



## Allah versus God! Influences of News Reporting on Contents

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### ABSTRACT

Reporting on sensitive or controversial issues, particularly race and religion, has always been challenging for media practitioners. With a plural society background like Malaysia has, the media practitioners have to put more concern in the contents of their news reports. The consideration includes journalists as individuals, media routines, organisation, extra media forces to the ideological, sociocultural forces as presented in the Hierarchy of Influence model by Shoemaker & Reese (2014). The paper aims to study how the Malaysian mainstream media report on controversial issues in the newspapers from the hierarchy of influence perspective. Through a qualitative method, in-depth interviews were conducted among editors and journalists from The Star and Utusan Malaysia to obtain their experience in reporting such issues. Their responses were then analysed using Nvivo through the categorization of themes from the hierarchy of influences. The results show that there are connections between all levels that contributed to the shaping of news contents particularly on controversial issues like the translation of the word 'God' to 'Allah' case. This shows that Malaysia is unique and different when reporting on such issues as these influences will help to keep and maintain the peace and harmony in the plural society.

**Keywords:** *controversial news reporting, 'Allah' issue, hierarchy of influence, plural society, reporting influence, media contents.*

### INTRODUCTION

Media reporting in the world today has gone through a huge transformation in terms of the news gathering process, the medium and tools used in obtaining information. The role of media maintains the same as much as the formatting of what to have and what not have in the news stories. Despite all those, what makes a story valueable and worth reading will always be the content.

Studies have always make contents as variable to examine on various aspects such as the processing of news stories, the symbolic environment, the system of representation the variety of range of theoretical inferences in shaping it and the effects and implications on a society (Reese and Lee). Although the inferences in shaping the stories have been an evergreen favourite study, the shaping of contents of a controversial issue in a plural society like Malaysia could contribute to the richness of knowledge of the contents studies.

Relating to that, this paper intends to show how the Hierarchy of Influences model, founded by Shoemaker & Reese (1996) became the shaping factors of the contents in the translation of word 'God' to 'Allah'; a controversial religious issue that started since year 2010 until present. Although religious issues itself has brought pressure to a society, reporting on it is even more challenging in a plural society like Malaysia.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Hierarchy of Influence and Malaysian Media**

In *Mediating the Message*, Shoemaker & Reese (2014) have analysed the factors that shape media content, resulting in the formation of the hierarchy of influences model. It helps to link the relationships of individual-level professionals and their routines, the organisations they work for, the institutions in the same field, the social systems within that they use and help to maintain (Shoemaker & Reese, 2016).

In this paper, it is significant to observe on how these influences have been shaping the contents in the Malaysian media provided that the society comes from a plural background living together under the same Constitution in peace and harmony (Safiyah Ahmad Sabri, 2018). With the fact that Islam is the official religion of the Federation, the 'Allah' word issue is a definite challenge task in media reporting by the media practitioners.

As a matter of fact, through a stable politics in ruling the country, there is a need to handle diplomatically when it involves issues such as fragile social structure, extremist religious groups, national security and the role of media (Hasny, 2004). Because of that, Malaysia requires certain or specific legislative tools such as the Internal Security Act (ISA), Official Secret Act (OSA), Sedition Act (SA), and the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) to maintain peace and harmony in the society (Mohd Azizuddin & Dian Shah, 2010).

The nature of the ownership of the media in Malaysia is also unique. The newspaper ownership for instance, has never been separated from the political and business people who has close connection with political leaders and groups (Jamilah Ahmad,

2016). Nik Norma (2007) found in her study that the environmental coverage in Malaysia maintains in two ways; eliminating environmental stories for other sensational stories; and not reporting at all environmental issues for the sustainability of the harmony of the multi-ethnic interaction in the society. Because of that, it is not surprising when the ownership of the mainstream media in Malaysia leads the control over the contents presented to the public.

The multi-racial and multi-religion background of the media practitioners as well contributes to the environmental factor in shaping the news stories in Malaysia (Safiyah Ahmad Sabri, 2018). Even when they work for the media agencies to achieve the organisations' goals and objectives, the pressure is there when it comes to reporting controversial issues such as the 'Allah' word issue especially when the contents required is against their faith principles.

The working environment too plays the influence in shaping a news content (Shoemaker & Reese, 2016). With the transformation of media channels especially the rapid use of the social media, media practitioners have to adapt with the nature of obtaining news through the online platform. In his study, Amjad Safori (2018) found that some interviewees depend on social media when they could directly interact with public figures or authorities to obtain information on sensitive issues such as political, religious and racial issues. This is very much similar to what they normally do when sharing information among other media practitioners in obtaining information.

### **'God' to 'Allah' Issue**

The 'Allah' word issue has started been filed in the Courts in 2009 by The Herald. In 2008, the Malaysian cabinet banned The Herald, a Catholic newspaper for the usage of 'Allah' in their publications. This is due to the justification of that the word 'Allah', refers to God in the religion of Islam and that the usage may touch the sensitivity and creating confusion among the Muslim community in the country (The Sun, January 4, 2008).

At the beginning, Judge Lau Bee Lan allowed the usage of word 'Allah' by The Herald in the Malay section of its newspaper in 2009 (Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani & Dian Diana Abdul Hamed Shah, 2010). The decision changed after an appeal filed by the Home Ministry with the suggestion of 'Allah' is exclusive for Muslims that somehow will erode the position of Islam in the country. Such act would strike the prohibition against propagation of other religions to Muslims. Mohd Azizuddin and Dian continued that however, this will turn into a commit of offence if the usage of word is for Muslim but it would be not if it is for a non-Muslim as there is another option of word translation of God; which is '*Tuhan*'.

At one perspective, it is disappointing when Malaysia has prided itself for being a peaceful country with multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-racial country to many

observers (Neo, 2014). In another, it has become a religious contestation in the country when in Article 11, Islam is stated as the official religion of the Federation under the Constitution. Some criticized the Courts decision as it seems to protect the religious freedom of religious minorities in Malaysia. Questions of how, when, and why the regulation of freedom of religion has become debate topics in many countries (Dian Shah, 2015).

Although the case went through different hearings and decisions by the Court, this case is unique in Malaysia as the Malays are claiming ownership of the word 'Allah' when other countries such as Arab, allow the Christians to use 'Allah' in Arabic to refer to God (Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani & Dian Shah, 2010; Tariq Ramadan, 2012). After more than a decade legal battle, the latest update of the Malaysian High Court decision on March 10 2021 is to grant the Malaysian Christian the right to use the word in their religious practice which also include three other words; 'Kaabah', 'Baitullah' and 'solat' (Ram Anand, 2021 March 11).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study applies a qualitative method through in-depth interview approach. Since the objective involves the contents in media reports, the respondents were among the media practitioners working in the media industry. The interviews were conducted with an editor from The Star and Utusan Malaysia, and ten journalists from both newspapers. The selected respondents have been working in the industry for more than three years experience, and have covered sensitive or controversial issues that relate to race and religion.



**Figure 1: Hierarchy Influence Model**

With a preparation of verified interview questions from a pilot study, interviews were conducted in informal conversational sessions where questions emerge from the immediate context (Patton, 2002). This is to increase the salience and relevance of questions that match to the individuals and the circumstances of the interview. The

response excerpts were then analysed using Nvivo software that match the themes according to the elements in the Hierarchy Influences model as shown in Figure 1; journalists, media routines, organisation, extramedia forces, and ideological, sociocultural forces.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Influences Hierararchy model describes the multiple level of influences that impinge on the media and showing how one level of influence interact with other levels. In this study, it is found that from the individual level that will form a community and society, this level represents the journalists or editors individually. In this level, the journalist is the first person who write the reports with his or her own words before handing over to the editor to decide on whether to amend, publish or not publish at all. In this level, the policies of the news organisations are also part of the factors that form this level. From the interview, respondent A who is a journalist stated that *'it really depends on what the editor has to say.... because no matter how much we think that we have written the best, sometimes it (the contents) will still change depending on the subject matter...'* This is also similar with what other respondents responded particularly when it involves sensitive or controversial issues like the 'Allah' word case.

Both of the editors on the other hand agreed that they have to consider the newspaper owners and stakeholders' interests everytime they have to decide to publish a news story. However, when it involves the 'Allah' word issue specifically, playing the gatekeepers, they already know such stories should be written carefully and most of the time, reporting only on what the Courts or the related authorities have to say. At most times, to play safe, they even have to avoid sources that might contribute personal preferences on the issue.

Some of the respondents even mentioned that when covering on such issues, the challenge is always with what relate to their own beliefs and faith they hold that sometimes contradicts. For example, respondent E said that *'It is difficult when you know... what we understand and learn in our religion is like this... and somehow we need to report on the justifications of a certain decision was made that contradicts with what we believe... it is disappointing.... but anyway, we adapt things with time...'*

The individual level is directly connected to the second level of influence in the hierarchy; media routines. This level describes the practical or daily routine the media practitioners have besides understanding the nature of their work positions and their responsibilities.

From the interviews, almost all respondents agreed that of what ever they decided to write or publish, it really depends on the ownership's interests. Respondent C kept on

repeating this line everytime she ended her sentences '*.....at the end of the day, it depends on the the bosses' interests...'* which in other words, respondent B said that '*... of course we understand that the company has its own vision and mission... and because of that, we know what they want in their news stories...'*

Adding to that matter, the respondents too, learnt that the sources they refer to must stand on the same side as the ownership's interest. Therefore, in reporting such cases, they must be selective in choosing their sources particularly when it involves opinions and recommendations on the issue.

The third layer of the hierarchy represents the organisation's influence. This level involves the larger organisational and occupational contexts. According to the respondents, although the ownership interests play a significant role in shaping the news contents, however the visions and missions of the organisations still represent the larger concept of interests which in this case, refer to the ethnicity as the media organisations are of ethnicity-based ownership.

In this layer, five respondents mentioned that they understood the nature of what their organisations hold on to especially on the ethnicity interest. For instance, respondent G stated that '*We already know the nature of what the company holds... their stands... that's why it is quite challenging when we have to report religious or racial issues...'*. He continued that it is either they have to report according to these interests or the other option is not to report at all.

The extramedia forces or social institutions is located in the fourth layer of the hierarchy. This refers to the larger trans-organisational media field that influence in shaping the contents of the news stories. In this case, this level represents anything that came outside of the media organisation itself that has the ability to contribute to the shaping of contents in the media reports. This level also include the other media organisations, the audience and advertisers.

*'We have to consider the external factors too... the ones we work close with such as the sources, their backgrounds, their interests... you know the advertisers.... who will read these stories.... there are many other factors that we have to consider too...'*. The excerpt was recorded by respondent J, who said that sources are one of the most important people that they have to consider since they are the source of information that become their contents. Most of the time, sources represent their angle of stories in their news stories.

At the same time, other media organisations are also important sources for them. Because it is a norm to share information on news stories, it is vital to have good relationship with other journalists and editors too. According to respondent C, '*Yes... yes... we are very close to each other. We report things together and share a lot... they are*

*our friends and making them enemies will not benefit you at all...'* This shows that the situation describes a kind of mutual agreement among the media practitioners to cooperate in providing information among them.

Finally, the outer layer of the hierarchy refers to the ideological, sociocultural forces or the social system. The ideology refers to the interrelationships of the routine or culture of the society between individuals, groups and institutions that build the identity of the society itself. On the other hand, the social system not only refers to the socio-cultural environment of a society, but also the political and economic structures that shape them.

Concern with the plurality that exist among the people in the Malaysian society, all respondents agreed that that is the most important factor that they have to consider when reporting on controversial issues like the 'Allah' word issue. Even this factor is one of the first things that their companies highlighted as any news report that touched the sensitivity of a certain party will bring harm and damage the reputation of the organisation specifically through legal form.

This is in line respondent H's response, *'We never want to get sued, brought to the Courts, get suspended over sensitive issues coverage you see... no matter what, it is already inside all of us, to consider our multi backgrounds...'* and respondent I's too has the same opinion, *'I think that is already something that every Malaysians know and learnt since school time... we don't hurt each other... we agreed to live in peace so even if the story sells, but some parties are hurt, what's the point? We don't want another May 13 incidence, don't we?'*

From another point of view, this is the rationale of having rules and regulations restricting the contents such as the Internal Security Act, Official Secret Act and Printing Presses and Publications Act when the purpose is to have a control that plays a limit towards publishing or sharing stories with the public and that the plural society background is very important to be considered when reporting on controversial issues. Although there are differences in the people's background and beliefs, the people agreed to cherish the similarities they have in them rather than highlighting the differences that could cause chaos and uncomfortable feelings among them.

## **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

From the discussion of the findings, it is clearly shown that there are interacts or connection within the five levels in the Hierarchy of Influences model in shaping news contents. Although one of the main target of the media organisations is profit, there are many influences that contribute to the contents when reporting on sensitive or controversial issues like the 'Allah' word case. In conclusion, the shaping of contents in the news stories of such issues were influenced by all levels; journalists, media routines,

organisation, extramedia forces, and ideological, sociocultural forces. Even though they were located in different layers of the hierarchy, however each layer has the connectivity to influence the other layers too to colour the identity of a society itself. Because of that, Malaysia is unique when these factors influenced the shaping of the story for the most important reason; which is to maintain peace and harmony in the plural society.

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