

A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON VIOLENT EXTREMISTS AND NEWS MEDIA: HOW MALAYSIAN ONLINE NEWS FRAMED VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUPS INVOLVED IN THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

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ABSTRACT

The news has been a place for violent extremist groups to gain recognition internationally. The Syrian Civil war which had involved notorious and internationally recognised violent extremist groups is an example of this phenomenon. However, a limited number of studies had uncovered the thematic variation on how Malaysian online news frames violent extremist groups involved in the Syrian Civil War. Therefore, the present study explored whether the Malaysian news coverage of the violent conflicts that involved violent extremist groups active during the Syrian civil war may shed light on how mainstream news covers violent extremist groups. The present study employed a qualitative search and analysis of two popular online newspapers in Malaysia to identify the types of news frames on the news published during the peak of the Syrian civil war and when a notorious violent extremist group, Daesh (alternatively known as Islamic State (IS) or Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)), had shaken and threatened the world. A total of 272 news articles published between 2010 to 2020 were collected and analyzed. Analysis of the news frames revealed twelve different news frames. The frame with the highest occurrence was labelled as “Western destructive interventions”. The frame detailed out Western nations’ involvement in the war which caused damage to livelihood and civilizations in Syria and justified the violent extremist groups’ activities. The present study concludes that the Malaysian news media framing on violent extremist groups and other parties involved in the Syrian Civil War could have two varied forms, positive (heroic or humanized) or negative (destructive or demonized). The main contribution of this study is that it provides an insight into how Malaysian news media cover a conflict involving Muslim extremist groups. Additionally, the study adds to previous research on how violent extremist groups is framed in digital news.

Keywords: violent extremism, news media, Syrian civil war, Daesh, ISIS, framing theory

INTRODUCTION

Violent extremists - individuals who support or partake in use of violence to further an ideology or change status quo (Striegheer, 2015) - and media are bonded by a convoluted symbiotic relationship (Nacos, 2016). Extremists are aware of the power of media, and they prioritized achieving public awareness of their existence to gain legitimacy and recognition, which would allow an increase in supporters and followers to their cause (Archetti, 2013; Nacos, 2016). The practice is even notable in Malaysia as the digital evolves (Yasin, 2017). Violent extremists need media to provide publicity and recognition, which is the bloodline for their existence. Without the

audience, violent extremist groups existence may deplete, and their goal to make a social change or threaten the local or international governing body may be a futile effort.

On the other hand, media will always have a space for extremist groups to thrive due to the media's consideration for sensational news to publicize. Media are likely to cover violent extremist attacks due to their desire to provide the public with a sensational story, and nearly every extremist attack fit into the category of sensational news (Ghersetti & Johansson, 2021; Hellmueller et al., 2022; Matusitz, 2015; White, 2020). The news assists the public to know and understand critical issues impacting the nation and global development. The widespread news coverage on various extremist activities could attract news supporters or ignite public fear and anxiety. Subsequently, their knowledge and general attitude about controversial events such as terrorism and violent extremism depend highly on the perfunctory priorities set up by mainstream media (Powell, 2011, 2018).

The association between news on conflicts and violent extremist groups and individuals' attitudes and perception towards violent extremism in other regions of the world is quite clearly presented in past studies (Baugut & Neumann, 2018, 2019, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; Heeren & Zick, 2014; Schumann et al., 2020; von Sikorski et al., 2017). Moreover, in the current age, news published by public media outlets is a source of information used by extremist groups as evidence to support their ideological narratives and convince newly recruits of the legitimacy of the group and movement (Abu Bakar & Aslam, 2019; Baugut & Neumann, 2020b; Parker et al., 2019). A recent study by Weirman & Alexander (2020) highlighted this exact concern. Their research on online sympathizers of ISIS found several social media posts that quoted or cited from credible online news sites to punctuate the groups' narratives. For example, some of the sympathizers would share online news with the title "Muslims being 'erased' from Central African Republic" published by Al Jazeera and "Massacre report show U.S. inability to curb Iraq militias" published by Reuters. This highlights the concern on how general news write on violent extremist groups.

In Malaysia, a limited number of studies uncovered the thematic variation of Malaysian online news media framing of violent extremist groups during the Syrian Civil War and how those content could potentially influence the public's perception of violent extremist activities. Moreover, there is a lack of research qualitatively discerning the news frames on violent extremist groups from Malaysian online news sites. News frame is conceptually defined as the "central governing idea" or "storyline" serving as the essence of an issue or providence of meaning and connection to an otherwise compartmentalized series of events or phenomena (Gamson and Modiglian, 1994). News frames can define an event, situation, issues and set terms of public debate by stressing some aspects of the content while pushing others related to the issue into the background (Tankard, 2001).

One notable study published within the last five years may be similar to the current research. The paper was published by Saifuddin & Sualman (2017). The paper reported an analysis of the portrayal of the Islamic state in selected online newspapers in Malaysia. The paper and the current study used framing theory as a guide for analysis. In addition, both the paper and the current study looked into similar samples, news on violent extremists active during the Syrian civil war. However, the paper focuses on quantitative analysis of reporting frequency predicted by theme and news site. Whereas the current study solely concentrates on the qualitative nature of news

frames. As highlighted earlier, the qualitative content is essential to decipher how violent extremist groups are described in the news and how they may glamorize or demonize the group.

Thus, the present proposed study opted for an in-depth analysis of the media content to understand how prominent Malaysia's online news media frame content related to violent extremist groups. It aims to answer the following research question: How did Malaysian digital news media frames news related to violent extremist groups involved in the Syrian civil war?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The present study utilized a qualitative research design, and the data collected are news articles archived in two popular online news websites in Malaysia, The Star Online and Berita Harian. Studies of news frames require the focus on the qualitative aspect of the text through analyzing and examining the keywords and the meanings of the text through the words presented, the images included, and the central messages conveyed (Gamson and Modiglian, 1994; Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Lecheler and de Vreese, 2018). The texts were analyzed using thematic content analysis with an embedded systematic approach proposed by Tankard (2001) and media content attributes by Ghanem (1997).

Data Sampling Procedure

The articles selected were based on the survey of the most-read newspapers on online news sites recorded by market research company (Vase.ai., 2019) and the published rank for 'Top 30 Malaysian News Sites' (All You Can Read, n.d.). Two sites were selected for this study based on the ranks published: Berita Harian and The Star Online.

Reuter's analysis for 2019 indicated that Berita Harian and The Star Online had a great "trust" among readers (Nain, 2019). Therefore, for each newspaper site, the following English and Malay keywords were used to generate as many articles published as possible which could answer the research question: terrorism ('terroris'), violent extremism ('keganasan ekstremis'), Syria, Palestine, Israel, radicalization/radical ('radikalisme'/'radikal'), Daesh, Al-Qaeda, ISIS, ISIL, and I.S.

Articles found were published between 2010 to 2020 were analyzed as the violent extremism that has affected Malaysian within the last decade were mainly the ISIS extremist group which came to the emergence in the late 2000s and peak in the 2010s (CNN Editorial Research, 2020). In addition, during the 2010s, the Syrian civil war began (BBC News, 2019) and had inspired a countable number of Malaysians to depart and travel to Syria and joined violent extremist groups active in the country (NST Online, 2019). There were 272 news articles obtained from Berita Harian (n = 92) and The Star Online (n = 180). The articles were compiled between 2019 and 2020.

Data Analysis Procedure

The present study used thematic analysis which is useful in analyzing qualitative data. In addition, the present study included systematic approach in analyzing frames proposed by Tankard (2001) and the conceptualization of media framing attributes by Ghanem (1997).

Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017)

Thematic analysis is a qualitative analytical method involving systematic identification, analyzing, and interpreting discernible patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017). The thematic analysis begins with generating code from the qualitative data. Codes are the smallest perceptible analysis features relevant to the research question(s). Once the codes are gathered, they are then attached to the themes. The themes are the larger patterns discernible from the data, providing a comprehensive and organized interpretation of how the data answers the research question(s). Therefore, for the present study, the raw data will be schemed through for discernible codes that could then be generated to themes providing an organized interpretation of how Malaysian online news sites portray violent extremist groups involved in the Syrian civil war.

Mechanisms of News Frames (Tankard, 2001)

Tankard (2001) has proposed that in searching for frames, the focal points of the news articles could be used as guidance to ensure the articles are analyzed thoroughly and systematically. The focal points of framing mechanisms were introduced by Tankard (2001) to address the frequently raised issue conceptualization and measurement for frames. The approach ensures the methods of analysis is precise and non-arbitrary by introducing 11 focal points of framing mechanisms: (1) headlines, (2) subheads, (3) photographs, (4) photo captions, (5) leads (the introduction), (6) selection of sources or affiliations, (7) selection of quotes, (8) pull quotes, (9) logos; (10) statistics, charts, and graphs; (11) concluding statements or paragraphs of articles. The advantage in using Tankard's (2001) framing mechanism is that it assists in breaking down the structure of each news article to ensure every element is reviewed independently than as a whole. For the present study, generating codes began with looking at the focal points of the news articles.

Media Content Attributes (Ghanem, 1997)

The framing mechanism by Tankard (2001) is hollow as it does not capture the central message that defines the news frame. Furthermore, the framing mechanism only outlines the compartmentalized structure of the news article. The structure alone is insufficient in identifying themes that provide an interpretable framework that could answer how the news is framed. Thus, the analysis method includes Ghanem's (1997) conceptualization of media content attributes.

Ghanem's conceptualization of frames focuses on cognitive attributes and affective attributes. The cognitive attributes look at the information provided. The affective attributes focus on how the information is informed by focusing on the intonation, imageries, word selections and

other items that could add emotional weight to the message. The attributes of the frames guide how to classify the frames by analyzing the information contained in the article and the emotional laden value attached to the information or the characters in the information. Other essential elements that were looked at during analysis were names of political figures, countries of origin and names of extremist groups.

Additionally, the affective aspect helps to understand whether the story glamorizes or demonizes the group based on used words and images. Thus, the words for specific events and specific adjectives associated with selected political figures or extremist groups were analyzed. The images and the captions were also coded. They were analyzed to discern how the messages in the articles are visually manifested.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Salient Key Words

The analysis began with scheming the frequency of words used throughout all articles. Since the two news articles used two different languages, the texts from collected news articles were keyed into two different excel sheets. Each sheet contains collected articles for each respective news outlet, The Star Online and Berita Harian. The most frequent words were identified using the Orange software version 3.27.1. Several words were excluded from the word calculation using pre-process text tool in the software. Words excluded were deemed abundant and provided no value to the analysis, such as conjunctions, prepositions, pronouns, and dates. Table 1 summarizes the comparative analysis of The Star Online and Berita Harian's most frequent words used and the frequency of their appearance.

News Frames

After careful analysis and review of the articles, there is a total of twelve different frames identified and categorized based on characters (see Table 2). During the search for the frame, the researcher found that the frames are better understood based on the character (i.e. the who) in the story or message contained in the article. While the frame identification focuses on the central message that consistently appeared in the analyzed articles, the groups represent the most frequent characters mentioned in all articles. From the search of the frame, there were five different frame categories: (1) Muslim (the religious) extremists; (2) the rebels; (3) the victims; (4) Syrian government; (5) Foreign governments.

'Western destructive interventions' is the highest appeared frame (205 articles, 75.4%). The highest number of the appeared frame remains the same for each site. In The Star Online, the news was sourced from Reuters, with 179 out of 180 articles analyzed were from them. On the other hand, Berita Harian acquired most of the news from local agencies, including AFP, BERNAMA or AGENSI. The frames identified are further explained in terms of their meanings and selected samples from the news articles as examples.

Table 1: Comparative analysis of The Star Online and Berita Harian based on selected words and frequency of appearance

The Star Online		Berita Harian	
Words in English	<i>n</i>	Words in Malay (English)	<i>n</i>
Assad	473	“ <i>Tentera</i> ” (Military)	43
Rebel(s)	410	“ <i>Kanak-kanak</i> ” (Children)	38
Islamic State	384	“ <i>Pelarian</i> ” (Refugees)	30
Government	338	“ <i>Perang</i> ” (War)	39
Opposition	233	“ <i>Negara Islam</i> ” (Islamic state)	25
Fighter(s)	206	“ <i>Militan</i> ” (Militant)	25
Military/Militant(s)/Army	501	“ <i>Kerajaan</i> ” (Government)	25
Western	146	“ <i>Pemberontak</i> ” (Rebels)	22
Extremist	128	“ <i>Konflik</i> ” (Conflict)	22
Islamist	117	“ <i>Rejim</i> ” (Regime)	14
Conflict	115	Daesh	13
Al-Qaeda	113		
Terrorist(s)/Terrorism	153		
Regime	96		
Violence	72		
Humanitarian	68		
Radical	40		

Table 2: Comparative Analysis of News Frames of Extremism during Syrian Civil War: Berita Harian and The Star Online

Frames	Combined (N = 272) <i>f</i> (%)	Berita Harian (n = 92) <i>f</i> (%)	The Star Online (n = 180) <i>f</i> (%)
Muslim (the religious) extremists			
a. Deaths and Destructions	74 (27.2)	13 (14.1)	61 (33.9)
b. Jihad	58 (21.3)	5 (5.4)	53 (29.4)
c. Dangerous group	50 (18.4)	2 (2.2)	48 (26.7)
The rebels			
d. Syrian rebels’ atrocity	20 (7.4)	7 (7.6)	13 (7.2)
e. The “Good” Rebels	19 (7)	-	19(10.6)
Victims			
f. Humanity crises	129 (47.4)	48 (52.2)	81 (45)
g. Muslims’ sufferings	27 (9.9)	8 (8.7)	18 (10)
Syrian government regime			
h. Merciful and Heroic	9 (3.3)	4 (4.3)	5 (2.8)
i. Corrupted and Inhumane	106 (39)	27 (29.3)	79 (43.9)
Foreign governments			
j. Western destructive interventions	205 (75.4)	52 (56.5)	153 (85)
k. Western heroic interventions	45 (16.5)	17 (18.5)	28 (15.6)
l. Middle east involvement	53 (19.5)	5 (5.4)	48 (26.7)

Muslim (The Religious) Extremists

The character refers to any mention of any personally proclaimed members or groups of extremists that commit their actions in the name of Islam or consider themselves the prominent and noble

actors of religion. Alternatively, the characters also refer to identified or labelled as Muslim extremist groups or devout Muslims committing violent actions. The frame character has three distinctive frames.

Deaths and destructions

Under this frame, the articles identified outlined horrifying images of the attacks committed by the extremists and described them as inhumane. In The Star Online, the articles place quotes taken from observers and civilians directly involved in the attack of several violent incidents in Syria. In the given article (The Star Online. May 24, 2016. 'Blasts hit Syrian coastal city, causing casualties - monitor, state T.V. '), the use of subheading, "BLOOD AND BODIES" further inscribe vivid imagery. On the other hand, Berita Harian utilized the words such as "kejam" (cruel) and "teruk" (horrendous) to describe the acts of the religious extremists. This is visible in the article published on December 29, 2016, titled, 'Aleppo, Mosul musnah akibat kuasa geopolitik, pengganas'. Furthermore, the article has an exasperation intonation to describe the extremist group. This could be taken from the word "ada saja" in the original Malay text, linguistically valued as words uttered to express exasperation and, in this case, the frustration was towards the religious extremists.

The results highlight the difference between Berita Harian and The Star Online in framing religious extremists. The Star Online attempts to provide explicit imagery of the horrifying situation caused by the extremists by including direct words of those involved and vivid descriptions to paint the situation for readers. While Berita Harian provides a more genuine disappointment and fatigue tone to depict the situation.

Jihadist group

Most of the articles containing this frame would include depictions of well-known extremist groups' propagating rigid Islamic teachings willingness to utilize violence in the name of their religion. The articles likely associate these actions with the term "jihad" (alternatively, "jihadist", which is a noun associated with the term) hence the frame name is provided. There is variation in its depiction. Some examples include extreme regimental practice and strict enforcement of religion. In certain instances, the practice is associated with being an attempt to establish an Islamic framework as proclaimed by the extremists. Providing the original quotes or personal accounts by the extremist groups provide legitimacy to the message. For example, an article titled 'Insight - Foreign fighters seek Islamic state in post-Assad Syria' posted on January 11, 2013, provided an interview quote with a jihadist. The article provided an articulate depiction of how members of extremist groups minimize the violence and stated that it is necessary as only those deserving of it will be beheaded.

Dangerous group

This frame would contain articles entailing the danger of the Muslim extremist groups, specifically IS. Among selected examples of news covered on this would explain on how the groups were forcefully taking control over territories and claiming it theirs to build Caliphate. For instance, the

article titled ‘Bomber kills two Iraq generals as I.S. advances in Syria’ posted on August 27, 2015. The article provided some descriptions on how fast and efficient the I.S. fighters act. The article entailed that the group’s activities are endangering lives of civilians in several areas in Aleppo, Syria. The article described how the group thrived in a “bloody civil war” while being a “persistent problem” because they continuously caused deaths and terrorized the nation.

The Rebels

This character emerged due to frequent usage of the word rebels with and without associating it with extremists or terrorists. The main difference between this frame category and the earlier category (Muslim (religious) extremists) is the lack of association with religiosity or Muslim extremism. The author deems it essential to notice the clear distinction made by selected articles that use the “rebel” terms without inputting words such as Islamic State or Muslim extremists. The analysis of frames further found that when Islamic State or Muslim extremists are removed, the focus of the articles looks at the rebels’ act as mere politically driven rather than ideological. The ‘rebel(s)’ could either be depicted in two conflicting frames: (1) Syrian rebels’ atrocity and (2) the “good” rebels.

Syrian rebels’ atrocity

This frame covers mainly the destructions and deaths caused by the rebels to demolish Assad’s government regime. It is to paint that the rebels are inhumane, and they are to be hated and feared as they relentlessly cause deaths of civilians and destructions of properties. In *The Star Online*, the ‘Syrian rebels’ atrocity’ frame includes harsh words to depict the vicious acts of the rebels. For instance, in the article title ‘Syria at U.N. compares militant onslaught to 9/11 attacks’ posted on September 30, 2013, there was a description of how the extremists brutally murder through grilling the head of civilians’ who oppose the group. It is noteworthy that the article included words quoted from Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moualem, during the U.N. General Assembly in September 2013. This indicates potential bias or leniency to defend the Syrian government while condemning the rebels.

Notably, *The Star Online* has repeated indications of bias depicting the Syrian Government Regime as an evil dictator. Within the same article, quotes by Eric Pelton, spokeswoman for the U.S. mission to the United Nations, were included to indicate lack of credibility in any uttered words by Syrian representatives. The article published on October 1, 2013, titled ‘At U.N., Syria compares rebel violence to 9/11 attacks’, represents the tension between Syria and the rest of the U.N. General Assembly. The article presented heavy criticism against the Syrian Foreign Minister, thus further minimizing the input provided by the governing body of Syria. The news articles consistently illustrated that the main enemy that fought in this war was Assad’s Military Regime. The heroes are the rebels who oppose the government’s cruel military regime presented in the next frame, ‘the “good” rebels’.

The “good” rebels

There is a consistent appearance of frames ascribing the rebels as inhumane. However, there are some instances where the rebels were painted in a “good” light. The “Good” rebels frame referred to the rebels from Syria as those committed to bringing democracy to Syria and freeing it from Assad’s regimental governance. For instance, the article published on *The Star Online*, November 15, 2012, ‘On Syrian border, mixed feelings for rebel “liberators”’, presented an alternative viewpoint. The rebels were labelled as “liberators”, which has a more positive depiction and an example of an oxymoron as it contradicts the negative term, “rebel”.

Although the rebels were depicted as “good”, in the same manner of portraying Assad’s heroism in the frame ‘Merciful and Heroic Assad’, the rebels’ true intention was also doubted. *The Star Online* selected quotes taken from a refugee who opposed the rebels and Assad’s military regime. In the example provided above, the rebels were depicted as a necessary evil to fight against the worst form of evil: Assad’s Military regime. The article consistently painted doubt against both sides visibly from its subheading, “NECESSARY EVIL?”. The use of a question mark further accentuated the doubtful stance against either side. This frame, akin to the others, represents the situation’s complexity. The enemies and the heroes are interchangeable. The interchangeability is a pragmatic depiction of war as the enemies and the hero are dependent upon the side or nation. In addition, the variation in the frame due to the source of the message further underlines how divisive the viewpoints on the following are: (1) who is the enemy in the war; (2) which violent action is an act of defence, and which is barbaric. The answer depends on from whom the condemnation or support was generated.

The Victims

The victims represent characters that have not been presented as the attackers but the receivers of the attack. Articles containing stories about victims had highlighted the continuous oppression and victimization of civilians residing in countries in the middle of a war. From the articles collected, under this frame category, there would be stories entailing the Muslim minorities in Syria were the primary victims. Aside from that, the news frame would highlight the results of the war of conflict that had a devastating impact on human civilians and civilization. There are two main news frames under this category: ‘humanity crises’ and ‘muslims’ sufferings’.

Humanity crises

This frame refers to the severe effects of war on human lives and civilizations. The frame mainly painted an image delineating the severe effects of the continuous ongoing civil war between two sides, which were equally blamed, the Syrian rebels and the Syrian government military regime. *Berita Harian* provided a broader and more extensive coverage of the Syrian Civil War compared to *The Star Online*. *Berita Harian* has 48 articles (52.2%) containing the frame, making it the second-highest frame covered. Their articles had greater and more considerable coverage on the effect of the war among the residents in Syria and neighboring countries compared to *The Star*

Online. Some of the articles would portray this frame by describing the sufferings among the civilians forced to flee their homes.

In some instances, the articles would place quotes utilizing words with heavy sentiments attached to them. For instance, in the excerpt from the article published on April 19, 2015, title ‘18,000 pelarian Yarmouk sentiasa dalam ketakutan’ had repeated the words “they are afraid” (in original Malay text: “*mereka takut*”) to highlight the constant fear faced by the refugees because of the civil war. Furthermore, to further accentuate the frame, the articles would include pictures of destructions, inclusive of buildings in rubbles. Intermittently, the added aspect of the photo are civilians walking through the destructions to depict the loss of civilizations and the horror the civil war has brought. On the other hand, *The Star Online* had lesser use of images compared to *Berita Harian*. However, the portrayal of the frame is almost synonymous with one another, such as describing the scene with using several collective words such as ‘screams’ and ‘pierce the air’, as found in one article published by *The Star Online* on January 2, 2017, titled ‘Syrian child refugees taught to release stress and resist recruitment’.

Muslims’ sufferings

In this frame, the articles mainly describe Muslims as the primary victims of various parties’ attacks, causing suffering and loss of livelihood. Furthermore, the frame mainly includes extremists’ accounts of Western nations’ cruelty in both news outlets, causing them to seek revenge. Alternatively, the articles quote from international organizations’ criticism against the interference of foreign parties causing deaths and suffering among Muslims. The countries which had the most frequent mention for their interference include the United States and Russia.

Syrian Government Regime

The articles compiled painted Bashar Al-Assad, the President of Syria, and the Military regime as either ‘merciful and heroic’ or ‘corrupted and inhumane’.

Merciful and heroic Assad

In some instances, *The Star Online* delivered articles that framed Assad and his military regime as heroic. Alternatively, it would also depict Bashar Al-Assad’s, the President of Syria, and the Military regime committed to peace, merciful. The frame mainly considers the regime’s allies, believing that Assad’s presence and governance are eminent to battle against extremism. This frame is an excellent contrast to the Syrian Government Regime. Nevertheless, the appearance of this frame is rare, which indicates the weighted bias to frame Assad’s regime as a tyrannical ruler, and the extremist’s brutality is side-lined.

Corrupted and inhumane

Under this frame, the Assad Regime is painted as the enemy to be hated by the readers. The frame focuses on the regime’s behaviors, which reflect their corruption and inhumanity as they cause

their citizens to suffer. There is a similarity in the Syrian Government Regime frame coverage across *Berita Harian* and *The Star Online*. In one of the articles published on December 17, 2016, with the title “Darah Aleppo’ di tangan Assad, Russia, Iran – Obama’ from *Berita Harian*, there was an exclusive coverage of criticism drawn by Barack Obama, former president of the U.S., relative to Assad’s governance.

Another article by *Berita Harian* depicted Assad’s personality by recounting his line of thoughts, perception, and agenda surrounding the Syrian civil war. The article referred titled ‘I sleep as usual – Bashar al-Assad’ (in original text: ‘Saya tidur seperti biasa - Bashar al-Assad’) published on November 7, 2016. The article is quintessential of the Syrian government regime. The title and content inscribed that Assad’s personality is conceited and heartless as he was unperturbed by the deaths of his people. The frame had a more consistent appearance than the ‘merciful and heroic’ frame in the two news outlets. The motives may be that both articles aim to present the Syrian government negatively. Alternatively, there may be unanimous viewpoints from foreign perspectives that Bashar Al-Assad is a tyrant.

Foreign Governments

Various international governing bodies were involved in the conflict and were either enemies or allied to various extremist groups. The foreign governments are depicted in three distinctive frames.

Western destructive interventions

This frame depicted the developed Western nations, likely mentioned include the United States and Russia, as harmful meddlers to the conflict. This frame had the highest appearance across both articles (205 articles, 75%). Most of the articles would provide a brief account of the providence of military aid or direct attack from foreign nations to selected regions in Syria, causing deaths and destructions. Notably, selected articles that provide quotes on the foreign interference would further punctuate the destructive effect. This means that the content has an even more emotional intonation to highlight that Western nations are the enemies to be blamed. In selected articles, the primary source of the claims made is the President of Syria and any representative of the Syrian government regime or from the foreign fighters against the ruling of Assad. In *Berita Harian*, there is a direct description of Western nations’ contribution in building and strengthening Daesh, in an article posted December 29 2016, titled ‘Aleppo, Mosul musnah akibat kuasa geopolitik, pengganas’.

Western heroic interventions

The second frame is a contrast to the previous news frame. Under this frame, the articles depict the West as heroic because they provided military aid to fight against extremists. The likely countries to be mentioned include the United States and Russia. However, the two are on the opposing side of the war. The United States was depicted as in the fight against extremists, but they were supporters of the rebels against the Syrian government.

Meanwhile, Russia provided military aids to assist the Assad regime. In selected articles, Russian involvement is not a humanitarian mission but acts of interventions causing destructions of civilizations and deaths of civilians in Syria. This indicates discrepancy and biased depictions of foreign interference. Additionally, it further insinuates who are presumably the enemy and the hero to the conflict. At least, in *The Star Online*, noticeably, the news outlet leaned towards depicting Russian intervention as harmful while the United States involvement as heroic or necessary.

Middle East involvement

Like the Western Nations, several nations in the Middle East had been depicted as influential critical players due to their involvement in the Civil War, including providing military aid and deliverance of military attacks. The countries which had repeated mention of their involvement include Iran, Iraq (one-half of the ISIS origin), Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Turkey. However, the mention is almost neglectable due to greater emphasis on Western foreign interference. This conclusion was not reached due to the frequency of articles containing the frame but instead the linguistic strategy and framing mechanism. Mentions of other nations aside from the U.S. and Russia are likely mentioned as the list of contributors without putting value-laden emotive words or factoids that could depict them as enemies or heroes.

DISCUSSION

The present study explored and discerned how Malaysian digital news framed news related to violent extremist groups involved in the Syrian Civil War published between 2010 and 2020. The study found that in reports on violent extremist groups and the Syrian civil war, the news outlets provide coverage on presumably the enemies and heroes to the story. In addition, the news frames also uncovered who are presumably the victims of the war. For the hero, their actions are either needed to resolve the conflicts or help the oppressed. Alternatively, the enemies are depicted as barbaric oppressors or violent actors causing incessant destructions of human lives and civilizations. Finally, in the middle of it, there are mentions of the victims who have no say in the conflict but suffer the most due to loss of livelihood.

The study results managed to identify twelve frames representing the journalistic technique and news content that may or may not be used among extremist groups to support their narratives. There is a greater rate of articles providing heavy criticism against the Muslim extremist groups rather than condoning them. However, the content of the articles could still provide support to the narrative. For example, there are a few frames that may provide justification for their actions, including, Muslims' sufferings, Western destructive interventions, Corrupted and inhumane Assad regime, and the "Good" rebels. Past literature have illustrated that extremist groups may share snippets of news or manipulate published news articles and share via online social media platforms (Baugut and Neumann, 2018; 2020a; 2020b; Weirman & Alexander, 2020). The extremist members or sympathisers may easily use the content to their advantage to further spread their agenda. For instance, they may use the articles containing Muslims' sufferings to inform that Muslims must help their fellow believers. This tactic has been recorded in past literature examining

IS magazine content (Macdonald & Lorenzo-Dus, 2018). Thus, focus on frames should not only be given to content about extremist groups solely but any other elements that could justify their existence.

Although the present study initially aimed to only look at how two online news framed violent extremist groups associated with the Syrian civil war, the results were discovered beyond its original intentions. The study had uncovered thematic differences in how two online news from Malaysian media covers the issue. One noticeable difference is how the two news outlets write on Muslim extremist activities, referring to the ‘Muslim (the religious) extremists’ frame. *The Star Online* focused on providing vivid imageries through an extensive description of the situation. The articles containing the frame would describe the blood and gore to highlight the cruelty of the groups’ movements. On the other hand, *Berita Harian* focused on providing emotional input to inform the readers how they should feel about the situation. This is likely due to assumed audience of *Berita Harian* which is written in the Malay language that has high association with the Muslim communities in Malaysia. It is likely that the articles production aims to not only inform the public on the Muslim extremism that is severely affecting livelihood in Malaysia but also to educate that the actions are providing negative light to the Muslim community. Moreover, a great number of *The Star Online* articles were sourced from Reuters which is an international news media. Therefore, the content may have been reflective of the international media’s viewpoint on Muslim extremism. However, this opinion is merely based on the observation of the researcher and may need further investigation from future research dissecting difference between *The Star Online* and *Berita Harian* or any other news platforms that cover using the Malay native language on Muslim extremism activities.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the present study managed to discover two varied forms of frames, positive (heroic or humanized) or negative (destructive or demonized) demonstrated from Malaysian news media framing on violent extremist groups and other parties involved in the Syrian Civil War. The study provided an insight on how Malaysian news media cover a conflict involving Muslim extremist groups and how they are framed in digital news during the peak of the Syrian Civil War. The present study is limited as it only used samples from two Malaysian news sites. Additionally, the analysis only covered on violent extremist groups active during the Syrian civil war. There is a need to uncover other incidences of international and local violent extremism incidences that may have affected the Malaysian society’s view on violent extremism. The findings of present study should not imply there is a need to impose strict governance on media narratives. Strict media governance may threaten freedom of speech. Instead, it is recommended that there is increment in awareness for public on how extremist groups draw on news to manipulate and lure new supporters. Educating the public regarding the harm of extremist ideology may be a more effective violent extremism prevention measure without sacrificing media freedom.

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