

## Social Actor Representation of the Missing Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370 in the Malaysian and Foreign News Reports: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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### ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to examine the linguistic representation of social actors in the selected Malaysian and foreign news reports on the circulated event of the missing MAS flight MH370. Despite extensive studies of news discourse, less attention is paid on how news event are speculated and the extent the social actors are relegated. Hence, the study explores the role of newspaper editorials in promoting stereotypical depictions through the representation of *self-* and *other-* in their reporting of the MH370 tragedy. The study retrieved a total of fifty (50) news reports of the missing MAS flight MH370 incident from ten news press, twenty-five (25) published by five local (Malaysian) English newsagents: *The Star*, *New Straits Times*, *Sun Daily*, *Malaysian Insider* and *Malaysiakini*, and twenty-five (25) others from five foreign newsagents: *Daily Mail (UK)*, *The Guardian (UK)*, *Washington Post*, *New York Times* and *USA Today*. The corpora were collected from March 8, 2014, to November 5, 2014, and analysed using Van Dijk's (1998) Ideological Square framework, as well as Reisigl and Wodak (2000) Discursive Strategies. The analysis of this study discovers evidence of the "intergroup bias" made by the selected news press in representing the MH370 social actors. The selected news press displays an overt preference for own group and obvious demotion of the other group. The study also reveals the occurrence of lexicalization of the 'other' in the foreign news reports indicating positive representation of their in-group and exhibiting apparent disapproval of the actions by the out-group. On the other hand, the analysis also reveals an impartial representation of the MH370 social actor by the local news press both for in-group and out-group.

**Key words:** Aviation Crisis, MH370, News Discourse, Social Actor Representation

### INTRODUCTION

Presently, news has been one of the main means of information transfer, given that today's societies are greatly occupied by the give-and-take of daily news. Despite the meaning-making function of news, the tangible intention unnoticed is the ideological load it offers. Evidently, many current news media enact a vital role of sculpting the perception of public opinion through speculation, assumption, theorisation, or presupposition. This has become one of the major concerns in the field of journalism.

#### Research Problem

Befitting to the power of modern information societies, news media is held responsible for prevailing discourses and seemed as the most influential form of public discourse. News media representations, both national and international, reporting the incident of missing flight MH370 have

been distorted from sympathy to blame, and the sudden emergence of conspiracy theories among the social actors involved worthy of a Hollywood screenplay. The continuous outbreak of excavating war between local and foreign media has even related this tragedy to the act of terrorism and economic downfall of the home-state, creating political tensions among concerned Malaysians. It can be observed that the neutral reporting of news is now entirely overlooked and ignored. It is in fact the commonly found issue seen in numerous works of literature on the news media accounts which is concerned with the lack of neutral reporting.

#### Research Aims

Therefore, the aim of the study is to investigate how the Malaysian and foreign news press represent the social actors involved in MH370 tragedy.

## ITERATURE

### Related Studies

Koller (2009) conducted a study on inter-discursivity, examining how group identities are constructed in discourse. In her analysis, Koller (2009) presents a framework for examining discourse agents or actors through the application of both synchronic and diachronic analysis. The results revealed that linguistic factors such as the representation of social actors and inter-discursivity assisted in identifying how the group identities are shaped in discourse. The finding of her study also invokes the concept of “multiple inter-discursivity” and demonstrates that the in-groups are not always overtly represented in positive positions and sometimes can also be “less differentiated than out-groups” (Koller, 2009). From the findings, it is implied that the integration of both micro and macro parameters serves as a bridge to the analysis of “collective identity,” in which “the representation of social actors is shaped, if not determined, by discursive and social practices and formations” (Koller, 2009). Another related study is by Razzaq (2012), who conducted a critical discourse analysis on social actor representation using Reisigl and Wodak’s framework of Discourse-Historical. The study investigated the exemplification of migrant workers in one of the most extensively circulated Malaysian English mainstream newspaper, The Star. News articles which covered a ruling imposed by the Malaysian Government in June 2011 were used as the corpus. The researcher invited foreign workers working in Malaysia (both legal and illegal) to register in the 6P amnesty and legalization program. This program allowed the foreign workers to obtain legal documents such as “biometric” identification card. The aim was to discover the way these foreign workers are portrayed in the local newspaper with the effect of the action. The researcher placed its analysis based on two main research questions: how are the migrant workers attributed in the local news article and what are the argumentation strategies applied in justifying and legitimizing their depictions. The analysis of the study indicated that foreign workers are negatively portrayed in the local newspaper. The findings also revealed that local people reflected these foreign workers as “competitors” to job opportunities as well as a “threat” to public safety through the process of nominalization.

### Theoretical Framework

Koller (2009) conducted a study on inter-discursivity, examining how group identities are constructed in discourse. In her analysis, Koller (2009) presents a framework for examining discourse agents or actors through the application of both synchronic and diachronic analysis. The results revealed that linguistic factors such as the representation of social actors and inter-discursivity assisted in identifying how the group identities are shaped in discourse. The finding of her study also invokes the concept of “multiple inter-discursivity” and demonstrates that the in-groups are not always overtly represented in positive positions and sometimes can also be “less differentiated than out-groups” (Koller, 2009). From the findings, it is implied that the integration of both

micro and macro parameters serves as a bridge to the analysis of “collective identity,” in which “the representation of social actors is shaped, if not determined, by discursive and social practices and formations” (Koller, 2009).

### Ideological Square Self- and Other- Representation

The study adopts Van Dijk’s Ideological Square framework which serves as an analytical tool in analysing the representation of *self-* and *other-*. This representation is often used in a varied number of researches in news discourse as makers in identifying the representation of social actors as well as ideological construction. Hence, his framework lays the ground for the classification of positive *self-*presentation and negative *other-*presentation available in the selected news reports.

In this framework, Van Dijk (1998) underlines the concept of emphasising positive ‘us’ and negative ‘them’, and de-emphasising positive ‘them’ and negative ‘us’ (Afsar & Mahmood, 2017). It is, in fact, deemed to be the basic assumption in most of ideological discourse strategies (Sodano, 2013). Through this framework, Van Dijk (1998) conjures that ideological representation of social groups exhibits how negative thoughts are emphasized greatly in comparison to those that are positive of the ‘other’ and thus vice-versa for the *self-* who informs of greater goods of themselves in comparison to negative ones. Hence, his framework provides a practical tool for this study to examine how the news press of different social groups identify and represent the MH370 social actors in their reporting, either the perception of the *self-* demonstrates the differentiation of the in-group from the out-group, and whether the acuity is perceived indirectly.

### Discursive Strategies

In addition, the study also includes Reisigl and Wodak’s (2000) notion of discursive strategy to understand how social actor representation is produced through a dialectical relationship between certain discursive practices and the specific social structures and its practices, which act as determinants in the shape of the discourse frame. Using Fairclough’s (1995) notion of discourse, which exemplifies discourse as a method of “signifying a specific domain of social practice from a particular perspective,” Reisigl and Wodak (2000) developed five main discursive strategies to illustrate the interconnected linguistic manifestations within and across societal segments using specific semiotic types (genres). These strategies are applied mainly to examine the presentation of *self-* and *other-* in the text.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

The study employed a critical discourse analysis as a method of qualitative investigation to analyse the corpora. A textual analysis is conducted on the selected news reports from the ten selected news press to examine the way the MH370 social actors are represented.

## Corpus

The study is confined to ten (10) selected news press covering stories of the missing MAS flight MH370. Five (5) news releases, each from the ten selected newsagents are collected from the following time scope: March 8, 2014, until November 5, 2014, which makes a total of fifty (50) news texts. The researcher limits the selection of news releases of the MH370 tragedy to eight-month duration due to the notion that the overwhelming coverage of news events is normally made in a substantial volume within the range of not more than one year after the event occurring (Andersen, 2012). The study includes the newsagents from the following three countries: Malaysia, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Using frameworks from Van Dijk as well as Reisigl and Wodak, the study aims to reveal how both local and foreign news press portray the following main social actors involved in the MH370 tragedy: the Malaysian government, Malaysia Airlines Management (MAS), the countries that helped in the search mission, the victims as well as the families of the victims.

## FINDINGS

### Actions and Efforts of the Home-State and Malaysia Airlines

#### *Positive Representation – Local Press (In-group)*

Positive attributions of the actions and efforts of the home-state and Malaysia Airlines are mainly expressed by the in-group (local press). From the analysis, there has been an extremely favourable and satisfying commentary from the Malaysian (local) press on the representation of the home-state efforts as opposed to the foreign press. In all the five news press, the News Straits Times appeared to impose an extensive credit to the Malaysian government's search effort. The News Straits Times mainly broadcasted the acclamation of the home-state's determination in the search mission which can be seen as an effort to reclaim and repair the country's image and reputation which was badly affected by the event occurrence. Although some of the local news agencies are in favour of the opposition party, they appeared to also intensify the positive attributions of the country's efforts in the event of MH370, as this incident is regarded as a national state affair. Some of the positive lexicons used to imply on the home-state's attempts carried authoritative tenor, reflecting the state's determination to locate the plane. Examples of words that denote authoritative tone found in the selected news articles published by the local press include "clarified," "released," "refuted," "funded," "initiated," "had traced," "had centered," "had adhered," and "identified." These examples of authoritative words, hence, also imply that power is indeed manifested through the news language.

#### *Negative Representation – Foreign Press (Out-group)*

The Foreign news press, on the other hand, denoted massive negative attributions of the actions and efforts of the home-state and Malaysia Airlines with regards to the MH370 disaster. It is an apparent exhibition of negative representation towards the efforts and actions made by both the Malaysian

government as well as the MAS. In the news reports of the foreign news press, the efforts from the home-country and the airline company have been greatly criticized and mitigated by all the five selected foreign press. The undesirable illustrations of the Malaysian government and MAS centred on the issues of incompetence and ineffective search measures imposed by the state, and the lack of transparency. The Malaysian government is referred to several bad allusions, such as a "foot-dragging" and "bloody liar" which denote to failure to act with the required promptness as well as being deceiving. Negations are also used extensively in the portrayal of the Malaysian government's effort. Some of the negated words which are frequently found in the foreign news reports include "twist," "anomalies," "conflicting," "contradictory," "confusing," "chaotic" and "hiding."

### Actions and Efforts of Other Countries Involved in the Search Mission

#### *Positive Representation – Local and Foreign Press (In-group and Out-group)*

It is found in the analysis of this study that both local (out-group) and foreign (in-group) press equally marked positive representation of the efforts and actions made by the other countries who were involved in the MH370 search mission. Affirmative lexical are greatly used by both local and foreign news reports indicating their ratifications and acknowledgments towards the efforts showed by the other countries involved, especially Australia and the United States. Reporters from the foreign news press massively used strong words, such as "credible sighting," "spotted," "trying to find out," "continuing," "making moves," "operated," and "had narrowed down" to signify the virtuous rectitude and capability of these two countries. The utilization of affirmative lexical by the foreign news reporters, hence, confirmed on the deconstruction of the in-group polarization, as Van Dijk (1998) affirms the common configuration of reporting is the emphasis of good attributes of "us" and bad attributes of "other," or understating the bad attributes of "us", and good attributes of "other." Another factor that the researchers examined in the positive representation of the foreign press towards the other countries who were involved in the MH370 disaster is the reproduction of the in-group image and reputation to the public eye. However, local news reporters appeared not to adhere to this emblematic, as their constructive reporting of the efforts made by the out-group is of equal amount in comparison to the foreign press. Hence, it is acknowledged that the local news press portrayed objectivization, in their representation of the out-group. It is an act of focusing their reporting to the event occurrence as the main "object" of their coverage. The foreign press, on the other hand, mainly reflected objectification (an act of degrading the out-group) in their reporting of the incident.

### The MH370 Airline Crew and Passengers

#### *Positive Representation – Local Press (In-group)*

Next, the study aimed to examine the representation of the MH370 airline crew and passengers in both local and foreign

news articles. The local news reports are found to focus their coverage of the MH370 tragedy heavily on the details of the search mission. In addition, the local press also appeared to largely include the justification on the allegations made by the foreign press towards the flight MH370 captain and passengers. The local press mainly stressed the positive character of the MH370 flight captain and his extensive experience in aviation. In response to the allegations raised by many foreign media towards the captain, the Malaysian Insider, for an instance, highlighted the investigation results made by the external agencies including the FBI, on the captain's simulator which "found nothing sinister in the device." The Star, on the other hand, accentuated on the National Union of Flight Attendants Malaysia (NUFAM) unpleasant reaction on foreign media reports towards the co-pilot of the MH370 flight who claimed to allow two women into the plane cockpit by stating that such reports are insolent to the co-pilot's family, and quoted NUFAM to be "awfully disgusted with this form of publicity and insensitive reports made against the co-pilot." In addition, The Star also quoted the union's view that there is a possibility that the two women were paid by the press to make such claim that could serve as "a form of cheap publicity."

**Negative Representation – Foreign Press (Out-group)**

In contrast to the local press, the foreign news press revealed extensive utilization of negative words in ascribing the MH370 crew and passengers. Again, objectification of images to represent the in-group social actors was applied by the foreign press. There were also attempts made by the foreign reporters to create a political accusation towards the Iranian passengers on-board who were in possession of stolen passports. This affiliation appeared to raise public stigmas on the

possibility of a terror attack. The MH370 captain and crew were understated and intensified with several allegations by the foreign press. The expressions that "someone on board switched off the aircraft's transponder" and "the pilot could simply have switched off the transponder shortly before it vanished" placed a substantial weight to the possibility of delinquency made by the captain and the co-pilot, in which both of them had the authority to be in the cockpit and to switch off the aircraft's transponder. Another hypothetical expression "two passengers may have boarded with stolen passports" found in the foreign press revealed that the foreign press intended to provoke wariness and speculation on the occurrence of a terror attack.

**Resentment and Sorrow of the Victim's Family towards the Home-State**

**Negative Representation - Foreign Press (Out-group)**

The representation of sorrow was illustrated mainly by the foreign press through the grief of family members. A number of adjectival phrases can be found in describing the emotional state of the family members, such as "angrily accuse," "growing impatience," "sparking anger," "bloody liars," and "deep sadness." The phrase "cruel roller coaster of emotions" found in the foreign news reports indicated a strong feeling of resentment. It is observed that the representation of sorrow of the victim's families and a load of discontented feelings towards the Malaysian government by the foreign news press predominantly aimed to gain public sympathy. The local news press, on the other hand, has not focused their reporting into representing the frustration of the families of the victim, rather, the reporting is concentrated more on the search mission. The de-emphasising of the

**Table 1: Representation of self- and other- (Van Dijk, 1995; 1998; 2000: 75)**

Category	Representation
Actor description	Positive or negative features are applied to illustrate the belonging of the social actors whether in-group or out-group.
Authority	The duplicate of the statements from the authorities in order to provide credibility to a claim.
Lexicalisation	The choices of words or terms used to point negative representation of the other.
Polarization	Categorization of the in-group with positive representation and the out-group with negative representation.
Victimization	The awareness and attention provided to the negative consequences as a result of the out-group.

**Table 2: Discursive Strategies (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009: 96)**

Strategies	Objectives	Devices
Referential/nomination	The construction of in-groups and out-groups social actors	Membership categorization, biological, naturalizing and depersonalizing metaphors, metonymies and synecdoche.
Predication	Labeling social actors either positively, negatively, deprecatorily or appreciatively	Stereotypical, evaluative attributions of negative or positive traits. Implicit and explicit predicates.
	Justification of positive or negative attributions	Topoi used to justify political inclusion or exclusion, discrimination or preferential treatment.
Perspectivation, framing or discourse representation	Expressing involvement Positioning speaker's point of view	Reporting, description, narration or quotation of (discriminatory) events and utterances.
Intensification, mitigation	Modifying the epistemic status of a proposition	Intensifying or mitigating the illocutionary force of (discriminatory) utterances.

resentment of the victim's family appeared as it would lead to damaging the national image of the country.

### Compassion and Support towards the Victim's Family and the MH370 Incident

#### *Positive Representation - Foreign Press (Out-group)*

Lastly, the representation of compassion was also found mainly in the foreign news reports. Reporters from the foreign press extensively rendered supports to the MH370 family members in their reportage. Most of the phrases employed aimed to reflect the care and concern of the global society. Examples of phrases denoting to compassion and support that can be found in most foreign press include *"pledged to stay in touch," "we will never give up. This we owe to the families of those on board," "hope," "deeply sympathetic,"* and *"urge the media to respect their privacy, allow them the space they need at this difficult time."* Apparent insignificant coverage of compassion towards the families of the victims can be observed from the local press, as the local press seemed to lay their interested more on covering news related to the updates of the search mission. The foreign press anticipates this as one of the illustrations of the Malaysian government's insensitivity.

## CONCLUSIONS

### Discussion of Findings

The analysis reveals great manifestation of actor description, lexicalisation, polarization and victimization of Van Dijk's Ideological Square in the overall representation of the MH370 social actors. The analysis of this research discovers evidence of "intergroup bias" by both local and foreign news press, a demonstration of preferences for own group and degradations of the other group. The finding of the study discloses a clear construction and reconstruction of the configuration of the "other" by the foreign press which denotes the "other" mainly as perpetrators and agents who contributed to the cause of the flight MH370 tragedy. In the foreign news reports, the victims and their families are passivized as being agonized and mistreated by the "other", in this case, the Malaysian government. Lexicalisation of the "other" in the foreign news press revealed their positive representation of the in-group and prominent displays of the out-group's (Malaysian government) deceiving actions is an act to provide a legitimization towards the out-group's incapacity in handling the aviation incident. Wodak (2001) indicates that this configuration style of "other" is a stereotypical representation by the in-group. In the event of the MH370 incident, the Malaysian authorities and Malaysia Airlines were deemed to be unreliable through their series of convoluted statements bringing latent prejudgments and conjectures to the fore.

The local news reports mainly displayed conscientious portrayal of the Malaysian government with regards to their actions in handling the missing MH370 aircraft crisis. It is observed that the local press aimed to establish objective reporting through the citation of facts and valid evidence and attempted to confine subjectivity. For example, the New

Straits Times highlighted the evidence of the home-state's action in leading the search and rescue mission immediately after the disappearance. Furthermore, the Malaysian government and Malaysia Airline's efforts to locate the missing flight's last location and to provide assistance to the families of victims are intensified by the local press which reflects their determination to unravel the mystery. Notably, the legitimisation and justification of the Malaysian government's power have also been made apparent in the local news reports. Furthermore, the foreign press appeared to primarily depict the magnitude of support and solidarity towards the family members of the flight MH370 crew and passengers through the narration of emotional sentiments and hopes. The Star was the only selected local press that included the expression of solidarity in its reporting. This evidence is supported by Halim (2014), in which his study revealed that a familial tie is the ideological emphasis of The Star.

It is interesting as the study found that the selected foreign news coverage of the missing aircraft MH370 laid great attention on the representation of the Malaysian government's struggle in handling the crisis from the following three main aspects: failures in locating the exact site of the missing aircraft, inattentive action towards the families of the victims, and countless miscommunication of information about the event. This evidence is supported by Hynes (2014) who asserts that the foreign press intended to offer less attention to the Malaysian perspective of the story. Hence, the finding of the study revealed that the selected foreign press publicised on the portrayal of the image loss of the Malaysian government and the defeat of its reputation.

In brief, a negative representation of the out-group (the Malaysian government as well as Malaysia Airlines) by the foreign press is seen as a process of social re-categorization, attempted to make a deconstruction of public perception towards the image and reputation of the out-group. While the positive representation of the in-group by the foreign press (especially to the United States and Australia) is seemed as an attempt to incorporate a repairman of reputation to the in-group through exposure of constructive crises management roles played by the in-group.

### Conclusions

The study of this research reveals that foreign press prominently present negative attributions on how the two main social actors of the MH370 incident: the Malaysian government and Malaysia Airlines handled the missing Flight MH370 event. Great condemnations on the state's lack of transparency and promptness in managing the search operations were made vibrant by the foreign press. The selected foreign newsagents are also found to be opinionated in their presentation of the Malaysian government, and highly acclaimed other countries (self-) who were involved in the search mission. It is also pointed out that foreign press has given fewer considerations of the Malaysian perspective. Whereas, local press appeared to impose almost a balanced coverage from both perspectives. Negative predispositions in the representation of the other- (especially the Malaysian authorities) are mainly reflected by the foreign press, where-

by lexicalisations are greatly imposed. It can be seen that the ineffective attempts made by the Malaysian authorities are controversialized (lexicalised) mainly by the foreign press. Consequently, the study contributed insights into the reproduction of power relations, in which the Malaysian government is greatly fragmented in their ability to handle the MH370 conflict process.

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