malaysia has a large number of people saying they do not trust news (71%) most of the time. Majority of these people (61%) expressively perceived the news to be atrociously manipulated by unwarranted political influence. The quality of a news source affects its news value, since one source can be more trustworthy or appropriate than another. The most worrisome issue is that these news agencies report news of their own countries in a more objective way than news in other countries such as Nigeria and Malaysia. In this regard, Ibrahim et al. (2011) argued that majority of the news about foreign countries covered by these international news agencies is indubitably negative while those of the agencies' countries of origin were more positive.

Studies showed that the international news provided by the news agencies, particularly Reuters, AFP and AP is more of negative and neutral directions compared to positive directions. However, local gatekeepers in Malaysia expressed that they have no choice but to use the news stories provided by the news agencies due to their superior materials, images and more wide and current coverage of the events (Faridah & Safar, 2005 cited in Ibrahim, et al., 2011). Maslog and Kim (2006) also concluded that the media are predominantly concerned with the coverage of conflict perhaps due to the fact that the international news agencies, from which the media mainly obtain their news, are serving their own local western audience.

In recent years, Third World countries have made several efforts to introduce an international news gathering and dissemination system by expanding their national agencies, but expenses were huge. In addition, the western agencies are dominant, and they are known for their unidirectional approach in disseminating information to the Third World countries. Also the unjustifiable conflict among the Third World countries prevents them from realizing the intended collaboration in news exchange as an alternative to the dominant and distorted news content from the western media. In fact, the over-dependence of many media outlets on the news agencies for news and information has led to reflection of the distorted content. In this regard, Thussu (2011) stated that if the negative depiction of Islam is only intended for the western audience, it would have been less problematic, since the west has a long history of viewing Islam as a threat.

International news agencies, which are technologically advanced, gather news in terms of global perspective and distribute the news to the local media which are technologically dependent. In this situation, the news consumers are more likely to access second-hand, perhaps distorted or western perspective news. Therefore, it is a triangular method of

information dissemination considering the indirect relationship between the reporting source and the news consumers (Anatsui & Adekanye, 2014). Some of the stories published in the selected newspapers are mere duplications of the news content provided by the agencies. It can be argued that the international news agencies dictate the news content and assume the role of agenda-setters in the global news. This situation might have the possible consequence of influencing news reporting of Islam and journalism standard in the selected countries in general.

A study conducted by Okeke (2012) indicated that Nigerian newspapers might follow the Malaysian newspapers' trend, predominantly obtaining their news and information from the international news agencies. The study found that 59.6% of the stories published in Nigerian newspapers were sourced from International news agencies while 30.3% were obtained using correspondence reports. Only 3.7% of the published articles were from regional and national news agencies, including News Agency of Nigerian (NAN), Pan-African News Agency (PANA), and Middle East News Agency (MENA). The author argued that Nigerian print media are still inclined toward the services of international news agencies in coverage of events. But Malaysian newspapers depend more on the news agencies compared with Nigerian newspapers according to the present study,

The use of sources in news reporting is very significant in analyzing media content (Wang, 2003). In this study, 37.4% of the articles were reported from news agencies. In this case, the credibility of Islam-related news in the newspapers might be questioned. This is because credibility of the reporting sources is of great importance. Accuracy is a value fundamental to journalism. Generally, the news content needs to be backed by facts and credible sources. Though feature articles are meant to educate, illuminate, or entertain (Oyero, 2006), they have to be constructed based on facts and credibility. Credible reporting sources would help reduce biases in news. Eltantawy (2007) suggested that writers should ensure accuracy in their writing through verification of facts and credible sources.

### **Conclusion**

This study examined the credibility of Islam-related news in selected Nigerian and Malaysian newspapers. The findings reported in this study indicated that the dominant reporting sources for Islam-related news in the selected newspapers were news agencies and correspondence reports. While correspondence report is the dominant reporting source in Nigerian newspapers, Malaysian newspapers depend largely on international news agencies for Islam-related news. As a result of reliance on the international agencies, most newspapers use the same headlines and even present the same news content. This is what Pearson et al. (2001) simply called "duplication" of what other media have disseminated. Reporting sources should be authentic and accurate. Though information from news agencies might be authentic or otherwise, questions might be raised about whether the journalists have sufficient knowledge about the manipulated information they disseminate, or perhaps it is consistent with the agenda set by that particular media outlet. Almost half of the Islam-related news published in the selected newspapers was sourced from international news agencies. Using Framing theory, this study provides a better understanding of media framing by investigating the credibility of Islam-related news stories. Journalists should ensure accuracy in their writing through verification of facts and credible sources. Credible reporting sources would help reduce biases in news reporting.

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