

Framing Strategic News from The Perspective of Media Organizations in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Strategic news is published news with an implied agenda without explaining the truth. Nowadays, most media are more comfortable playing tug of war in their writing than telling the truth because of the news framing process. The process of generating strategic news is done by journalists and editors of a media organization by conducting the franchise process first to enable them to reach the target audience. Framing news is the cause for the reader's shift of understanding of news framed by the newspaper until the community's perception has been successfully changed. This study utilizes a qualitative method; three personality and media experts were interviewed to obtain relevant data regarding media agenda, framing and strategic news. The informants were from media conglomerates in Malaysia – Media Prima, Bernama TV and former Berita Harian Group Editor-in-Chief. The exploration of media practioner perspectives on news writing and framing allowed the researcher to delve into fundamental questions in journalism, specifically in the fragment of journalism ethics. The findings show that the framing of an issue was both deliberate and unintentional. Strategic news is the result of the interconnections between media agenda, ethics and journalism, editor responsibility and news framing, and manipulation by the media to advocate the success of the government's mission and vision.

Keywords: *Strategic news, news framing, journalism ethics, media organizations, Malaysia.*

INTRODUCTION

Media functions in the society are complex as it plays multiple significant roles including influencing social life, transmitting culture, source of information, education, entertainment, key player in political communication, democratic participation, transmitting ideology, norms, also believe on any issue (Dennis & Merrill, 1999). The media are an organization that distributes information from sources and is seen to have a strong influence on the recipient (Bahtiar, Hassan & Mohamad Khadafi, 2004). The powerful influence has led the media to control society, to give an understanding, to form an idea and to be interpreted as the main source of information about any occurrence or phenomenon that occurs worldwide (Aminudin Basir, Mohd Sabri & Nik Yusri, 2009). Media is a major source of information on society in understanding the situation that is happening both inside and outside the country.

It indicated that media is the main source of information in understanding the happenings local and abroad. In addition, the media is also obligated in propagating democracy and become watchdog to the public, protecting them from government's wrongdoings. Media is also the mediator between the society and government because it

conveys society's concern to the government. On the other hand, the government is also depending on the media to help them in developing and transforming the nation. Media, specifically journalism is more powerful as compared to other areas including politics (Franklin, 2012). Thus, it is being maximized by the government to spread critical development information to the society. Given the significant role of the media in our life, it has now influenced our identity, creating who we are including taking sides on behalf of us on important areas including stigma, self-esteem, social relationship, economy and political positions (Wimmer & Dominic, 2005). Hypodermic Needle Theory proposed that the media has a direct influence on the society. Indirectly, it actually indicated that the media is telling us what to think about and how to think about, which is the proposition of the Agenda Setting Theory and Framing Theory.

According to the assumption, the media is obligated to freely disperse ideas and information to the society so that they can make informed, independent and rational decisions. Media has to be balanced between supporting the government and providing objective information to the citizen. However, the Agenda Setting Theory believed that the media have been always bias on issues of its interest, therefore bias in giving information to the society. Tcw (2010) supported this argument by saying that it is easier for the society to understand and believe what has been transmitted by the media because they trust the media's authority as their information source. The media's authority is obvious when the agenda setting could inflict public believe on issues presented by the media. However, there are scholars like Atkinson, Lovett and Baumgartner (2014), who argue that media agenda might not exist. As explained by Miller and Wanta (1996), other than media agenda, media exposure also has its take in influencing the society. The higher media exposure on an issue, the more it will be presumed as important. One's position in the society has also been included as a factor that will boost credibility and gain society's trust. The media will play their role in deciding which issues should receive people's attention. As we know, the media will highlight governments' responses to the good news that reflect positive developments in social problems because this could politicize policy success (Thesen, 2013). Therefore, the media nowadays is not only limited to the printed media. The emergence of new media using new technology such as the Internet allows the government to build relationships with the citizens they represent.

In the past decades, governments had to rely almost exclusively on traditional media specifically newspapers, televisions and radio (Dixon, 2010). Even, newspapers are being forced by readers' use of the internet to change and adapt their content, style and design. The field of journalism is seen as a very powerful field when compared to political branches or other jurisdictions. (Franklin, 2012). Journalists are professionals who play a role in influencing people's views or attitudes, through reports or writing. Therefore, journalists are regarded as community change agencies that will alter the dimensions of each individual's thinking through reading. Wikipedia (2008) says journalists are a career in the mass media industry that includes newspapers, magazines, television, radio and the internet. The term journalist not only focuses on the individual who goes out to find the news, but the author, editor, reporters, broadcasters and news readers are also journalists. In fact, Ryfe, Mensing and Kelly (2016) mention that journalists are important individuals who seek information, form information to be news for people's gaze and reading. Journalists can be described as educators who are often references or examples to all levels of society. Tandoc Jr. and

Peters (2014), the task of journalists in a democratic society is to inform the public by providing accurate and complete information on public affairs.

In addition, journalists are also general opinion planners who can influence the making and cancellation of a law. Journalists also have the right or power that can influence a decision. The advantages of this journalist are that journalists are often regarded as individuals who create phenomena in writing so that the creation of strategic news. The result of this strategic news writing has shaped perceptions that affect readers whether positive or negative. People find what the media is doing are right. This is due to the media being able to influence the minds of the public to tend to be the most dominant mediator (Julia Wirza & Chang, 2013). Media also serves as a social reality speaker on issues such as climate change issues, agents have a strong influence on the individual in evaluating and interpreting issues in the press (Scheufele, 1999). The media's ability to influence is due to the idea of media practitioners being applied in news reports then the information is channeled to the public to assess news reports according to the style and delivery techniques of the news. At the same time, the media is responsible for suggesting what the appropriate issues are getting attention and trying to influence the public's understanding of the news reported using emphasis, exclusions, and descriptions in an issue presented in the news reporting.

MEDIA AND FRAMING OF STRATEGIC NEWS

Agenda Setting Theory posits that the media is capable of inducing a viewpoint, opinion and idea to their readers. It can be scrutinized that the media is actually doing it when they are making one news as more important than the other. According to Weaver (1982), the press will not report the whole truth but they are filter that will mold the society's thinking horizon. It can be seen that the media is powerful in influencing human perceptions. Media has been said as having a very strong relationship with society when each news has its own agenda that will become a discussion topic of the society. According to McCombs and Shaw (1972), the media has its roles in shaping political realities. For example, in campaigning for a candidate, media is the one setting the agenda that can attract society's attention. They added that this agenda is also shaping the functions of the mass media. According to Golan (2006), for decades, scholars have been debating on the main variable that influence the complicated news selection process. The debate centered around the questions how a nation considered an issue as having news value? Previous research found that among the main factors are extraordinary, logic, culture and location. However, political communication theory posits that political agenda setting will influence the media agenda and will eventually setting the public agenda.

The central tenet of mediocracy theory is the proposition that the media agenda sets both the public agenda and the political agenda (Kleinnijenhuis & Rietberg, 1995). News selection, the idea and theme of the news that will be published is based on media practitioners' decisions as mentioned by McCombs and Shaw (1972), where they stated that media practitioners are responsible in setting the political reality. It can be concluded that agenda setting is a business deal where the elite, media and the public sit together to decide important issues for a campaign (Dalton, Beck, Huckfeldt & Koetzle, 1998). It is clear that society cannot be separated from the media because media is the main platform for society to know current development happening around them. The government is also

using the media as mediator between them and the society. According to Cook (1983), media is influencing the policy makers and government sectors. In addition, Cook also said that it is not the public opinion that changes the policy, instead it is the outcome of the collaboration between reporters and the government sectors.

According to Reese (2001), framing is symbolic expression that uses words or visual to create a pattern or categorization in the readers' mind. It is also a cultural process that mirrors the decision on what is considered more important than the others, influenced by news space, work routine and assumptions made by reporters and editors (Blood & Holland, 2004). It is a macro mechanism that has connections with internal and external factors (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

This research is looking at how news media choose strategic news and upgrade the issue into main focus of the newspaper. Usually strategic news is about government's planning in implementing certain policies for the benefit of the public or even the government itself. In the political world, strategic news is being used to gain votes. In this research, a few research questions have been identified which are: what is strategic news, behaviour and the process of news framing and the roles of organisational and journalist's ethics in the framing of strategic news. The relationship of the attributes was shown in Figure 1.

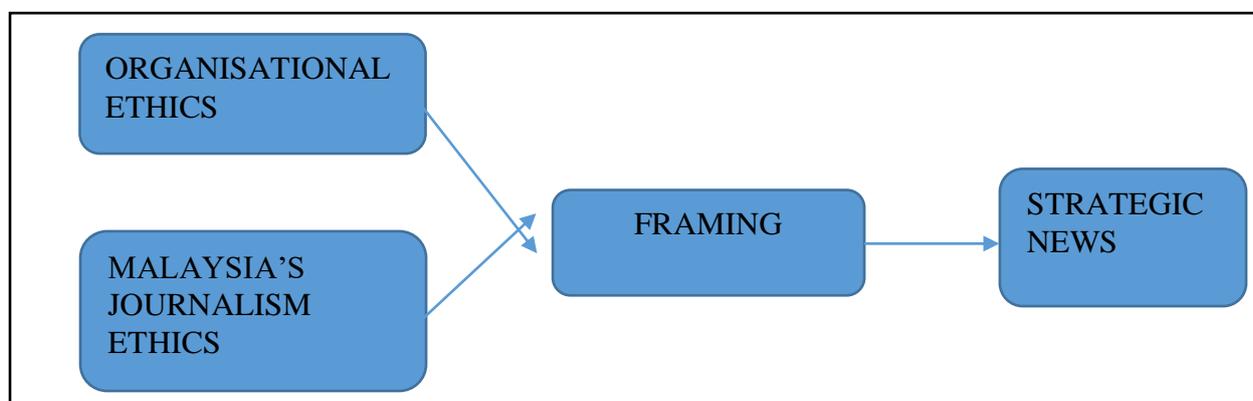


Figure 1: Research Framework

This framework shows the relationship between each element, which in the end will form the strategic news to feed the need of the organisation or the stakeholders. Ethics in organisation is also an important element to make sure that the organisation smooth operation of the media. Ethics also explain and restrain one's unlawful behaviour. This is closely related to framing because ethics actually help reporters frame new issues. In the end, they will produce the strategic news that contains government's aspiration.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ETHICS AND STRATEGIC NEWS

Journalists are the professional elite that has influence on society views and actions through writing. They are changing agent. Therefore, introducing journalist's ethics as a guideline is deemed appropriate. It can be the moral foundation, guiding them in determining the right and wrong of their actions. According to Medvedeva (2009), ethics code helps guiding the information transmitting process between journalists and the society. However, journalist's ethics must take into considerations the advancement of technology when the media is

evolving towards online news which indefinitely will affect the media organisation's structure and rules, viewers fragmentation, society's concern on the practice of tabloid journalism, change in politics, sociology and cultural sphere (Franklin, 2012). Journalists have to be more aggressive and active in keeping up with technology advancement. According to Roberts (1981), ethics are based on the assumption that human behaviour is the choices of ontogenic and phylogenic. It is originated from radical behavioralism perspective.

However, Islam has a different perspective on ethics. According to Shukri and Razali (2001), Islam sees ethics in two different principles, which are rationalism and traditionalism. Islam puts ethics as the utmost important element in the organisation to manage the discipline of the employees. This perspective can be adopted into media organisation to increase the effectiveness of news reporting. On the other hand, newsroom staffs including reporters and editors have a very important role in packaging the news because the readers not only learn about the issue but making their assumption on the issue based on the information they read (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Reporters and editors frame the news to ease reader's understanding, at the same time focusing the assumption to angle set by media agenda. Framing is molding the society's perceptions according to the media agenda. Therefore, news published is not necessarily telling the whole truth because it has been packaged with strategy and agenda. Media were said to have a public agenda to attract readers and increase newspaper sales. According to Idid and Kee (2012), the media is responsible in setting the agenda, resulting from the political agenda. Brubaker (2008) said that the media has no right in setting the public agenda. It is supported by political communication theory which stated that political agenda will set media agenda, consequently will set the public agenda (Kleinnijenhuis & Rietberg, 1995).

METHODOLOGY

This research employed qualitative method, which is an in-depth interview of former reporter and editors to see the process of framing and strategic news. The interview did not only revolve around issues regarding media content and its effects caused by news framing but was used to get feedback and society's perception on certain issues and their construction of reality. This research has found the perfect candidates to give a holistic view on the issue raised in this research based on their experience. This is because the main objective of this research is to understand how the media reports framed certain issues to extend of changing society's perceptions and attitude.

The first informant is the former *Berita Harian (BH)* Group Chief Editor. He has 48 years of experience in the journalism industry. He started his career as a radio journalist in 1975 until 1980. He then started his career with BH from 1980 until 2004. Later, he advanced his career as the Editor of *UmnoTV* and Editor of *Majalah Milinea Muslim* from 2004 until 2009 when we were appointed as *BH* Group Editor until September 2012. After that, he left the industry and joined the academic arena. Informant Two was the assignment editor at *Bernama TV* and has been with the industry for the past 22 years. The informant was the reporter of *BH* from 1993 until 2008. After that, he got involved with broadcasting under *Bernama TV* from 2008 until 2015.

The third informant is the Executive Director and Editorial News Operation *Media Prima Berhad* who started his career as a cadet reporter at Malaysian National News

Agency (*BERNAMA*) for six years starting 1972. In 1987, he was assigned as assistant news editor before migrating to the *New Straits Times (NST)* as News Editor. At *NST*, he was responsible to edit news, involved in seminars and a few international visits and conference. The informant, who resigned from *NST* in 2004, was also an advisor to the Chief Executive Officer of *Maxis Communications* for about a year and the half. Now, he is the Chairman of *Yayasan Salam Malaysia*, a non-governmental association active in encouraging volunteerism among youth in the country.

Data gathered from the interview was thematically analysed and interpreted to answer the phenomenon scrutinized in this research. The main objective is to analysed the media activities in framing certain news for the public. In addition, a lot of academic researchers are inclined towards using qualitative research because the of its low cost but able to produce interesting findings (Milena, Dainora & Alin, 2008). In-depth interview is also easily adaptable to any kind of research.

FINDINGS

Media Agenda and the Government

Media has significant roles in our life. It is hard to separate mass media from our social life. Mass media is not only responsible in educating and transmitting information to us but it is also used as a government tool to disperse development information and move the society to support the government's development plan. Indirectly, the media is helping to build society's trust towards the government, nourishing harmony and reinforcing unity between multi-racial Malaysian. As described by the informant:

Media transmit information of great importance to the nation. In addition, media is government own organization where the government has their share in the company, restricting the media to frame positive news of the government like improving the good name of the leader, his party and his ideas (Informant 1).

Media is not only distributing information but also helping unite this multi-racial society. The nation and the society are so indebted to the media for this (Informant 2).

Media in Malaysia plays huge roles in the country's development. It was the catalyst of the development by connecting the government and the society (Informant 3).

In this case, the media are not functioning as the transmitter, but become the main reason why the government still has the society's full support. Media in Malaysia is using the media agenda as their guideline in daily operations. Media has been set to become the main connector between the government and the society. They will portray the government as a strong lead by visionary leaders. They added:

Of course media is restricted to the agenda set by the government either through the chairman, shareholders or the editors who understand the government's agenda (Informant 1).

In Malaysia, the agenda of mainstream newspapers and broadcasting media is to support government's development policy. Still, the mainstream media Di Malaysia will not left out other news like crime, economy, sports, entertainment, court news, women and education (Informant 2).

Media is owned by the government. Government has become stakeholder of the media. As media, we need to obey rules set by our management even though it is contradicting with the journalism world (Informant 3).

In an organisation, media agenda is needed to make sure plans can be implemented according to the objectives. This statement is supported by previous researchers, Cook et al. (1983), who said that society's views is being influenced by policy makers and government sector. According to the informant:

Of course we need the agenda, because socialization understood by the editors will determine the kind of news that will be played or kept to safeguard the government's image. All news that can tarnish the government's reputation will not be published. Although it seems unfair but media has to obey because it has been stated in our SOP (Informant 1).

This is because agenda of the mainstream media in this country followed the ownership. For example, *Utusan Melayu* which publish *Utusan Malaysia* and *Kosmo* owned by *Umno*, *The Star* owned by *MCA*. Therefore, the party's agenda will become the government agenda because *Umno* is now ruling. Consequently, it will become the media agenda because the media is owned by the party (Informant 2).

Current media agenda is to support the government. Either the government is doing the right thing or the wrong thing; it is not a big issue. That consideration has dropped to number two (Informan 3).

It has clearly shown here that the media have been under full government control for the political purposes and strengthening the government's position. However, the government will strongly deny the fact that they are using the media or buying the media for their own benefit.

Journalists Ethics and Moral Responsibility

In the society's social life, ethics are an important element in any action or behaviour. Ethics originated from the word '*ethos*' which means tradition, attitude, way of thinking and morale of individual. It indicates that media industry cannot escape ethics. It is the guidelines towards achieving the media's objective in transmitting information to the society. The society always blames the journalist when they read something they felt as unfair reporting. However, the informants with vast experience in journalism world have different opinions:

A journalist has to agree and obey the journalist ethics and organisation's ethics set by the company or political party. If the journalist did not follow the ethics, they will have to leave the job (Informant 1).

All journalists including editors have to follow journalist ethics. Journalists need ethics for example the ethics of reporting precisely and objectively (Informant 3).

However, Informant 2 has a different opinion on journalist's ethics.

No, ethics is voluntary, nobody is forcing journalists to follow ethics. Same goes to the organisation (Informant 2).

Differences in the opinion of Informant 1, 2 and 3 show that ethics is not a formal law or officially enforced but still most reporters are writing their reports as guided by the ethics. Almost all informant informed that most articles were written based on an organisation's ethics and policy. For them, it is a moral obligation:

Ethics is something good and it will help the reporter to get the right source and transparent input. All news must contain reliable source in terms of integrity and credibility which will help in convincing the readers. Like high position in the organisation, authoritative and so on. Therefore, everything related to journalist's ethics must be followed. The journalist cannot do as they wish (Informant 1).

Generally, journalist's ethics has been draft by Malaysian Press Institute (MPI) as a guideline for the reporters who followed voluntarily (Informant 2).

Journalist must understand journalist's ethics for example ethics of reporting precisely and objectively. This is because reporter's job is to report (Informant 3).

However, there are unethical reporters because they aim at selling their newspaper by publishing unethical news although the news could trigger public provocation. According to the informants:

Although the media don't like it, we still have to follow all the rules. But still, there are reporters who are unethical in some subject matters like racial and religion (Informant 1).

Like I said before, ethics is not something compulsory, reporters are free to choose either to be ethical or unethical. If he decided to be unethical, nobody can stop him (Informant 2).

After the journalist wrote their reported, the editors will evaluate the news and determine whether the the news will be published or spike. This involves different roles and ethics has dropped to number two or three. Because the

utmost important is to make sure that we can sell the newspaper, also so make sure the political master is protected and will not be rejected. Ethics is still there but the implementation may be different (Informant 3).

All in all, journalist's ethics and organisations should be followed and supposed to be an important element in today's journalism. However, it will become the opposite if the reporters and editors are more profit oriented compared to precise and transparent writing.

News Framing Instigate New Society's Perspective

In this research, the researcher found that framing done by the reporters would affect the reader's feelings, opinion or thinking. Therefore, framing shows that the media has its influence in the news written. It also proves that framing capable of instigating new perspective to the readers on current situation and influencing editors to make it front-page headline. According to the informant, framing is:

Setting the type of message that will be published and it has become tradition that the framed media will be given priority in the media (Informant 1).

Framing is seen as replacement to agenda setting which is not capable of telling what to think through a more systematic and in-depth news especially when it comes to the process of choosing and highlighting of certain news. Media will propose issues that should get society's attention and trying to influence the society's interpretation using emphasis, exception or explanation in the story line (Informant 2).

Issues categorization has its own mechanism that capable of changing readers' perceptions and forcing them to think about a phenomenon. Borah (2011) posits that the framing technique only focus on the message construction and frame unique for certain news. News framing also has its own objective. Informants' thoughts on the purpose of framing are:

Media decided to frame certain news for political purposes, position of the interest group or to defend the government so that the news will get public's attention and so on (Informant 1).

Usually we framed the news to make it easy for the society to understand. But the government is happier if the reporter framed the issue in his favour and show to the public that the government is committed in delivering their services to the public (Informant 2).

Used to report precisely, fast, and objectively while considering the nation's development at the moment (Informant 3).

Reporters and editors need to go through a few processes in framing the news. It is the basic process that reporters and editors have to face daily in ensuring that the news has high news value to the readers. The informant explained the framing process:

Every morning, each reporters will be assign and asked to produce a news in certain angle. If the reporter cannot fulfilled the requested angle, they have to discuss with the editors. Interaction and discussion with the editors is crucial to secure the interest of the readers, top management, stakeholders and the government (Informant 1).

Generally, two main aspects will be the editor's concern to make sure the news is interesting. First, it must be new (never been published before) and second it involve mass public (like the NKRA policy that involve the public interest) (Informant 2).

Editor will filter the news to see the appropriateness of the writing. Decision on either to publish or not depends solely on the chief editor (Informant 3).

News selection will be done by high-ranked editors in the organisation hierarchy. All decisions depend on his discretion. Informants said that:

Editor has the absolute right in deciding which news and which page to publish, not the reporter. Everyday, newspapers received hundreds of news from local and overseas. Of course the news need improvement in news value to be competitive, but it depends on other elements as well for example the news has low news value but high in human interest, then it will be published (Informant 1).

News selection is the absolute right of the editor trusted by the organisation. Reporter's duty is only to report the news and the rest will be the editor's job (Informant 2).

Reporters will also edit their news before submitting it to the editor who has the absolute right because the reporters already understand the process. They already know that if the news is not written as directed by the editor, the news would be spiked (Informant 3).

Usually, if the reporter has been long enough in the field, they will understand the editors need in structuring the news. Each news must have the element of reciprocity and giving latest information to the public so that it can attract reader's attention and improve the newspaper's daily sale.

Strategic News Imbedded Denoted Ideas

It is difficult for the readers to interpret the real situation or the media's intention in strategic news. Usually, the readers are served with questionable news. This is the strategy used by today's media in presenting news with an agenda. The strategy put forward by the organisation is very important to make sure that they achieved their objectives. However, not all strategic news successfully achieved their target. On strategic news, the informants said:

In strategic news, the party incharge will not reveal the real motive, but they will cover-up their news with other agenda to achieve their mission (Informant 1).

Sometimes reporters will use the information given but treated with some cover-up element (Informant 2).

We do practice strategic structured sentences in news (Informant 3).

In this case, news framework needed to achieve the objectives and some parties need the media as their transmitter. According to the former Chief Group Editor of *BH*, former editor at *Bernama TV* and Executive Director and News Operation at *Media Prima* on being used by some parties for their own interest:

They will use mass media either printed or electronic as their platform in conveying their intention and strategically using broadcasting until the society is unaware of their agenda. In conclusion, everything is being done for a reason and they are doing it in their own way (Informant 1).

Of course they are targeting media because only with the media' help that they can achieve what they have planned (Informant 2).

Mass media and the government have the same agenda: to see a prosperous and peaceful country (Informant 3).

DISCUSSION

Through the research findings, it can be concluded that the media has its own discipline indoctrinated by higher levels of media organization's management to protect shareholders' interests. A few agendas have been predetermined in news writing to portray positive values of stakeholders. This is aligned with responses from informants saying that media as the main information distributors to the society, must comply with the guidelines of portraying and upholding the good image of the government in the eyes of the society. It is clearly stated by the informants that each agenda was set by top management officers in media organizations like editor, shareholders, or the chairman. This is supported by previous researchers' findings on the significant influence of agenda setting in media operation (Tcw, 2010). According to Syed Arabi (1994), Agenda Setting Theory is an approach used in communication research to ascertain the power of media influence to the society. This actually explains why we always read positive news about the government in the mainstream media. Even if media practitioners wanted to write the truth to the public, it is not going to happen because the media is compelled by the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP). Professionalism of media practitioners, will be evaluated based on their social responsibility, the quality of service given and ethics practiced throughout their career. Scholars had discussed the link between ethics and journalism. Three types of ethics mentioned by journalism scholars were absolutist ethics, antinomian or existentialist ethics and situational ethics (Merrill, Faridah & Chamiril, 2000).

As mentioned above, informant was expressing the same idea when he said “journalist needs to obey the ethics” and inferred that “ethics is something good”. In other words, ethics which are closely related to values will exist in those with responsibility because ethics is the foundation for truth, responsibility and integrity. In addition, ethics is not the only foundation in choosing news but the values chosen will dictate the news framing. Editors are responsible in framing the issue because editors ranked highest in the media organization hierarchy. This is proved by the informant who said that it is the editor’s absolute right to determine the front page headlines for the newspaper.

The research findings become more interesting when the informant’s statement that “framing decisions are politically motivated” actually proven what has been said by McCombs and Shaw (1972) about the influence of media in establishing political reality. Therefore, understanding news framing will actually expose the explicit function of the media in politics. Strategic news was found to be the result of the interconnections between media agenda, ethics and journalism, editor’s responsibility and news framing, manipulated by the media to advocate the success of the government’s mission and vision. However, as stated by the informant, they will not reveal the genuine motive of the strategic news to the public. According to Karlsson and Stromback (2010), the genuine motive will only be noticeable through traditional research like quantitative content analysis. It can be concluded that journalist should be nurtured with the right attitude from the beginning to prepare them to face the complexity of journalism field.

BIODATA

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