

# News Production in Malaysia: A Comparison between Practices in Utusan Malaysia and Sinar Harian.

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*Abstract*— News making in Malaysia involves distinct types of newspaper productions. This paper intends to study the practices in two Malaysian newspapers, namely Utusan Malaysia (UM) and *Sinar Harian* (SH). These newspapers are distinct in their own ways, in that UM is a serious and associated with the state, and SH is privately-owned and non-partisan newspaper. The elements of news production examined include the considerations involved in publishing the front page news, picture selections, the presentation of entertainment news and the comparison of news angle of both newspapers. Generally, the findings indicate that each newspaper follows specific methods of determining news, although, on the surface, there are so-called ‘universal’ methods of news making. Thus, the paper argues that, even when a newspaper is produced in a particular country, news making practices are *specific* and still bound to specific practices within a particular news organization.

**Keywords**—News production, Malaysia, newspaper, Utusan Malaysia, Sinar Harian.

## I. The Malaysian Press

Colonisation and multiracialisation have highly influenced the Malaysian press (Herbert 2001). Newspapers in Malaysia can be argued to be “product[s] of communal divisions” (Syed Arabi and Latiffah 1988: 19) published in four major languages that characterise the three main ethnics in Malaysia – Malay, Chinese and Indian, the fourth being English.

In terms of common issues pertaining to the press in Malaysia, it is characterised by academics as having close affiliation with the state (Brown 2005, Kenyon and Marjoribanks 2007) and concentration of ownership (Mustafa K Anuar 2005, Wang 1998, Zaharom 2004).

The *Rukun Negara* or the national ideology prescribes five beliefs (united nation, democratic society, just society, liberal society and progressive society) and five principles (belief in God, loyalty to king and country, upholding of the constitution, rule of law, and good behaviour and morality). All Malaysians should embrace these principles, and have also been applied to guide mass media as to what their contents should include (Lent 1979: 6).

In the *Rukun Negara*, the emphasis is on religion, and so media content that includes pornographic or other illicit elements is banned (Mohd Azizuddin 2008). This is also the basis of the Malaysian version of ‘Asian values’. Specifically, in the Malaysian context, the notion of Asian values “stress(es) the role of culture, including religion in determining the identity and distinctiveness of the Asian peoples” (Mohd Azizuddin et al. 2009: 92).

It has also been used to inform actions of a democratic government, which must be “acceptable, viable and truly authentic in the Asian context,” and, therefore, “provides the necessary foundation of the assertion of a broad ‘Asian identity’, a political identity that facilitates the legitimisation of a particular form of ‘democracy’” (Mohd Azizuddin et al. 2009: 92) that rejects the Western style of democracy.

In this study, interview with eight journalists of both newspapers (four journalists respectively) and textual analysis are deployed to seek answers on the specificity of the front page news construction of both newspapers, the picture selections, the presentation of entertainment news and the distinct angles of UM and SH.

## II. Findings

### A. The Front Page of UM and SH

As for UM, the considerations of front page news based on several values such as politics, and stories that would benefit the most people. Journalist UM1 said,

We don’t have any system for the selection of news. What we do is, we choose the biggest happening of the day. Our first priority is news from the prime minister or the meeting by the parliament.

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Journalist UM2 added that,

*“Our front page usually tries to help people. So stories that would help the poor such as the increase of price of food and new policies related to that will be highlighted compared to stories on general development of education”.*

Both of the quotes suggest the importance of politics as the main news consideration at UM. As said by Journalist UM3, although the stories highlighted is to help people, still, it has to contain political element (policies) related to the issue. Thus, helping other people is done through steps taken by the government.

The importance of politics as the news value of UM can be associated with its ownership that is affiliated with the government. However, to Journalist UM4, it is the element of politics that able to sell UM.

These are some examples of the front page of UM:

PICTURE 1: AN EXAMPLE OF THE UM FRONT PAGE



This is an example of the front page of UM featuring the ex-Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad

PICTURE 2: AN EXAMPLE OF THE UM FRONT PAGE



This front page features President Obama's visit to Malaysia in April 2014.

As for SH, the front page news of SH is determined mainly by certain types of stories mainly crime and politics (Journalist SH1). As observed and based on the findings of Siti Suriani Othman (2012), SH has changed its focus of lead news selection for its front page that used to be based on community (almost all activities run in villages will get coverage), with its non-partisan political news.

For political stories, Journalist SH2 explained:

*“To SH, we choose front page stories based on who govern the state. If they are the opposition, it will still get coverage because we believe that the government that runs the state always has the best statements and policies for its people”.*

In the selection of crime stories, the textual analysis suggests that crime stories with certain moral values can be published as the front page stories. For example, in one of the front pages on crime, the headline states, ‘Awat Ibu Bapa Cuai’ (A Warning to Careless Parents) that was a follow up news from the previous day's front page that reported on an injured child due to careless attention of the parents. The warning was given by the Minister of Women, Family and Society.

PICTURE 3: AN EXAMPLE OF THE SH FRONT PAGE



Example of SH front page on non-partisan news.

PICTURE 4: ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF THE SH FRONT PAGE



Example of SH front page on the warning of the ministry on children safety.

### B. Picture Published at UM and SH

In terms of picture selection at UM, it is mainly based on general ethical conduct of publishing pictures. Journalist UM3 said that, pictures need to maintain sensitivity of the people. For example, if the story is about an embarrassing account, the picture of the victim should not be published.

Examples of usual pictures published at UM:

PICTURE 5



PICTURE 6



This statement is generally true, because if based on the textual analysis, most pictures on UM are formal and aims to support the news. However, on 2 May 2012, UM chose a highly criticized photograph of a sexual allegation of someone with similar look with an opposition leader. UM is always been seen as a highly reputed Malay newspaper, has damaged its own credible with the publication of the sexual conduct with some blurring effects to the faces of the doer.

With its reputation, it is argued that UM made a big mistake in terms of ethical practice, although to some this would help increase the political support to the state. Even if it does, it caused impairment on the ethics of the newspaper.

PICTURE 7: AN EXAMPLE OF UNETHICAL FRONT PAGE PUBLISHED BY UM



The front page of UM that published what is seen as unethical picture.

While in terms of picture selection at SH, all pictures are ensured to follow ethical conduct of journalism (Journalist SH3). Journalist SH4 added that it is very important to demonstrate high Islamic value which is by ensuring no semi nude pictures are published.

This is indirectly in line with Journalist SH2's arguments who argue that photos at SH are not sensationalized. Journalist SH2 added that,

*"Pictures have a lot of impact to the society, thus they need to conform the national interest. Besides that, sensitivities on other people must be uphold. For example, we always consider the feelings of the victims' families when deciding publishing pictures on accidents."*

Some examples of pictures published at SH:

PICTURE 8



### C. Presentation of Entertainment News at UM and SH

On the entertainment news, although UM is a serious newspaper, it does not deny the importance of entertainment news and its function to the readers. That is why, in UM, albeit it seriousness, it has a particular desk on entertainment. (Journalist UM1).

In fact, in the main section of the newspaper, UM has 28 pages of news about entertainment, and a weekend supplement on entertainment called 'Pancaindera'.

Based on the textual analysis, in Pancaindera, the front page of the newspaper supplement sometimes does publish pictures of artists with indecent clothings. One of the recent examples is as below. However, the newspaper has improved in terms of the pictures presentation as compared to before.

PICTURE 9: AN EXAMPLE OF AN INDECENT ENTERTAINMENT PICTURE IN PANCAINDERA



Besides that, the angle of the entertainment news at UM can be said to include tabloid elements. For example, the news angle is framed on the personal issue of an artist rather than the contribution on the entertainment industry.

For example, textual analysis on 27 April demonstrates that on page 10 of Pancaindera, there is a whole page of question and answer page with Saleh Yaakob, an actor with four wives. The headline of the news is 'Dugaan Beristeri Empat' (The challenges of having four wives). On page 12, there is another question and answer session with an actress, Eina Azman, headlined 'Kekasih bukan tunang orang' (Boyfriend is not someone's fiancée). Both coverage does not ask questions related to the artists' latest development in terms of career.

On its centerspread, the whole news is about the close relationship between an actor and an actress- Sharnaaz Ahmad and Nelydia. The news was headlined 'Keintiman Sharnaaz-Nelydia' (Close relationship between Sharnaaz-Nelydia).

Other local entertainment news that highlighted on personal matters rather than career are on the marriage of Fizz and Almy (after the couple faces a lot of difficulties prior the



marriage), the marriage of the sons of a popular director Yusof Haslam, an actor Que Haidar is said to become more selective in acting, and on a husband and wife, the actor Yusry and actress Lisa Surihani on how they have to be apart due to work commitment.

Besides that, *Pancaindera* also publishes gossips on *Pancaindera*'s page 8. For example, two news published on the wrongdoing of artists without mentioning the artists' names.

Although some would argue the advantage of such reporting, which is to indirectly warn the artists and they would always know that there are eyes that indirectly know what they do. This, however, although might be true, but in principle, still is not an acceptable writing if it is taken from the aspect of its ethical conduct.

However, other pages of *Pancaindera* includes positive entertainment news such as the secret of the success of a veteran actress Normah Damanhuri success story of a famous DJ Halim Osman and a review of a telemovie '*Bidadari Walid*' (The daughter of a father).

Interestingly, there is a whole page covering on a film seminar headlined '*Gagasan filem bernilai Islam*' (A group of films with Islamic values). This is a good effort as such coverage would help readers to see entertainment industry with deeper insights.

On the other hand, at SH, entertainment section covers only eight pages of the whole 56 pages newspaper. Seven pages are devoted for local entertainment news, and only one page for international news.

Data from the interview suggested that the newspaper avoid publishing gossip news in their entertainment section.

*"At SH, we do publish entertainment news, but definitely not gossip"* (Journalist SH3) and *"no speculation"* (Journalist SH2).

Besides that, 'we make sure that our entertainment news do not give negative impact to the readers because we realize that celebrities do have impact on their fans' (Journalist SH4).

Based on the textual analysis of SH 29 April 2014, the entertainment news mainly covers positive stories on artists and celebrities. The main entertainment news was on a teen group called Fourteen and their success solo concert story. Another story is on a tribute news on Sidek Hussein, an actor who died on cancer.

Another news, which is about the dispute between three actors (Fauzi Nawawi and wife, actress Nisdawati) and Sharnaaz Ahmad, was headlined on its positive angle '*Sedia Selesai Cara Baik*' (Ready to Settle the Problem with the Best Way). This is an example of how such constrovery between two

parties can be angled positively, without sensationalizing the news.

#### D. News Angle at UM and SH

This section compares the findings of news angle construction of the same story published at UM and SH in 2012. The news is based on the speech of the Chief Minister of Negeri Sembilan during agricultural products exhibition known as MAHA on 26 June.

PICTURE10



MAHA news as reported by the SH headlined *Production of Agricultural Consumption in Negeri Sembilan is Being Fulfilled* dated 26 June 2012.

PICTURE 11



MAHA news as reported by the SH headlined *Yet to Achieve Self Sufficiency Level: Agriculture, Farming Not Able to Contribute to the Country's Food Supply* dated 26 June 2012.

This is the example of the lead for this news as published in the SH in English translation:

#### **Yet to Achieve Self Sufficiency Level: Agriculture, Farming Not Able to Contribute to the Country's Food Supply**

SEREMBAN – The production of agriculture and farming of the state is yet to contribute to the nation's food supply.

Chief Minister, Datuk Seri Mohamad Hasan said, Negeri Sembilan has not yet achieved a self-sufficient level of food production.

This lead and part of the news can be compared with what was published by the UM that has been translated into English:

#### **Production of Agricultural Consumption in Negeri Sembilan is Being Fulfilled**

SEREMBAN 25 June – The production of agricultural products in



the state is being fulfilled after proactive steps taken by the state government to ensure optimum achievement.

Chief Minister Datuk Seri Mohamad Hasan said the achievement is because of the struggle by those involved in agriculture, fishery and farming, who have increased their production to reduce dependency on imported products.

This is an example of how two different newspapers covered the same story. Although it can be argued that both newspapers try to publish positive story on MAHA (UM feels that it is following the developmental journalism perspective, while SH feels that it remains a positive news because it maintains the exact tone of the speech), UM did it by changing the tone of the speech. By all means, we argue that it is unethical to change the tone of the speech although the aim is to angle the story to a positive one.

### III. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that, although these newspapers are both published in the same country, but they practice distinct aspects of news production. The aspects examined are on the front page news, picture selections, the presentation of entertainment news and the news angle of each newspaper.

However, it is no doubt that both newspapers do carry similar journalistic convention as demonstrated from the interviews. For the front page news selection, for instance, both newspapers show that they see the newsworthiness of political news. On picture selections, both newspapers in general express the importance of being ethical and pay attention to the sensitivities of the readers in the selections.

Besides that, the presentation of entertainment news for both newspapers do based on the development of the entertainment industry in Malaysia, with less sensationalization. Finally, the general findings indicate that both newspapers try to maintain positive angle in their news writings.

However, the specificity of news published in both newspapers become apparent when the data suggest that the distinction between how does UM and SH define 'political news'. To UM, it is more on covering policies of the state and the tendency to publish stories from a particular party. However, to SH, they see political news as non-partisan, which is from both the state and the opposition.

On the picture selections, the specificity of UM comes when at one point, picture can be used as a tool of political propaganda. As discussed, an indecent picture was used to show a sexual wrongdoing of an alleged opposition leader. SH, on the other hand, remains publishing decent pictures throughout the paper.

The presentation of entertainment news at UM tends to be more on the personal matter of the artists rather than the career and industry development. However, UM also provides a large space for a coverage on a film seminar that suggests the value of academic discourse in the film industry. On the contrary, SH avoids publishing any gossip in its entertainment news, and all news are accompanied with decent pictures.

Pertaining to the angle of each newspaper, UM seems to construct positive angle, however, argued to be unethical when the exact tone of the speech is changed to make it sound positive. This is associated by some as a way of portraying the country as a developing nation, and that the government is doing all it can to sustain development for the people in line with the developmental journalism perspective (Herbert 2001), thus in line with the notion of Asian journalism.

On the other hand, SH maintains the exact tone of the speech and argued that, that is the way to create news with positive impact to the readers.

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