DESENSITISING INTERETHNIC CONFLICTS
IN NEWS REPORTS

Fariza Puteh Behak *

Abstract
In general, the print media employs a few ideological frames in reporting news to achieve desired effects. One of the frames usually employed by the media in reporting interethnic conflicts is the desensitization of the issue. The objective of this study is to investigate the method employed by Malaysian English language mainstream newspapers in desensitizing the tension of interethnic conflicts in their news reports. To achieve the goal of the study, a comprehensive content analysis of news reports on the 13th May 1969 incident and the 2001 - Old Klang Road clash by two mainstream English newspapers - the New Straits Times and the Star was carried out. The finding indicates that among the techniques used to desensitize the conflicts are: portraying positive and ecstatic stories to indicate normalcy, inserting confidence-building statements and blaming an unspecified antagonist. The study will conclude in discussing the implications of the study towards the awareness of the masses towards the role of mass media in Malaysia in maintaining unity in our multicultural country.

INTRODUCTION

Brief outline of Inter-ethnic conflicts in Malaysia

The population of Malaysia consists of several ethnic communities. According to a survey carried out by the Department of Statistics in 1965, by 1964, the ethnic composition was as follows: 45.9% Malays, 35.9% Chinese, 9.6%

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Indian, 6.6% non-Muslim natives and 2.2% other ethnic groups respectively (Means: 1991). Meanwhile, according to the Population and Housing Census 2000, the ethnic composition was as follows: 65.1% Malays, 26.0% Chinese and 7.7% Indians.

Generally, Malaysia is known for the harmony of its multiracial community. It is the ‘open-policy’ of the government to ensure peace and harmony among the multiracial communities. For example, the National Constitution was amended to accommodate the cultural diversity in this country (Syed Arabi Idid and Latifah Pawanteh: 1989). In addition, the mass media in Malaysia is required to cooperate to lead the pluralistic society to this direction. The Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPAPA) of 1984 was enacted to ‘regulate the use of printing presses and the printing, importation, production, reproduction, publishing and distribution of publications, and for matters connected therewith’ (Syed Arabi Idid and Latifah Pawanteh: 1989).

However, despite efforts by the Government to promote racial unity, Malaysia is not exclusive of inter-ethnic clashes.

The most significant inter-racial conflict in Malaysian history is the 13th May 1969 tragedy. As cited in a special report by Majlis Gerakan Negara (1969), the incident was sparked by a dissension between the Chinese and the Malays. The existence of communal parties that fought for their own ethnic groups had somewhat contributed to the interethnic tension. It was reported that the tension was sparked by verbal assault against each other in the victory procession of opposing parties DAP, Gerakan and UMNO. The heat of the clash affected the whole of Peninsular Malaysia and a state of Emergency was declared (Majlis Gerakan Negara: 1969). It was estimated that more than two hundred Malays, Chinese and Indians were killed in this chaos (Kertas Putih: 1988).

Another significant inter-ethnic clash is the Old-Klang Road clash. It was reported that the incident happened due to a misunderstanding of an Indian family and Malay family (Wong: 2001). As a result of the misunderstanding, accompanied by the rumour of the Indian-Malay fight, intense rage besieged the residents. Soon after that, fights broke out in
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Taman Desa Ria Flats and later spread to adjoining Kampung Lindungan Medan, Kampung Dato’ Harun and Kampung Medan. Few people were killed and many were injured in the series of clashes (Wong: 2001).

The power of the media

The mass media is one of the main sources of updated information for the public (Davison: 1977; Kertas Putih: 1988), and in addition to reporting facts, many scholars have noted that news reports are always value laden (Elliott: 1977). News reports are usually interlaced with dominant ideologies, which are the thoughts and ideas of people in power in a particular society (Tolson: 1996; Lye: 1997). Davison (1977) claimed that apart from dissemination information, mass media also provides guidelines for thinking about the information. In short, the media plays a major role in shaping the masses opinion (Iyengar & Simon: 1993; Luke: 1996).

Due to the claim that media has the power to shape the masses mind, Malaysian mass media is said to have social responsibility. It is said that they were supervised by the ruling government (Samsudin Rahim: 1998; Rampal: 1995; Nathan: 1986). As cited by Rampal (1995), Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad (1989) once claimed that “the proper, appropriate system (of mass media) must depend on the objective condition of the society, its aspirations and state of development.” It was quite clear that Malaysian mass media has the responsibility in maintaining and nurturing national unity and development.

Ideological frames in conflict news reporting

The way the writer frames a racial conflict plays a substantial role in times of crisis (Kertas Putih: 1988). The choice of what to report and what is to be given emphasis shapes the overall opinion of the masses towards the whole issue. According to Ashley and Olson (1998), framing involves principles of selection, emphasis, exclusion and presentation by the media to organize a discourse. To achieve a desired effect, the news writers embed intended ideas by selecting what to print, giving emphasis to things that are to be hidden. In short, in reporting mass media have its own ideological frames.

One of the ideological frames in conflict reporting is the desensitization of the conflict (Syed Arabi Idid and Latifah Pawan teh: 1989;
Martin & Oshagan: 1997; Manoff: 1996). This often claimed that this technique is employed by the media in their peacekeeping assignments. Idid and Pawanteh (1989), concluded that, desensitization by the media is “to promote and advance the cause of positive racial relations in Malaysia”. They further stated that journalist have “to report issues of national importance without making them appear racially sensitive”.

Syed Arabi Idid and Latifah Pawanteh (1989) explained a view from Haddad (1967:37) on the guidelines in reporting conflicts; which were:

i. Scare headlines, scare bulletins and sensationalism of all kinds should be avoided in magazines, newspapers, radio and televisions.

ii. No report should use superlatives or adjectives, which might incite trouble in areas where disturbances have quietened.

In addition, in 1970, the Press Foundation of Asia presented a 22-point General Guideline for reporting racial and communal tension (Gonzalez: 1989). Among the guidelines were as follows:

i. Journalist should use cool and moderate language, especially in headlines and also in display. No concession should be made to rhetoric. Lurid and gory details and emotive reference to past history should be avoided.

ii. Every effort should be made to portray ethnic groups other than conflict situation.

Second, media always associates the contender with negative images (Elliott: 1977, Dimpap Ngidang: 1993; Garon: 1996). Downing (1988), in his research of Soviet media reporting on Afghanistan conflicts, suggested that the media boosted the image of Soviet army in Afghanistan by describing them as contingent, a more positive portrayal than army. Meanwhile, in referring to their contenders, the Soviet media used negative images such as foreign agents, mercenaries, counter-revolution agents and terrorist. In the case of Malaysian mass media, in reporting inter-ethnic conflicts, an unspecified opposition was blamed.

In the course of the research, the researcher noted that another significant technique was employed in desensitizing inter-ethnic conflicts, that was by giving confidence-building statements.
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Hence, it can be concluded that in desensitizing a conflict, the following techniques can be adopted:

- Estatic stories indicating normalcy
- Strategies to desensitize an issue
- Delegitimization of an antagonist
- Confidence building statements

THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Much research has been done on the role of media in reporting information in times of crisis. Many studies have shown that the mass media follows certain ideological frames in handling news reports on conflict (Elliott: 1977). Thus, in times of crisis that affects national unity, the mass media can be utilized to propagate a set of ideological frames for conflict resolution (Davison: 1974; Syed Arabi Idid and Latifah Pawanteh: 1989).

It is said that the newspaper is one essential tool employed by Malaysia media institutions in reporting inter-racial clashes. Syed Arabi Idid and Latifah Pawanteh (1989) pointed out that the policy of the Malaysian government is “to maintain national unity at all cost”. Thus, it is likely that the Government enlists the help of the media in addressing racial conflicts.

In relation to this, this study aims to examine how newspapers frame ethnic conflicts in Malaysia. Specifically, the study focuses on investigating whether Malaysian English language newspapers desensitize inter-ethnic conflicts in their news reports. The study also aims to identify and documents the strategies and techniques employed by the newspapers in desensitizing the inter-ethnic conflicts.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study utilized content analysis to achieve the goals of the study. Content analysis is a valuable tool in analyzing many mass media issues such as agenda setting and news framing (Wimmer and Dominick: 1997). It is a popular
approach as it provides an efficient way to investigate the content of the media reports. For example, as cited by Syed Arabi Idid (1994), the method was used by Laswell (1971) in analyzing German newspapers to examine the military strategies as well as the status of the enemy morale.

After a comprehensive content analysis, the results were referred and discussed with two specialist informants. The two specialist informants are well qualified in their own fields. One is an experienced journalist for a renowned institution and another is an experienced English teacher. Much time was spent with the two specialist informants in going through the analysis.

The samples of this study were news reports regarding interethnic conflicts in Malaysia, namely the 13th May 1969 tragedy and the Old Klang Road clash in the New Straits Times (NST) and the Star. The New Straits Times and the Star were chosen because both are the mainstream English language newspapers in Malaysia. However, for the case of the 13th May 1969 tragedy reporting, only the news reports from the New Straits Times were analyzed as the Star was not yet established during the 13th May 1969 tragedy.

FINDINGS

Table 1 (a) Parts of news reports on the 13th May 1969 tragedy, containing ecstatic stories indicating back-to-normal scenarios.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Ecstatic statements indicating normalcy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HM1</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>19 May 1969</td>
<td>Situation in Selangor shows improvement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HM2</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>19 May 1969</td>
<td>The situation throughout the country and Kuala Lumpur in particular, had improved to some extent during the past 24 hours.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HM3</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>20 May 1969</td>
<td>And, in view of the all around improvement in the situation, from tomorrow: the NORTH SOUTH BOUND morning passenger trains will run again.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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HM4 NST 20 May 1969 The General Post Office here and the main post office in Petaling Jaya will be open for restricted business from 8 a.m.

HM5 NST 20 May 1969 The court will resume sitting, and staff are asked to report for work by 8 a.m.

HM6 NST 20 May 1969 Tension is still high, but the situation in Kuala Lumpur has improved.

HM7 NST 20 May 1969 “The main lines of communication throughout the country have been normalized. Malayan Railway has resumed its services, while ports and roads are open for convoys carrying food and goods” Tun Abd Razak said.

HM8 NST 20 May 1969 Important government departments have started to function.

HM9 NST 20 May 1969 School reopens in Penang.

HM10 NST 20 May 1969 Life in Penang took another step towards normalcy today when thousands of students went back to school.

HM11 NST 20 May 1969 Important government offices, bank, firms and shops worked a full day today.

HM12 NST 20 May 1969 Three friends - a Chinese, an Indian and a Malay - find time to share a joke, despite the rush to buy food in a market in Petaling Jaya when the curfew was lifted for five and a half hours yesterday morning.

HM13 NST 20 May 1969 Shops and markets throughout the Federal Capital and Petaling Jaya were again crowded, but there was enough food and plenty of fresh vegetables for all in nearly every centre.

HM14 NST 21 May 1969 Situation in Penang continues to improve.

HM15 NST 21 May 1969 Now buses back on roads again.

HM16 NST 21 May 1969 So encouraging this K.L scene… Good old traffic jams are back.

HM17 NST 21 May 1969 Traffic jams yesterday morning in Jalan Mountbatten (at right) and in other parts of Kuala
Lumpur were welcome signs of a return to normalcy after a week of tension.

HM18 NST 21 May 1969 Even more encouraging - there was not a policeman or soldier in sight.

HM19 NST 26 May 1969 Tension easing; curfew cut further.

HM20 NST 26 May 1969 The situation in the country has further improved and tension is easing off appreciably, the Information Control Centre said today.

HM21 NST 26 May 1969 Most residents here and in Petaling Jaya spent quiet Sunday at home.

HM22 NST 27 May 1969 A never before picture - Federal Court in Session, a reassuring sign that capital is returning to normal.

Table 1 (b) Parts of news reports on the Old Klang Road clash, containing ecstatic stories indicating normalcy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Ecstatic statements indicating normalcy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HK1</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>12 March 2001</td>
<td>The security situation at Kg Lindungan, off Jln Klang Lama, where clashes among residents were reported since Thursday, has returned to normal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HK2</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>12 March 2001</td>
<td>Peaceful wedding. It was like any other wedding made memorable with presence of relatives and friends. For Adzlin Abd Kadir and Norzahura Abdul Rani, their reception at the groom's home in Taman Medan, off Jln Klang Lama, went on smoothly despite reports of clashes among residents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HK3</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>12 March 2001</td>
<td>It was reported that the situation in the affected areas had now returned to normal following quick action by police.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HK4</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>13 March 2001</td>
<td>Friendly neighbour. In true Malaysian spirit, Nafisah Abdul Rahman offers home made cookies to neighbours V. Angapan and Murali in Taman Medan off Jln Klang Lama, PJ.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HK5</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>13 March 2001</td>
<td>It's business as usual.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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HK6 NST 13 March 2001  Life is returning to normal for residents of Taman Medan and the surrounding areas today with DPM Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi advising residents to remain calm and ignore rumors.

HK7 NST 13 March 2001  It was business as usual for the residents- shops and stalls reopened, while residents left their homes for work and children went to school.

HK8 NST 15 March 2001  Friends. Having been neighbours for several years, Raja Pathar is all smiles with friends Halim Mohamad and Yusuf Ismail in Kg Medan yesterday. Due to the police crackdown in recent days, following clashes in Kg Lindungan and neighboring settlements, the friends stayed indoors and lost out on their regular chats.

HK9 NST 15 March 2001 Business as usual. Living in Kg Medan for the past 15 years, sundry shop owner Muthu Suppiah is glad he is able to serve regular customer like Ruslina Yusoff, who turned up with son Nur Ain, to buy her daily groceries. The settlement was one of five near Kg Lindungan where clashes took place after a fight in the area last Thursday.

HK10 NST 16 March 2001 MB. Solution in sight, issue coming to an end.

HK11 NST 16 March 2001  ‘Happy situation almost normal’

HK12 NST 16 March 2001 Natural remedy, Suhairi Mustaffa, R. Devanan and R. Maran plucking margosa leaves - known for its effectiveness in healing chicken pox - for a sick friend in Kg Medan yesterday.

HK13 NST 23 March 2001 He (Datuk Seri Samy Vellu) said the situation had generally improved in the areas affected by unrests recently.

HK14 NST 24 March 2001 Class attendance back to normal.

HK15 NST 24 March 2001 Education Minister Tan Sri Musa Muhammad said today that the report he received showed the attendance yesterday was 92%. “This shows the situation is back to normal”, he said.
Television footage shows cheerful students no longer afraid to come out. Some walk and cycle to and from home to school.”

“The situation (in Kg Lindungan and neighbouring areas) has returned to normal with no incidents in the past 48 hours,” he (Inspector General of Police Tan Sri Norian Mai) said.

Samy Vellu said he visited the area in Petaling Jaya daily and had witnessed with his own eyes how the Malays and Indians in that area live in harmony as usual.

The people in that area do not fight among themselves. They are also baffled with the recent cases as they believed that everything has been resolved,” he (Datuk Seri Samy Vellu) said.

Normal routine. Several villagers doing their grocery shopping at the wet market in Kg Medan yesterday, indicating peace and order has been restored in their area.

Having fun. Children enjoying a game of soccer in Kg Lindungan yesterday after heavy police presence brought the tension-filled situation under control.

For many residents, the sight of politicians, security forces and the press signaled that things were returning to normal as they went out to buy provisions for their households and other essential items.

Groups of children, unperturbed by the presence of policemen in their neighborhood, played games and mingled with each other.

Time to play... a group of children playing sepak takraw under the watchful eyes of police in Tmn Datuk Harun, off Klang Road, yesterday.

Not far from where they spoke, a few hundred people earlier attended a wedding kenduri without disturbance and watched police go about their duties.
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HK26  The Star  16 March 2001  In harmony. Children playing together in Kg Medan yesterday.

HK27  The Star  18 March 2001  No worries. Children playing at the Kg Medan playground yesterday. Life in the village where the recent racial clashes took place is back to normal once again.

HK28  The Star  18 March 2001  The residents continued with their daily chores, with people of various races patronizing the shops and stalls in the area while children playing in the play-grounds.

It is interesting to note that the ecstatic statements above can be divided into a few subcategories.

First, the reports provided a sense of resolution by implying that the situation had returned to normal or improving. This was primarily formulated through the use of words such as “improved”, “easing”, “normalcy” and “return to normal” throughout the news report in Table 1(a) and Table 1(b). The tense situation was described as returning to normal and everything went on as “usual”.

In the reporting of the 13th May 1969 tragedy, the state of normalcy was portrayed through the resume of daily businesses. As presented in Table 1(a), the state of normalcy was represented by announcing the operation of transportation system such as the North South Bound morning passenger trains of the Malayan Railway (HM3,HM7) as well as bus services (HM7,HM15). It was also announced that the roads and the ports in the country, especially for convoys in carrying food and goods, resumed their operation (HM7). Table 1(a) also depicted the operations of main line of communication and other institutions such as schools, government offices, banks and post offices as signs that everything had returned to normal (HM4, HM8, HM9). In the reporting, it was also portrayed that the courts were already in session, whilst firms, markets and shops began to operate as usual (HM5, HM11). Even the traffic jam was given a positive image that symbolized a state of normalcy. The traffic jam in Jalan Mountbatten and other parts of Kuala Lumpur were described as a part of normal life of the people (HM16, HM17).
Meanwhile in Table 1(b), signs of normalcy were portrayed through the depiction of operation of daily businesses. It was described that the wet markets, stalls and grocery shops operated as usual. In item HK20 and HK29 in Table 1(b), these activities was described as normal routines and served as an indication of peace and order in the area. Once again, the operation of schools and working institutions were used as a symbol of normal state (HK5). The residents at the affected areas were described as leaving home as usual to go to school and workplace (HK7). For example, in item HK15, the Education Minister Tan Sri Musa Mohamad was quoted announcing the rate of school attendance was as high as 92%, indicating that everything is back to normal. In reinforcing this point, item HK25 portrayed the residents attending a wedding without disturbance. In short, the news reports implied as if the people involved are not affected in any way due to the fights, thus trivializing the problem.

Secondly, the news reports portrayed the interaction of conflicting parties, exclusive from the conflict scenario. The news reports compiled stories of racial integration of the major races in Malaysia, specifically among the conflicting parties. The news reports depicted that both parties remain united and friendly to each other as if they are not affected by the chaos and isolated from the racial tension around them. For example, in item HM12, in Table 1(a) depicted the friendship of three friends, a Chinese, an Indian and a Malay; who seized the opportunity of the curfew lift to share jokes. This portrayal can be considered as an effective strategy in instilling the sense of resolution. It emphasized the positive image of racial unity amidst the chaos; thus, indirectly reassured the masses that the conflict is not serious.

Table 1(b) further shows that the news reports on the Old Klang Road clash were more focused in portraying the positive image of the conflicting parties, isolated from the state of tension. In item HK2, the peaceful wedding of a Malay couple and its multi racial guess was most likely to give the impression that the relationship of the races was still untarnished by the clash. Table 1(b) also shows that the news reports stressed on the friendship among the conflicting party. In item HK4, it was reported that a Malay in the affected area, Nafisah Abdul Rahman offering homemade cookies to her Indian neighbours V.Angapan and Murali and the scenario was anchored with the slogan, a "true Malaysian spirit". Similarly, in item HK8, the friendship of Raja Pathar, Halim Mohamad and Yusuf Ismail of
Kampung Medan was put to the limelight. Item HK9, depicted the story of a glad Indian sundry owner, Muthu Suppiah who could operate business as usual and serve his Malay regular customer, Ruslina Yusoff and her baby. It can be assumed that, this positive image implied the safe and calm situation in the affected area.

Table 2(a) Parts of news reports on the 13th May 1969 tragedy, in which an unspecified antagonist was delegitimized.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Blaming unspecified opposition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BM1</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>15 May 1969</td>
<td>The Tengku spoke of a ‘real attempt’ by disloyal elements to overthrow the Government by force of arms and spread panic throughout the country.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BM2</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>19 May 1969</td>
<td>The Sultan of Kedah today called subjects to be on guard against subversive elements who were seeking not only to divide the various races but also make the people lose faith in the Government.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BM3</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>19 May 1969</td>
<td>Such rumours, he (Sultan of Kedah) said, could easily start trouble between one race and another and thus create a tense situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BM4</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>19 May 1969</td>
<td>‘Do not listen to rumours, but listen to radio, TV’ Razak urges.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BM5</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>19 May 1969</td>
<td>However, we must continue vigilant. We will continue to take strong measures against troublemakers or potential mischief makers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BM6</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>19 May 1969</td>
<td>“I (Tun Razak warn all mischief makers that the country s now in a state of Emergency. Anyone who inflames racial sentiment or helps to deteriorate the situation will be severely dealt with under the Emergency laws.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BM7</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>21 May 1969</td>
<td>He (Kelantan Chief Minister Dato’ Hj Mohamad Asri) regretted that the incidents took place after the election and added ‘bad element’ who did not want to see a multiracial society live in peace and harmony.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BM8</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>20 May 1969</td>
<td>Council blames rumour mongers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Table 2(b)  Parts of new reports on the Old Klang Road clash, in which an unspecified antagonist was delegitimized.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Blaming unspecified opposition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BK1</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>12 March 2001</td>
<td>“Rumours spread by irresponsible people would only jeopardize public peace and order” he (Deputy Inspector-General of Police Datu Jamil Johari) added.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BK2</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>13 March 2001</td>
<td>He (DPM Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) also warned rumour-mongers could be charged with sedition and attempting to cause unrest and causing racial riots.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BK3</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>16 March 2001</td>
<td>All for political gain: Certain quarters spreading rumours.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BK4</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>16 March 2001</td>
<td>The Prime Minister said these people had spread rumours of many people being killed in the hope that it would lead to widespread unrest in the area but in other settlements too.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BK5</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>24 March 2001</td>
<td>Police today warned that rumour mongers who are out to create the unrest and those who accept unfounded statement as the truth would be dealt with according to the law.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BK6</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>24 March 2001</td>
<td>And, in a move to show they mean business, police have increased manpower in Kg Lindungan and nearly all settlements off Jalan Klang Lama, to bring and book the ramble-rousers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BK7</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>26 March 2001</td>
<td>The police have not ruled out the possibility that the recent attacks against people in Selangor and here are the work of organized crime.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BK8</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>30 March 2001</td>
<td>The Prime Minister said while the situation in Jln Klang Lama had improved much, certain groups were still trying to capitalize on the fragile situation to achieve their objectives through evil ways by staging attacks in other areas to infuriate the residents and spark off riots.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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BK9  The Star  11 March 2001  We believe some quarters spread rumours of fights taking place, which led to a group of people showing up in the area to end support.

BK10 The Star  11 March 2001  We are doing all we can to ensure that national security is not eroded by unscrupulous parties with vested interest.


BK12 The Star  15 March 2001  MIC President Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu said the recent fights in Kg Medan and its surrounding areas could have been planned by certain quarters out to create chaos in the country.

BK13 The Star  15 March 2001  “There is an element of outsiders involved” (Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu)

From Table 2(a) and Table 2(b), it is clear that the news reports deligitimized an unspecified opposition. It was implied that a negative unspecified element was responsible for the chaos. The image of the opposition was vaguely and negatively described. In Table 2(a) they were described using negative words such as disloyal elements, subversive elements, trouble makers, mischief makers and rumour mongers. Meanwhile in Table 2(b), they were described as irresponsible people, rumour mongers, certain quarters, ramble rousers, unscrupulous parties and outsiders.

In addition to the negative name-calling, these elements were portrayed as the responsible party of starting and igniting the clash between the two parties. It is interesting to note that, the unspecified opposition was also reported to be neither from the conflicting parties (BK7, BK11, BK13). It was reported that these negative elements spread rumors regarding the gravity of the clash thus inflaming the spirit of both conflicting parties (BK4). They were also claimed to have their own vested interest agenda (BK10). It was reported that they have negative intentions to overthrow the Government and spread unnecessary panic throughout the country (BM1, BM2, BK3, BK8, BK12).

In short, these negative images and name-calling were described as an opposition outside of the conflicting parties. It can be assumed that this technique was used to desensitize the conflicts by disassociating both
conflicting parties to the clash. To further desensitize the conflicts, the whole situation was also trivialized and labeled as rumours.

Table 3(a) Parts of news reports on the 13th May 1969 tragedy, containing confidence-building statements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Confidence-building statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CM1</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>15 May 1969</td>
<td>The King acts to end mob violence in the nation’s capital.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CM2</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>15 May 1969</td>
<td>I hope all of you can work for peace, well-being and safety of the State.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CM3</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>15 May 1969</td>
<td>If all of you show loyalty to me, I don’t care what creed you belong to, I will protect you. (Sultan).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CM4</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>19 May 1969</td>
<td>The Deputy Prime Minister and Director of the National Operations Council, Tun Abdul Razak, tonight urged all races to rebuild trust, mutual respect and confidence in each other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CM5</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>19 May 1969</td>
<td>The Government was prepared and determined to resist these elements so that the good, loyal citizens will once more enjoy peace and harmony.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CM6</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>19 May 1969</td>
<td>Ministers study problems caused by curfews.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CM7</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>19 May 1969</td>
<td>We are looking into these matters to see how they can be improved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CM8</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>19 May 1969</td>
<td>He assured all Malaysians that he would use the powers vested in him as Director of Operations “fairly but with firmness” to restore law and order quickly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CM9</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>19 May 1969</td>
<td>At the same time, the Government will continue to take firm and effective measures against disloyal elements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CM10</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>20 May 1969</td>
<td>Ops council gets down to work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CM11</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>20 May 1969</td>
<td>A relaxed Tengku Abdul Rahman expressed the hope today that the National Operations Council would quickly restore peace.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The council is working in earnest and I (Tengku Abdul Rahman) hope the result will be peace.

Table 3(b) Parts of news reports on the Old Klang Road clash, containing confidence-building statements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Confidence-building statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CK1</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>10 March 2001</td>
<td>Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi denied today that clashes between rival groups in housing settlements off Jalan Klang Lama last night were racial in nature, attributing the misinformation to rumours.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CK2</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>11 March 2001</td>
<td>Dr. M: Situation under control.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CK3</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>12 March 2001</td>
<td>“There was nothing to worry about,” Selangor Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Mohd Khir Toyo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CK4</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>13 March 2001</td>
<td>“The police made the arrests as a preventive measure and as a result the situation has remained under control,” Abdullah said.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CK5</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>13 March 2001</td>
<td>“This is not racial battle between Malays and Indians...it just isn’t, take it from me,” he (Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) said.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CK6</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>13 March 2001</td>
<td>“The situation in the city is very much under control and there was no need for alarm.” (Kuala Lumpur police chief Datuk Meor Hussein Chek Mahayuddin).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CK8</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>14 March 2001</td>
<td>“We have a longstanding excellent track record when it comes to racial unity and harmony and we must defend it at all costs” (Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CK9</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>14 March 2001</td>
<td>“Our gathering tonight indicates that what people really want is to live in harmony” (Datuk Shahrizat Abdul Jalil).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CK10</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>15 March 2001</td>
<td>Big plans for Kg Medan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
<td>Source</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CK11</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>23 March 2001</td>
<td>Police to increase patrols, presence in Kg Medan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CK12</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>24 March 2001</td>
<td>There was nothing to fear now as the situation was under control.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CK13</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>24 March 2001</td>
<td>&quot;We want the people to continue to live in peace. They should not fear anyone.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CK14</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>24 March 2001</td>
<td>&quot;They should be free to do what they wish to or go anywhere, even at night.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CK15</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>24 March 2001</td>
<td>&quot;Even if they want to go to work early in the morning, they should not feel frightened. The bottom line is we do not want the people to live in fear,&quot; he (Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi) said.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CK16</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>24 March 2001</td>
<td>&quot;The police will continue to monitor the area. But if, I am saying, if really necessary, we will station more security personnel in the area,&quot; he said.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CK17</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>26 March 2001</td>
<td>More than 1000 policemen were stationed round-the-clock in the areas and roadblocks were still being mounted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CK18</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>26 March 2001</td>
<td>&quot;I just come back from the area early this morning and no new incident has occurred there,&quot; he (Datuk Seri Samy Vellu) said and urged the public not to listen to rumours.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CK19</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>30 March 2001</td>
<td>PM: We must value peace.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CK20</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>30 March 2001</td>
<td>As such Dr Mahathir said it was crucial that Malaysians preserve the peace and avoid racial misunderstanding because no one would benefit from riot-torn country.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CK21</td>
<td>NST</td>
<td>30 March 2001</td>
<td>He (Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad) said that a peaceful Malaysia would generate greater development that would bring good to all.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CK22</td>
<td>The Star</td>
<td>11 March 2001</td>
<td>Under control.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CK23</td>
<td>The Star</td>
<td>11 March 2001</td>
<td>Resident’s safety is assured.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Desensitising Interethnic Conflicts in News Reports

CK24  The Star  11 March 2001  Prime Minister is confident that police will look after the safety of people in Kg Medan and neighboring areas off Old Klang Road.

CK25  The Star  11 March 2001  Commenting on clashes in the area in the last three days, he (PM) said the situation was under control and people there should not be unduly worried.

CK26  The Star  11 March 2001  "They (the clashes) were not planned. There were no racial clashes" (PM).

CK27  The Star  11 March 2001  "It will settle down. We assure the people that police will look after the situation and there will be no repeat of the incident" (PM).

CK28  The Star  11 March 2001  Earlier in Petaling Jaya, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi stressed that the situation is now calm and under control.

CK29  The Star  11 March 2001  Jamil stressed that the situation is under control and there was no reason to impose curfew. (Deputy Inspector-General of Police Datuk Mohamed Jamil Johari)

CK30  The Star  11 March 2001  "My officers are monitoring the situation. We are confident it will not spread," he (Deputy Inspector-General of Police Datuk Mohamed Jamil Johari) said.

CK31  The Star  15 March 2001  Peace efforts. Leaders move to mend community ties.

CK32  The Star  26 March 2001  "Let there be continued peace in Malaysia, let there be continued prosperity in Malaysia" (Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu).

One emergent category in desensitizing interethnic conflicts was using statements containing confidence-building elements. This category can be divided into four sub-categories.

First, the news reports contain assurance that the problem is under control. Almost all the news reports began with the statement of this security assurance. The public was assured that the chaotic situations were under
control or cease to exist. The assurance was depicted as early as the first coverage of the clash (CK2, CK22). The diction 'under control' was repeatedly mentioned in the news reports, reinforcing the idea that everything was definitely secured (CK2, CK4, CK6, CK12, CK22, CK25, CK28).

Second, the news reports contained declaratives that necessary steps has been taken by the authority. In item CM1 and item CM2, the rulers such as the King and Sultan assured the masses that they would take actions and protect the citizens. In addition, Table 3(a) portrayed the determination of the ruling government in handling the matter (CM5). For example, the Ministry had set up National Operations Council to discuss effective measures in resolving the conflict (CM4, CM8, CM10). Repeatedly, the news reports gave accounts of the Ops Council getting to work to restore law, order and peace in the country. Similarly, in covering the Old Klang Road incident, the newspaper portrayed that the government had taken necessary measures to ensure the safety of the citizens. It was reported that the police patrol had been increased at the affected area (CK4, CK16, CK17, CK23, CK24, CK27, CK30).

Next, the confidence-building statements also consist of a call to the public to maintain inter-ethnic harmony. In item CM1 and CM2, the King not only promised to take actions but also summoned the public to work for peace, well-being and safety of the country. In item CM4, the Deputy Prime Minister urged the people to “rebuild trust, mutual respect and confidence in each other”. In Table 3 (b) the news reports reminded the public that they have lived in harmony and it was not time to jeopardize the long-enjoyed peace. In addition, it was reinforced that the conflict would not benefit anyone (CK8, CK20, CK21, CK32).

Finally, in nurturing confidence amongst the public, statements of denial was also used. The news report either implied that the conflict was not serious or denied the existence of the conflict (CK5, CK7, CK18, CK26). Specifically, in item CK5, Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi, the Deputy Prime Minister, claimed that “this was not a racial battle between Malays and Indians... it just isn't...”. To further stressed the point, in item HK26, the Prime Minister stressed that, "There were no racial clashes".
CONCLUSION

In the case of reporting inter-ethnic clashes, the mass media becomes one of the most referred to as a source of information (Davison: 1974). Thus the news reports have to be framed in a certain way to avoid triggering further conflict. This study has shown that in reporting a crucial and sensitive issue such as this, the print media used two strategies.

One of the strategies used by the media was depicting ecstatic stories indicating back-to-normal situations. Using this strategy, the media portrayed that everything had returned to normal. This was done through the depiction of people recommencing their daily activities. These included the operations of government institutions, businesses, schools and transportation system. In addition, the media also put forward stories of the conflicting parties outside the context of the conflict. The people of Malaysia were described as leading their daily lives as usual. Racial integration between the conflicting parties was stressed. The conflicting parties were described as friends and isolated from the tension.

It was interesting to note that this strategy was quite significant as it set out to create an image in the eyes of the reader. The scenario that was portrayed as going on as normal gave an impression that the crisis had ceased and everything had returned to normal. Also, the stories of the friendship among the conflicting parties were manipulated to represent a tight bond between the conflicting parties. It gave the image that the citizens were living in peace and harmony despite the different races and culture. In short, these stories could help to reduce the tension as it created an image of united Malaysians.

Another strategy used was through delegitimization of unspecified antagonists. The unspecified party was pointed out to be from neither of the conflicting parties. It was implied that the antagonists were communist or gangsters who would benefit from chaos in the country. The antagonists were inflicted with negative attributes. Once again, an image was created in the eyes of the readers. It can be assumed that this technique to be parallel to one of the propaganda technique, which is the name-calling technique. Propagandist usually use this technique in hopes that the audience will reject
the person or idea (Luke: 1996; Mac Lean: 1981). In short, not only this technique disassociates the conflicting parties from the conflict itself, it also somewhat unites the conflicting parties to contend the same antagonist.

The third strategy used to desensitize an inter-ethnic conflict was using confidence-building statements. In developing confidence amongst the masses, the media announced that the crisis was under control and secured. In addition, it also implied that necessary steps had been taken by the authority in ensuring safety of the people, as well as the country. The public was also summoned to maintain the national unity. Furthermore, the media also portrayed statements of denial which denied the severity or even the existence of the conflict.

**IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY**

Generally, this study has somewhat make the role of mass media transparent to the public. It has established that in reporting an issue, mass media do not remain unbiased but follow a certain ideological frame. And, the ideological frames were usually set by the gate-keepers.

However, the study also has contradicted the general assumption of many that news framing is always negative. As proved by the findings of the study, news framing can be wisely manipulated to settle conflicts and tension. In the case on Malaysia, news framing is seemingly used to maintain national unity.

This study also presented a few techniques in desensitizing conflicts. This knowledge is essential as it provides possible guideline for practitioners as well as learners in reporting conflicts or any situation alike.
REFERENCES


