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Media Framing on Covid-19 Pandemic in Malaysian and Indonesian Newspapers

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Abstract

The Corona or Covid-19 outbreak has been much more prominent in media coverage than other recent epidemics. Media often adopt the frames in covering news and dealing with sources. This study aims to find out which frames are dominant during Covid-19 pandemic coverage from January 25 to June 10, 2020 in Indonesian and Malaysian newspapers. Two leading newspapers were selected as samples: Berita Harian represents reporting from Malaysia and Kompas represents reporting from Indonesia. This study uses a deductive analysis approach that involves predefining certain frames (alarming, reassuring, or neutral) as content analytic unit to confirm the degree to which these frames appear in the news. This study concludes that Berita Harian reported the Covid-19 pandemic with all the three frames (alarming, reassuring, and neutral) where a neutral frame is the most dominant (39.3%) followed by alarming (32.10%) and reassuring (28.60%). Meanwhile, the framing of Kompas' reporting on the Covid-19 pandemic was dominated by an alarming tone (83.30%) and neutral (16.70%) while the reassuring tone was absent from the newspaper. This study found that militaristic language was largely absent both in Berita Harian and Kompas. The occasional metaphor used to describe the Covid-19 pandemic is 'dangerous disease'.

Keywords: Media Framing, Corona, Covid-19, Malaysia, Indonesia

Introduction

The ongoing outbreak of the novel coronavirus has received extensive media coverage that can tell us how uncertainty in the face of such an epidemic can all too easily breed fear. Media coverage sets the agenda for public debate. While the news doesn't necessarily tell us what to think, it tells us what to think about. In doing so, the news signals what issues merit our attention. Research has consistently shown that when issues receive extensive media coverage and are prominent in the news agenda, they also come to be seen as more important by members of the public.

The Corona outbreak has been much more prominent in media coverage than other recent epidemics, including Ebola. For example, a Time Magazine study has shown that there were 23 times more articles in English-language printed news covering the coronavirus outbreak in its first month compared to the same period for the Ebola epidemic in 2018 (Ducharme, 2020).

Fear has played a particularly vital role in news coverage of the coronavirus outbreak. Reports first started to circulate about the mysterious new illness since January 12 2020 and the coverage expanded to almost 100 mainstream English-language newspapers worldwide within a month, in which it collectively published 9,387 stories about the outbreak with some 1,066 articles mentioned "fear" or "afraid" (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020).

A study by Wahl-Jorgensen (2020) reported that some tabloid newspapers were more likely to use fear-inducing language, for example, "deadly disease" while many stories offered local angles by reporting on fears in local areas affected by the outbreak. Other reports localized the story by discussing the impact on Chinese-owned businesses. Several stories, by contrast, sought to temper fears and provided reassurance.

Research on coverage of earlier disease outbreaks showed a similar emphasis on fear. For example, in the case of the SARS epidemic in 2003, a study found that "the main conceptual metaphor used was SARS as a killer" (Wallis & Nerlich, 2005,). Along the same lines, another study found that media coverage of the H1N1 epidemic in The Netherlands was marked by the "alarming" tone of its coverage (Vasterman & Ruigrok, 2013). Like the coronavirus, these historical outbreaks were characterized by uncertainty, breeding fear and panic.

It is interesting to look at the comparison of news coverage of seasonal influenza, to put these observations into perspective, which is estimated by the World Health Organization to kill 290,000 to 650,000 people around the world every year (WHO, 2018). But since January 12, 2020, newspapers around the world have published just 488 articles on seasonal influenza without mentioning of the coronavirus (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020). In sharp contrast to coverage of this novel coronavirus, fewer than one in ten stories about flu (37 out of 488) mentioned fear or similar phrases (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020).

The prominence of fear as a theme in reports of the coronavirus suggests that much of the coverage of the outbreak is more a reflection of public fear than informative of what is actually happening in terms of the spread of the virus. Yet at a time rife with misinformation, fake news and conspiracy theories, it is worthwhile remaining alert to the dangers of this contagious emotion in the face of uncertainty. Former US president Franklin D Roosevelt famously said that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself" (Franklin D. Roosevelt, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1933)

After the outbreak of a new virus it is very difficult to predict how fast it will spread, how serious the symptoms will be and how many people might die. In general, experts discussed several different

options, but the media have a bias in favour of the worst-case scenarios, as these have a higher news value (House of Commons, 2011: 3). Research on coverage of avian flu in US newspapers showed that worst-case scenarios were present in over 40% of all articles (Dudo et al., 2007).

During a pandemic, both health authorities and scientific experts play important roles as sources of the news (Shih et al., 2011). The experts have access to scientific knowledge while the authorities are in charge of public health policy. As sources they are deemed trustworthy, reliable and responsible (Albæk, 2011; Boyce, 2006; Clarke, 2008). However, experts with an alarming message are even more attractive for the media (Dearing, 1995; Sandman, 1997). The virologists, who are in a concerted campaign warning about the potential hazards of a new pandemic after a new outbreak of bird flu in 2005, received worldwide media attention (Nerlich and Halliday, 2007).

This study offers material for such a comparative review of the role of major newspapers in Indonesia and Malaysia in framing Corona pandemic. This article presents the research results with the central research question: How did the newspapers in Indonesia and Malaysia cover the Corona outbreak in 2020? Before formulating more specific research questions, the role of the media in covering and framing risks and epidemics is explored.

Pandemic Framing

Media often adopt the frames their sources have to offer, but in covering news and dealing with sources journalists also adapt and develop frames. Framing, therefore, can be defined as the outcome of negotiation processes between the media and their sources (Vasterman et al., 2008; Vliegthart & van Zoonen, 2011). In general, frames are used to structure the news story in terms of causes, predictions, solutions and responsibilities (Scheufele, 1999). Frames also have a tone of voice, supported by the use of metaphor and fearful or reassuring words (Lakoff, 2004).

News coverage on viruses typically uses military metaphors (Chiang & Duann, 2007; Larson et al., 2005; Williams Camus, 2009). The metaphors used to frame diseases have become a prominent subject illustrating the impact of the 'linguistic turn', the emergence of 'cognitive linguistics' (Turner, 2001). Emphasizing the interdependence of language and stigma, a metaphor has been used by the media in reporting disease since the 1970s (Sontag, 2001). For example, the 'war on cancer' that the American president Richard Nixon declared in the 1970s (Cox News Service, 2002; Lerner, 2003). Since then, military metaphors have remained abundant on news coverage on viruses (Chiang & Duann, 2007; Larson et al., 2005; Camus, 2009). Consequently, media coverage on epidemics can be quite alarming. Coverage of avian flu and SARS was often sensationalist, focusing on worst-case scenarios and full of emotionally charged language (Berry et al., 2007; Washer, 2004).

Yet, such militaristic metaphors have drawbacks. Among sufferers, they promote shame and guilt (Vasterman & Ruigrok, 2013). Military thinking concentrates on the physical, sees control as central, and encourages the expenditure of massive resources to achieve dominance (Annas, 1995: 746). They can even arguably make it easier to 'sacrifice people and their rights' (Ross, 1986: 18). One result of these concerns about military metaphors has been a series of calls to replace them with more attractive alternative metaphors (Vasterman & Ruigrok, 2013; Annas, 1995; Sherwin, 2001).

However, in the study of UK media framing of the 2003 SARS epidemic, Wallis and Nerlich (2005) found that, surprisingly, the militaristic language was largely absent, as was the judgmental discourse of plague. Rather, the main conceptual metaphor used was SARS as a killer. SARS as a killer was a single unified entity, not an army or force. Other studies on the A/H1N1 pandemic and the media, however, showed mixed results. A study of a Brazilian TV news programme showed that it

contributed to 'a scenario of panic' (Da Silva & Massarani, 2010). An analysis of British newspapers concluded that there was little evidence of the media 'overhyping' the pandemic (Hilton & Hunt, 2011). Whereas the overall tone was neutral and not 'alarmist', the media did pay a lot of attention to the flu. This is confirmed by a study of Australian TV news on the epidemic: coverage was in general 'non-alarmist', but 63.4% of all television news statements related to the seriousness of A/H1N1, creating the impression of a serious threat (Fogarty et al., 2011). On the other hand, an analysis of newspaper coverage of swine flu in Australia showed that the 'deadly swine flu' narrative prevailed with a combination of alarming and reassuring messages (Holland and Blood, 2010).

It is relevant to examine the characteristics of media coverage, as it influences public perception of risks, and this study aims to find out which frames are dominant in Indonesian and Malaysian newspapers. For this research the following research questions are formulated:

RQ2: What was the mainframe (alarming, reassuring or neutral) used by Indonesian and Malaysian newspapers in reporting Corona pandemic?

RQ3: What was the share of alarming, reassuring or neutral statements in Indonesian and Malaysian newspapers in reporting Corona pandemic?

RQ1: What metaphor used by Indonesian and Malaysian media (military or non-military) in reporting Corona pandemic?

Methods

Two leading newspapers from Indonesia and Malaysia were selected as samples. Berita Harian was chosen to represent Malaysia and Kompas newspaper represents Indonesia. The reason for the selection of these two newspapers is because they both have similar characteristics, both of which use the national language of the country, and both are one of the largest, and most respected newspapers in their respective countries.

Berita Harian, that was established on 1st July 1957 is one of Malaysia's major Bahasa Malaysia daily owned by the New Straits Times Press, a Malaysian conglomerate of publishing companies, controlled by Media Prima (Advertisingmy, 2014). It is a newspaper which is available throughout the week with the Sunday edition called Berita Minggu. Berita Harian is circulated up to 300,000 copies every day and is read by 1.4 million readers who are in the age group of 15 years and above with an average household income of RM5,195 (USD 1,241), with the largest group of readers are above 30 years old (Nielsen, 2018). It presents news and issues from domestic, the region and the world, featuring a wide spectrum of topics from sports to politics and religion (SPH, 2017).

Surat kabar Kompas began publication in 1965 in Jakarta and since 1969, it has been the largest national Indonesian language newspaper (Kompas, 2014). With a circulation of an average of 500,000 copies per day and reached 600,000 copies for the Sunday edition, Kompas is not just the largest circulating printed media in Indonesia, but also it is the largest circulating newspaper in Southeast Asia (Kompas, 2014). Like many major daily newspapers, Kompas is divided into three major parts: a front section containing national and international news, a business and finance section, and a sports section. Both Berita Harian and Kompas manage their online portal news that contains updated news and the digital version of the paper which was the source of data collection in this research.

The period of this study was from January 25 to June 10, 2020. This timeframe is selected to encompass a period from the first case of Covid-19 in Malaysia, when the Malaysian government announced the first case of Covid-19 on January 25, while Indonesia on March 2, until the two countries lifted the coronavirus restrictions in early June. Malaysia lifted the restriction on June 10

and Indonesia on June 4 (in Jakarta). The Malaysian government decided to take lockdown or quarantine measures nationally on March 18. Unlike Malaysia, Indonesia did not take a lockdown policy but large-scale social restrictions (PSBB), or partial lockdown (Sutrisno, 2020). The capital Jakarta, the first epicenter of the Covid-19 in Indonesia, was the first region to impose the PSBB on April 10 (Sutrisno et al, 2020).

Relevant articles from the two target publications were identified using the search features in their respective websites (<https://beta.bharian.com.my/> and <https://www.kompas.com/>) and the Google search engine, adopting the search terms 'Corona Virus' or 'Covid-19'. Each article was selected based on two inclusion criteria. The first criterion was that Covid-19 was the primary focus of the article. The second criterion was that the article was published in the regular newspaper column. Hence, all letters on Covid-19 or mentions of it in TV guides were excluded. Using these criteria, the study identified 56 articles from Berita Harian and 48 from Kompas bringing a total of 104 articles analysed.

Coding Procedure

The sentence or statement is used as the basic unit for analysis of the newspaper. To measure the alarming tone of the news coverage, three categories were defined: news can be alarming, neutral or reassuring. In general, a report is alarming when the situation is defined in terms of risk and hazard. For example: 'WHO raises pandemic alert level; more Covid-19 cases feared.' As such, warnings for severe outbreaks are alarming as are updates on the number of positive cases, hospitalizations and fatalities. For example: "The number of Covid-19 positive cases has reached a certain number" or "Corona cases have penetrated a certain number". The same goes for descriptions of the virus as 'extremely contagious' or 'deadly'.

A report is reassuring when it puts more emphasis on the number of patients who recovered than the number of people who are positively infected or the number of patients who died. A report is also reassuring when risks related to Covid-19 are put in a broader perspective that downscales the risk (also because of effective preparations by health authorities). For example: 'Covid-19 is like a regular flu.' Statements are neutral when they contain both perspectives, and when the tone is undecided.

Analysis

This study uses a deductive analysis approach that involves predefining certain frames (alarming, reassuring, or neutral) as a content analytic unit to confirm the degree to which these frames appear in the news. Through a deductive approach, three types of frames were utilized to assess the degree of these three frames are visible in the articles of the two newspapers.

In this study, the researchers performed the analysis separately (read and code the articles and comments independently) and constantly discussed the findings and obtained consensus to increase the validity (Coman & Cmeciu, 2014).

Result and Discussions

Before Indonesia and Malaysia announced the first case of COVID-19, there was no visible media attention to news about the Coronavirus. The average amount of news about the Coronavirus on the two newspapers only covers less than 10% of the total news items. News about the Corona

pandemic is still largely coming from international news that occurred in other countries, especially in China and was reported by most media with an alarming tone.

In early January, there were no positive cases of Corona yet both in Indonesia and Malaysia and therefore no significant and concrete steps had been taken by the government to overcome coronavirus outbreak (Mulyanto & Firdaus, 2020). During this period, Kompas and Berita Harian generally covered the preparations of the two governments in case the Covid-19 pandemic would appear in both countries. For example, on January 24, the day before the first case was announced in Malaysia, Berita Harian reported on the preparation of the Malaysian government in the economy if a pandemic hits the country:

Kementerian Hal Ehwal Ekonomi (MEA) akan bekerjasama dengan Kementerian Kesihatan dalam menangani wabak virus corona (2019-nCoV) secara berkesan melalui pembiayaan pembangunan bagi meningkatkan kesediaan negara untuk menghadapi keadaan kecemasan dan wabak. Menurut Menteri, Datuk Seri Mohamed Azmin Ali, MEA memandang berat wabak yang menyerupai penyakit pneumonia yang menjejaskan China dan beberapa negara lain di rantau ini (The Ministry of Economic Affairs (MEA) will work with the Ministry of Health in tackling the corona virus outbreak (2019-nCoV) effectively through development funding to increase the country's readiness to deal with emergencies and epidemics. According to its Minister, Datuk Seri Mohamed Azmin Ali, the MEA is concerned about an epidemic resembling pneumonia affecting China and several other countries in the region) ("MEA Bekerjasama," 2020).

In this article, Berita Harian used the expressions "to increase the country's readiness to deal with emergencies and epidemics" and "MEA is concerned about an epidemic resembling pneumonia". The use of the words "emergencies" and "concerned" indicated that the Daily News used an alarming frame in reporting the Covid-19 pandemic occurring in other countries. The Kompas newspaper on the same day published an analysis article entitled: "*Soal Wabah Virus Corona, Mengapa Sejumlah Virus Berbahaya Muncul dari China?*" (About the Corona Virus Outbreak, Why Are Some Dangerous Viruses Emerging From China?) (Shalihah, 2020). Like Berita Harian, Kompas newspaper also delivered the news about the Covid-19 pandemic that occurred in other countries by using an alarming frame using the word "dangerous virus".

Media in Indonesia and Malaysia began to pay more attention to the international news of Coronavirus when on 23 January 2020, the central government of China imposed a lockdown in Wuhan and other cities in Hubei province in an effort to quarantine the center of an outbreak of coronavirus disease. The Wuhan lockdown attracted media attention in Indonesia and Malaysia because the two governments were planning and preparing to pick up their citizens in Wuhan after the Corona case was getting higher in the city (Bernama, 2020; Kanyakumari, 2020). The Malaysian government brought home the first group of Malaysians from Wuhan, China on February 4 and Indonesia on February 2, 2020 ("Two Malaysian," 2020; Soeriaatmadja, 2020). Meanwhile, the two newspapers in general have shown alarming messages in their international news about the increasing number of dead or infected patients abroad.

Berita Harian and Kompas began to pay attention to the Covid-19 case more like a domestic issue after the governments of the two countries announced the first case in their respective countries. The Malaysian government announced the first case on January 25, or 5 weeks earlier than

Indonesia on March 2. From the announcement of the first case to the end of social restrictions in Malaysia and Indonesia, Berita Harian and Kompas showed differences in framing the pandemic coverage. Kompas' reports were dominated by alarming frame while Berita Harian reported the pandemic in a more neutral frame.

During the period from 24 January to 16 June, as many as 83.3% of news items in Kompas newspaper were framed with an alarming tone, 16.7% in a neutral, and none in a reassuring tone. In Berita Harian, news about the Covid-19 pandemic was mostly framed in a neutral (39.3%), alarming (32.1%), and reassuring tone (28.6%). The alarming frame is used by Kompas in reporting the Covid-19 pandemic by focusing attention on the number of people infected with the virus which continues to grow every day. Headlines with the same pattern - focusing on the number of positive cases, hospitalizations, and fatalities - tend to be repeated. For example, Kompas' headline in April: "1,677 People Infected with Covid-19, When Will the Corona Virus in Indonesia End?" (Ratriani, 2020). Likewise, news leads that are always repeated and have the same pattern. For example: "The number of positive cases of coronavirus infection in Indonesia continues to grow. As of Wednesday (1/4/2020), the number of patients infected with Covid-19 in Indonesia reached 1,667 cases." (Ratriani, 2020).

Berita Harian did not report statistics about positive cases and fatalities as something that it wanted to emphasize. Statistical reports did not become an important reporting pattern in the pandemic coverage. Neutral frames were used more by Berita Harian in reporting the pandemic by not displaying information that can cause concern among the public even after the first case was announced. For example, in the news entitled "Don't trigger panic - TPM", followed by the subsequent news leads:

"Timbalan Perdana Menteri, Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, hari ini meminta rakyat tidak menyebarkan berita palsu mengenai penularan koronavirus 2019 (2019-nCoV) di beberapa negara termasuk Malaysia ketika ini. Beliau berkata, penyebaran berita palsu boleh menimbulkan suasana panik dan akan lebih memburukkan keadaan" (Deputy Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr. Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, today asked the people not to spread false news about the transmission of coronavirus 2019 [2019-nCoV] in several countries including Malaysia at this time. He said, spreading fake news can create panic and will worsen the situation (Bernama, 2020).

In the next section of the news, in the body until the closure, the article did not mention examples of fake news regarding the transmission of the Coronavirus that have circulated previously. Making mention and explaining the circulated false news means to take part in spreading fake news in the mainstream media that can cause panic. This reporting patterns make news about the Covid-19 pandemic in Berita Harian become more neutral.

Table 1: Summary of newspapers' framing on Corona pandemic

Newspapers	Alarming	Neutral	Reassuring	Total
Kompas	40	8	-	48
	83,30%	16,70%	-	100%
Berita Harian	18	22	16	56
	32,10%	39,30%	28,60%	100%

The framing of the Covid-19 pandemic in Berita Harian tends to be more even and balanced because it presents news that represents the three framings. On the other hand, Kompas' reporting is not balanced because it is more dominated by alarming frames, there are only a small number of news stories with a neutral frame while reassuring frames are absent.

This study found that, surprisingly, militaristic language as the judgmental discourse of plague, was largely absent both in Berita Harian and Kompas. Words such as 'war' or 'battle' are often used by the media in the past to describe the efforts of various parties in overcoming the pandemic is not found. In the absence of military metaphors, there is also no main conceptual metaphor used for Covid-19 pandemic in Kompas and Berita Harian The current expression is rarely used to describe the Covid-19 pandemic as a 'dangerous disease'.

The way the Covid-19 mitigation agency announced the virus updates in the typical daily press briefing aired on television encourages media to exaggerate the alarming tone. The agency's spokesperson updates daily about the list of the cumulative number of people who have tested positive for Covid-19 without removing people who have recovered from the list. In this way, the number of infected people will always increase, and will never decrease. This information is misleading because the media then finally reports an ever-increasing rise in positive cases of Covid-19. This prompted Kompas to raise a question in its headline "When will the Corona Virus in Indonesia End?" (Ratriani, 2020). In this case, a study stated that the government must change its approach of communication so that messages become clearer and more transparent (JKSG, 2020).

Pandemic is a special story for the media because the fear of a deadly contagion is rooted deeply in the society. New contagious diseases of Covid-19 frighten many nations because they are unknown and unpredictable, at least in the beginning. But over time, the facts showed that the number of people who recovered is far more than the number of people who died. In June, 34 times more people have recovered from Covid-19 than those who died worldwide (Sedgwick, 2020). In Indonesia, the number of people who have recovered is 9 times (Kompas, 2020). Even in Malaysia, the number recovered is almost 56 times that of those who died (Prakash, 2020). However, most media in Indonesia did not choose to report the pandemic in a reassuring frame, for example by reporting more on the increase in the number of people who are recovering instead of reporting the increase in the number of infected people every day.

As a credible media, Kompas seems to be following the pattern of most other mass media in Indonesia, spearheaded by a TV news channel that hypes pandemic events in an alarming tone. The media even present news stories tend to be structured to resemble drama or, more specifically, melodrama. In this way, the media intentionally want to exaggerate the fear in society by cherry-picking certain stories with dramatic elements and then keep on repeating them, for example,

Community refusal of Covid-19 patient bodies to pass through or be buried in their area, family force taking of the bodies from the hospital, family rejection to conduct funeral protocols for dead members of Covid-19 patients. The use of this drama provides public with sensations and emphasis on feeling rather than on reason.

Kompas newspaper also tries to present a drama in its news. For example, one of them, in the news entitled: "Desperate to Open Plastics and Wash Corona Infected Bodies, 15 Hamlet Residents in Sidoarjo Are Positive for Covid-19" (Faizal, 2020). In the lead-in, Kompas said as follows: "Dozens of residents of a hamlet in Waru District, Sidoarjo Regency, East Java, tested positive for Covid-19. Residents have a history of opening crates, opening plastic wrappers, and even bathing bodies that have tested positive for Covid-19. (Faizal, 2020).

The government and the media should be a source of education and solutions for the community in dealing with the Corona Virus. Instead of being too busy delivering updates on the number of infected people in a daily press briefing, as well as tips that are repeated every day (wearing a mask, keeping your distance, washing your hands with soap) the government should also deliver messages about prevention so as not easily infected. For example, what can be done to improve immunity and antibody, what foods should be consumed, or simple tips such as the right way to sunbathe in the morning to increase immunity. Such information is urgently needed to combat panic due to information about the pandemic from unclear sources.

Conclusions

This study attempts to answer three research questions which include the mainframes used by Indonesian and Malaysian newspapers in reporting the Corona pandemic, the share of each frame, and also the metaphors used in the newspapers. Based on the results of research and discussion as stated earlier, this study concludes that Berita Harian reports the Covid-19 pandemic event by using all the three framings (alarming, reassuring, and neutral) where neutral framing is the most dominant (39.3%) followed by alarming (32.10%) and reassuring (28.60%). Meanwhile, the framing of Kompas' reporting on the Covid-19 pandemic was dominated by an alarming tone (83.30%) and neutral (16.70%) while the reassuring tone was absent from the newspaper. With regard to metaphors, this study found that, surprisingly, militaristic language as the judgmental discourse of plague, was largely absent in both Berita Harian and Kompas. The occasional metaphor used to describe the Covid-19 pandemic is "dangerous disease" but this metaphor is presented in relatively small numbers.

This study recommend that the government and the media should be a source of education and solutions for the community in dealing with the Corona Virus. Media do not exaggerate the risk and overreacting to the threat especially after more scientiests revealed that most of the population is not at risk of dying if they catch Covid-19 and efforts should be focused on protecting those who are vulnerable, while letting everyone else get on with their lives as normal (Wright, 2020). Instead of being too busy delivering updates on the case number, messages about preventive action of improving immunity and antibody is essential and urgently needed to combat panic.

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