Framing Interethnic Conflict in Malaysia:
A Comparative Analysis of Newspaper Coverage on the
Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf)

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Despite repeated warnings from the Malaysian government, the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) rally drew thousands of Indians protesting on the streets of Kuala Lumpur on November 25, 2007. Mistreatment of Indians and lack of press coverage of their plight had been commonplace for years. By employing framing as the theoretical framework and content analysis as the research method, this study examines what perspectives newspapers have created that influence citizens' understanding of the Hindraf movement. Three mainstream newspapers were found to focus on the conflict frame, and their representation of Hindraf articulated a hegemonic discourse that was prejudicial to the interests of the group and contrary to a spirit of democratic inquiry. The dissimilar coverage of the same issue by the alternative newspaper denoted that publication's varied points of view, which were rooted in different political beliefs, cultural assumptions and institutional practices.

Introduction

Since gaining independence in 1957, the Malaysian government has viewed interethnic relations as a real challenge to the social stability of the country (Abdul Rahman, 2000; Baharuddin, 2005; Brown, 1994). As early as 1970, Mahathir Mohamad, who was then a medical doctor and later became the fourth and longest-serving prime minister of Malaysia, claimed that there was never true racial harmony in Malaysia. In his much-debated and once-banned book, *The Malay Dilemma,* he argued that although there was a certain amount of tolerance and accommodation, racial harmony in Malaysia was neither real nor

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deep-rooted. Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, the fifth prime minister of Malaysia, identified national unity to be the biggest challenge facing his successor, Najib Abdul Razak, who took office in April 2009 (National unity, 2008). In an interview with The Associated Press, Abdullah pointed out that his last mission before stepping down was to alleviate the interethnic and religious tensions in the country (Eliminate interethnic, 2008). When Najib assumed office as Malaysia's sixth prime minister, he introduced the concept of "1Malaysia," which called for the cabinet, government agencies and civil servants to more strongly emphasize ethnic harmony, national unity, and efficient governance.

While pleas for national unity appear almost daily in the mass media, interethnic tensions in Malaysia still prevail and tend to surface when issues affecting particular ethnic interests are raised. The last few years have seen a number of ethnic and religious tensions in the country that continue to impact the lives of Malaysians from all walks of life. Recent instances of interethnic tensions include the *Kampung Medan* clashes, *Suqiu*, the *keris* polemics, *Negarakuku* incident, controversy over a tertiary education textbook on ethnic relations, controversy over freedom of faith and body snatching, Hindraf, cow head protest, *Biro Tata Negara* debacle, *pendatang* issue, disputes over the use of the word "Allah," arson attacks, etc.

Mass communication is an important tool toward the integration of societies. Media can act as a change agent, which can help to educate each subgroup and transform the traditionally segmented and divided society into a cohesive and integrated one where differences no longer become sources of conflict (Viswanath & Arora, 2000). Drawing from the existing academic scholarship on peace journalism, El-Nawawy and Shawn (2010) outlined the precise characteristics of a media that can serve a conciliatory function:

1. Providing a public place for politically underrepresented groups
2. Providing multiple viewpoints on a diversity of controversial issues
3. Covering stories of injustice
4. Acknowledging mistakes in journalistic coverage when appropriate
5. Demonstrating a desire toward solving rather than escalating conflicts
6. Avoiding the use of demonizing labels, such as *terrorist* or *extremist*, unless they are attributed to a reliable source
7. Abstaining from opinions that are not substantiated by credible evidence
8. Providing background, contextualizing information that helps the audience fully understand the story

When a media organization embodies such characteristics, it can work toward creating a general culture of tolerance, injecting a multicultural knowledge into the public sphere, and working to produce reconciliation among cultural antagonists. Nevertheless, this study recognized that this can be a difficult task, given the limitations and control imposed by those in power and the structural problems within the media establishment.

In addition, the structure of newspapers in Malaysia is strongly influenced by the multilingual nature of the nation's population and portrayals of its pluralistic nature. Newspapers are published in

different languages to cater to the respective major ethnic groups. The vernacular newspapers adopted different approaches to problems because different ethnic groups in Malaysia often are perceived to largely fall within differing bands of living standards and economic status (Samad, 1991). Muthalib and Wong (2002) asserted that readers of newspapers learn about issues of significance to their community, and how much importance to attach to the issues based on the amount of coverage given to them. Scholars also found that in Malaysia, the vernacular newspapers play a central role in shaping political and social reality because the editors and journalists are usually members of the community elite (Kua, 2010; Lent, 1990; Mansor, 2005).

The Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf)

The Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf) is a coalition of 30 Hindu nongovernmental organizations committed to the preservation of Hindu community rights in Malaysia. On November 25, 2007, a group of Hindraf supporters gathered outside the British High Commission in Kuala Lumpur to hand over a 100,000-signature memorandum to the British Embassy The memorandum was a petition to Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom to appoint the Queen's Counsel to represent poor Malaysian Indians. According to Syed Husin (2008), the underlying reason was actually dissatisfactions of the Indian masses with the policies of the ruling class, which they identified with the Malays.

Despite repeated warnings and a court order that allowed the police to arrest the participants, thousands of Indians took to the streets to rally for Hindraf. In addition, the rally supported a US$4 trillion (RM14-trillion) lawsuit by Hindraf against the British government for bringing Indians to Malaysia as indentured laborers and exploiting them for 150 years. The suit sought a declaration that the Reid Commission Report of 1957 failed to incorporate the rights of the Indian community when independence was granted, resulting in discrimination and marginalization of the community. The suit sought about US$1 million for every Indian who resided in the country.

In December 2007, several prominent Hindraf members were arrested—some on charges of sedition, and five were detained without trial under the Internal Security Act. Shortly after, Prime Minister Najib was sworn in, two Hindraf leaders were freed among the 13 detainees released from detention under the Internal Security Act.

Objectives and Significance of Study

The objective of this study is to compare the coverage of Hindraf by the Malaysian mainstream Malay-, English-, and Chinese-language newspapers, as well as alternative publications. Using a framing analysis, this study asks the following questions: What is the extent of coverage of Hindraf? What are the news sources used by the newspapers? What is the news frame used by the newspapers? What is the slant of the news articles?

The findings of this study will provide useful information about the Hindraf movement objectively. By examining the coverage of the movement by the mainstream newspapers as well as alternative media, this study is able to provide insight into the concerns and attitudes of different ethnic groups based on

their own perspectives and agendas. The results of this study also provide a better understanding of how the vernacular newspapers report about "the others" (those who do not belong to their ethnic groups). Results of this study also benefit media practitioners and decision-makers. It may give them an indication how the race- or religious-related and controversial material should be handled to promote consensus and integration. It is hoped that the study will foster the media's awareness to evaluate, revise and make appropriate changes to its role in promoting integration.

The comparisons of different ethnic media's reportage on interethnic conflicts and religious disputes remain largely unexplored. This study will be able to fill the gap of knowledge by comparing the coverage of Hindraf by the Malay-, Chinese- and English-language newspapers. Moreover, Bramlett-Solomon (cited in Lasorsa, 2002) pointed out that while religious, race, and ethnicity variables are included in mass communication studies, few of them are theory based. By employing framing theory as the theoretical framework, this study offers theoretical support for future research that is related to communications and ethnic relations.

Theoretical Framework

This study relies on framing theory as the theoretical framework. In recent years, framing theory has taken over from agenda setting and cultivation theory as the most commonly applied research approach in the field of communications science (Bryant & Miron, 2004). However, the framing concept does not belong exclusively to the toolset of the communications scholars. In fact, its origins lie in the fields of cognitive psychology and anthropology. Subsequently, it was adopted by other disciplines, often with a shift in meaning, including sociology, economics, linguistics, social movements research, policy research, communications science, political communications, public relation research and health communication (Bryant & Miron, 2004). According to Zhou (2008), Tuchman and Gitlin were two of the earliest scholars to introduce framing to media studies, which happened in 1978 and 1980 respectively. They used the concept of framing as a tool to understand news as a social construction and social resource.

Scholars (Bosman & d'Haenens, 2008; McCombs, 2005) pointed out that the most frequently cited definition of framing came from Entman (1993):

> Framing is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (Entman, 1993, p. 52)

In addition, Griffin (2003) regarded framing as "the process of calling attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring others, which might lead to different reactions." Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) described framing as "the selection of a restricted number of thematically related attributes for inclusion in the media agenda when a particular object is discussed." Besides, Tankard et al. (cited in Weaver, 2007) considered media framing as "the central organizing idea for news content that supplies a

context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration" (p. 143).

In their study of social movements, Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford (1986) suggested the terms frame alignment or micromobilization which were defined as the linkage or conjunction of individual and social movement organizations' (SMO) interpretive frameworks. Besides, Dardis (2006) defined frame alignment as an individual's acceptance of an agreement with at least some of the collection action frames advocated by an SMO. The scholars also argued that frame alignment is essential in furthering an SMO's cause. Dardis (2006) pointed out that both communications and social movement scholars have theorized that four functions are necessary in the effective framing of a sociopolitical issue: 1) problem definition; 2) blame; 3) solution; 4) moral appeal. It was believed that presenting a sociopolitical problem while also naming a specific source of the problem should appeal to the basic psychological impulses when persons try to understand the world around them. Offering a tenable solution will prompt individuals to accept it as more meritorious in combating a problem, while inclusion of a moral appeal should elicit greater alignment with an SMO's viewpoint (ibid.).

Tankard (2008) enumerated several news features that commonly convey frames. They are headlines and kickers, subheads, photographs, photo captions, leads, etc. Wong (2004) outlined four major dimensions of framing that could be studied: 1) presentation of news items (their size and placement); 2) news topic items (or what issues are included in the frame); 3) cognitive attributes (or the specific details of issues included); and 4) effective attributes (tone of the picture). Weaver (2007) mentioned that frames can be studied by means of systematic content analysis or more interpretive textual analysis alone. Van Gorp (2007) also observed that some researchers opt for a rather qualitative approach in analyzing media frames, such as discourse analysis, while others apply traditional content analysis or other quantitative methods. He argued that the strongly abstract nature of frames implies that quantitative research methods should be combined with the interpretive prospects of qualitative methods.

Furthermore, Tankard (2008) remarked that framing might give quantitative researchers a way to approach ideology, a subject that has been mostly dealt with by critical theorists. Framing may even give quantitative researchers a means to examine the hypothesis of media hegemony, which has been difficult to validate empirically. Media hegemony can be viewed as a situation in which one frame is so dominant that people accept it without notice or question. Tankard (2008) suggested that thinking in terms of framing might force researchers to be more specific about media hegemony and pose some testable hypotheses. In his discussion of media and the distribution of power, Entman (2007) stressed that agenda-setting, priming and framing fit together as tools of power. He then connected them to explicit definitions of news slant and bias. He also highlighted that content analysis should be informed by explicit theory linking patterns of framing in the media text to predictable priming and agenda-setting effects on audiences.

Gan, Teo, and Detenber (2005) recognized that the way news is framed in the media is a result of power relations, political forces, and sociocultural influences. They added that organizational structure of media and work routines of journalists affect the way news stories are framed. They conceptualized journalism as a professional ideology that rests on a series of identifiable assumptions, preferences, and

values. Song (2007) also recognized that framing analysis allows researchers to examine the roles of media in the development of social and political issues. It is common for competitions among political actors over an issue to turn into a rhetorical struggle to define the issue to their advantage. When it comes to ideologically sensitive issues, Song (2007) found that the mainstream news media serve as an institution of social control by imposing frames that marginalize causes or movements that challenge the values of the mainstream society. Alternative media, on the other hand, often serve as a communications outlet for movements and causes that are ignored or marginalized by the mainstream media.

Methodology

Content analysis was used as the research method for this study. The newspapers chosen were *Utusan Malaysia*, a daily published in Bahasa Malaysia—the national language; *The Star*, an English-language daily; *Sin Chew Daily*, a Chinese-language daily; and *Malaysiakini*, an alternative newspaper. *Utusan Malaysia* is one of the top Malay newspapers in the country. More importantly, it always has been singled out for evoking racial tension between the Malays and non-Malays (Kua, 2010; Lee, 2010; Lim & Har, 2008). *The Star* and *Sin Chew Daily* enjoy the highest circulation within their respective language stream. According to the Audit Bureau of Circulations Malaysia, the 2010 average daily circulation of *Utusan Malaysia, The Star and Sin Chew Daily* were 164,764; 247,661 and 384,391 respectively (Audit Bureau of Circulations Malaysia, 2010). *Malaysiakini* was chosen to represent the alternative newspapers as scholars regarded it as the most interesting and successful among the various independent news sites (George, 2005; McDaniel, 2002; Rodan, 2005; Tan & Zawawi, 2008). It also is said to often set the agenda for other news media (Chandran, 2006; Steele, 2009). Moreover, *Malaysiakini* recorded average daily hits of approximately 200,000, which compares respectably with the circulation of such mainstream newspapers as *The Star* and *New Straits Times* (Brown, 2005).

The sample of this study was drawn from November 1 to December 31, 2007, which represents the peak period of the issue. This study chose the census sample because scholars say a census often makes the most sense for research that examines a particular event or series of events (Neuendorf, 2002; Riffe, Lacy & Fico, 2005). The unit of analysis was the article, which included news, editorials, columns, opinions, and letters. The articles were pulled from the respective newspaper's online archives by using "Hindraf" as the keyword.

The extent of coverage was studied from three angles: 1) number of news items; 2) type of news items; and 3) size of news items (measured by word count). The categories for news source were: 1) the ruling party; 2) opposition leaders; 3) Hindraf representatives; 4) PDRM (Royal Police Malaysia); 5) NGOs representatives; and 6) civilians.

This study adopted and modified the five most commonly used news frames (conflict, human interests, economic consequences, morality and responsibility) identified by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) in the coverage of a range of issues, including integration, racial-ethnic issues, immigration, drugs, or crime. The following are the frames used in this study with their operational definitions:

1. Conflict—emphasizes conflict among and between individuals, groups, parties, or institutions as a means of capturing audience interest; reflects disagreement among and between individuals, groups, parties, or institutions; an individual, group, party, or institutional reproach; dichotomizes or labels the good and bad; news item refers to two sides instead of more than two sides of the issue/problem; news items refer to winners and losers.

2. Consequences—reports an event, issue or problem in terms of the consequences on individuals, groups, parties, institutions, or the country; reports the outcome of a court case.

3. Responsibility—presents an event, issue or problem in such a way as to attribute responsibility for its cause or solution to either the government or to an individual, group, party or institution; news items suggest the issue or problem requires urgent action.

4. Morality—puts the event, issue or problem in the context of religious tenets or moral prescriptions; emphasizes collaboration and fellowship.

5. Human interest—brings a human face or an emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue, or problem; refers to an effort to personalize the news, dramatize or emotionalize the news in order to capture and retain audience interest; employs adjectives or personal vignettes that generate feelings of outrage, empathy-caring, sympathy, or compassion; emphasizes how individuals and groups are affected by the event, issue, or problem; news items go into the private or personal lives of the actors.

The categories for slant of the news items were divided into: 1) supportive toward Hindraf, 2) neutral, and (3) critical of Hindraf. Figure 1 demonstrates the research framework of this study:
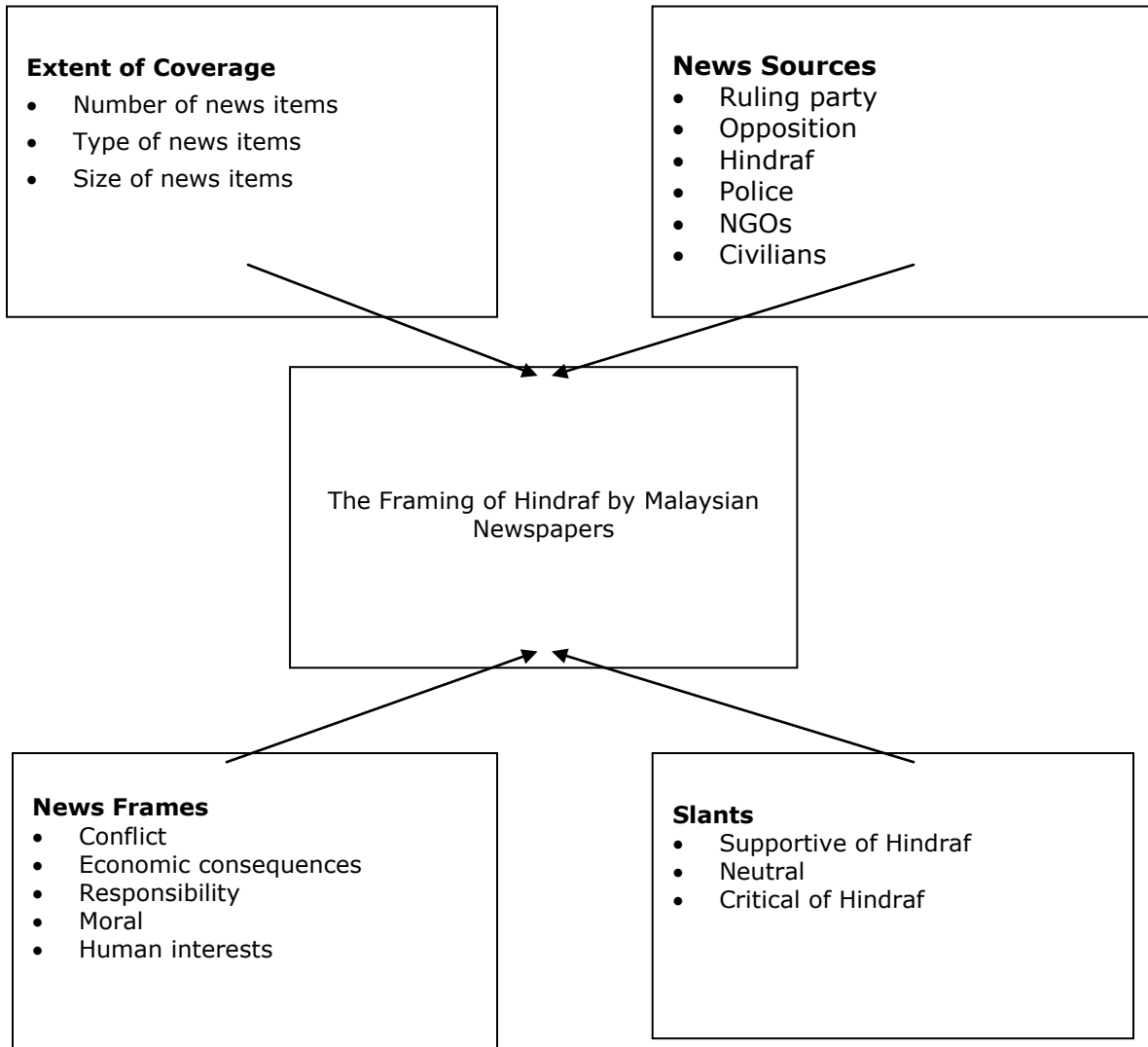
Extent of Coverage
- Number of news items
- Type of news items
- Size of news items

News Sources
- Ruling party
- Opposition
- Hindraf
- Police
- NGOs
- Civilians

The Framing of Hindraf by Malaysian Newspapers

News Frames
- Conflict
- Economic consequences
- Responsibility
- Moral
- Human interests

Slants
- Supportive of Hindraf
- Neutral
- Critical of Hindraf

Figure 1. Research Framework of the Study.

To ensure the reliability of this study, a communications graduate was chosen as the second coder. Riffe, Lacy, and Fico (2005) advocated random selection of content samples for intercoder reliability testing. Meanwhile, Wimmer and Dominick (2006) suggested that between 10– 25% of the body of content should be tested. Therefore, the intercoder reliability for this study was established by randomly selecting 10% of the news items. Using Holsti's formula (cited in Wimmer & Dominick, 2006), it was found that the intercoder reliability for news frames was 0.92 and 0.97 for slants.

Findings

A total of 1,205 articles on Hindraf were collected from the four newspapers. *Sin Chew Daily* contributed the most news items (513 articles), followed by *Malaysiakini* (342 articles), *The Star* (185 articles), and *Utusan Malaysia* (165 articles).

Extent of Coverage and News Sources

As indicated in Table 1, all the newspapers had most of their coverage in the form of straight news. On average, *Malaysiakini* published the most number of words on Hindraf (610 words), followed by *Sin Chew Daily* (406 words), *Utusan Malaysia* (339 words) and *The Star* (316 words).

Table 1. Extent of Coverage for Hindraf.

	Utusan Malaysia (*n* = 165)	*The Star* (*n* = 185)	*Sin Chew Daily* (*n* = 513)	*Malaysiakini* (*n* = 342)
Type:				
Straight news	86.67	94.59	94.74	56.14
Editorials	1.82	2.43	0	0.29
Columns	6.67	0.81	3.12	5.85
Letters	3.64	1.62	0	34.21
Opinions	1.21	0.54	0	3.22
Background	0	0	1.95	0
Interviews	0	0	0	0.29
Other	0	0	0.19	0
Size (mean):	339 words	316 words	406 words	610 words

According to Table 2 (below), the mainstream newspapers used the leaders of the ruling party, *Barisan Nasional* (BN, National Front) as their dominant news sources. In stark contrast, *Malaysiakini* turned to civilians as its most important news source. The BN is a coalition of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), Malaysian People's Movement Party (Gerakan), etc.

Across the four newspapers, the most frequently cited sources from UMNO were Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who was then President of UMNO and the country's Prime Minister, and Najib Abdul Razak, who was then Deputy Prime Minister. MCA's voice was shared by then-party President Ong Ka Ting; Ong Ka Chuan, the party's Secretary-General; and Fu Ah Kiow, then-deputy Internal Security Minister. MIC President Samy Vellu and then-acting Gerakan President Koh Tsu Koon were the main spokespersons for their party regarding the Hindraf issue. Musa Hassan, who was then Inspector-General of Police, was the main representative from the Royal Police Malaysia (PDRM). Lim Kit Siang from the Democratic Action Party (DAP), and Anwar Ibrahim from the People's Justice Party (PKR) were the frequently quoted representatives from the opposition parties. In addition, Uthayakumar, a lawyer representing Hindraf, was the main spokesperson for the group reported by the newspapers. Representatives from NGOs included members of the Malaysia Hindu Sangam, Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (Suhakam), Suara Rakyat Malaysia (SUARAM), Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ), Writers Alliance for Media Independences (WAMI) and more. The category of "others" included the Malay rulers, academics, representatives from the British High Commission and the U.S. State Department, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Pranab Mukherjee, India's minister for external affairs, and others.

Table 2. News Sources for Hindraf.

	Utusan Malaysia (*n* = 165) %	The Star (*n* = 185) %	Sin Chew Daily (*n* = 513) %	Malaysiakini (*n* = 342) %
Ruling party	61.21	65.40	56.33	20.18
Opposition	5.45	9.19	14.62	21.05
HINDRAF	2.42	11.35	10.33	17.84
Police	22.42	14.05	9.16	3.80
NGOs	3.03	5.41	3.51	12.28
Civilians	10.91	5.41	3.70	63.16
Others	5.45	9.73	7.02	6.73

The Conflict Frame

The most salient frame found in all the newspapers was conflict (see Table 3). It was reported that the Hindraf group declared that its enemy was the ruling party UMNO instead of the Malays. Uthayakumar, the lawyer representing Hindraf, explained that it was because UMNO had neglected the Indian community in the process of development (UMNO musuh, 2007). In response, Awang Selamat, a columnist for *Utusan Malaysia*, noted that the center point of national security in Malaysia lies within the Malay community. Therefore, he warned, it would be a real threat if the Malays' security was challenged. He wrote that the demand made by Hindraf to abolish Malay privileges and its declaration to be an enemy of UMNO were efforts to threaten the Malays because UMNO had represented the Malays since independence. The columnist also stated that although the Malays had scarified and compromised much, did not mean they would continue to do so when extremist groups like HINDRAF were out to hurt them (Bisik-bisik, 2007).

It was noteworthy that the columnist Awang also criticized the MIC president Samy Vellu, in one of his articles. Awang wrote that he was not comfortable with Samy's statement in an interview with Radio Television Malaysia about the illegal gathering of Hindraf. According to Samy, the demonstration had somehow affected the Indian community's loyalty to the government. Awang condemned Samy for sympathizing with Hindraf. Moreover, he also said Samy interfered by appealing for the release of a group of Hindraf supporters who had been accused of the attempted murder of a policeman. Awang noted that Malay leaders had been taking risks to fight against Islamic extremism until the Malays seemed to be disunited. Therefore, as an Indian leader, Samy should also be more courageous in fighting against the extreme group from his community (Bisik-bisik, 2007).

Table 3. News Frames for Hindraf.

	Utusan Malaysia (n = 165) %	The Star (n = 185) %	Sin Chew Daily (n = 513) %	Malaysiakini (n = 342) %
Conflict	59.39	55.67	56.13	70.46
Consequences	39.39	34.05	42.50	21.35
Responsibility	0.61	8.12	0.97	7.02
Moral	0.61	1.08	0.20	0.88
Human Interest	0	1.08	0.20	0.29

Commenting on Hindraf's allegation that the government was carrying out ethnic cleansing of the Indians, then-Prime Minister Badawi fumed that he was very angry and called Hindraf's charges blatant lies. He even offered to resign if there were proof that the allegations were true *(*Blatant lie, 2007). Then-Deputy Prime Minister Najib also criticized Hindraf supporters as being wild, stubborn, rough, aggressive,

and unacceptable (Perhimpunan, 2007). Besides, Nazri Aziz, a minister in the prime minister's office, said the government had identified overseas terrorist groups that were linked to Hindraf. They were Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a militant organization in India (Link, 2007). In addition, the mainstream newspapers justified the use of the Internal Security Act against the Hindraf group, while stressing the contribution of the government to the Indian community.

Through the conflict frame, the newspapers also reflected some voices that supported or justified the Hindraf movement. Ambiga Screenevasan, who was then president of the Bar Council, noted that there were reports of a large number of unnecessary roadblocks and use of force, tear gas, and water cannons against those involved in the Hindraf gathering. It was believed that a softer response would have resulted in less confrontation, fewer injuries, and ultimately fewer problems. Ambiga contended that the use of the Internal Security Act and Sedition Act against three Hindraf lawyers was retrogressive and counterproductive (No political, 2007).

All of the newspapers except for *Utusan Malaysia* reported some criticism toward the government and MIC in their conflict frame. Toh Kin Woon, a leader from Gerakan, wrote a letter to *Malaysiakini* asserting that the government should look into the Indians' woes rather than condemning the Hindraf rally (Toh, 2007). The MIC and its president Samy also were condemned for not doing enough for the Indian community.

Malaysiakini criticized the role of mainstream media in reporting Hindraf. A letter writer expressed that it was shocking how the reports in Malaysian mainstream newspapers were so far from the truth that Malaysians only read them to have a good laugh. The writer thanked the alternative media, like *Malaysiakini* and many Malaysian bloggers, which had given the Malaysian public firsthand reports and photos of the Hindraf rally to counter the local media's dishonest reports. He also called on Malaysians to boycott the mainstream media by not buying the local newspapers to send a message that the people would not be buying into their lies (Lies, 2007).

The Consequences Frame

By imposing the consequences frame, the newspapers focused on the actions taken by the police against individuals who were involved in the Hindraf gathering as well as the damage and loses caused by the gathering. For example, Johari Baharum, who was deputy minister in Internal Security said the government would not reject the possibility of using the services of the International Criminal Police Organization (Interpol), European Police Office (Europol) and ASEAN Chiefs of Police (Aseanpol) to locate one of the masterminds behind Hindraf—P. Waythamoorthy, who was believed to have escaped to India (Guna Interpol, 2007). It also was reported that Abdul Rahman Bakar, the then-deputy minister of Human Resources, asserted that employers could take stern action against those involved in the Hindraf gathering, which included termination of employment. He further said that according to the Employment Act 1955 and Industrial Relations Act 1997, those involved in illegal gatherings could be jailed for up to two years or fined RM10,000 (US$3,222) to RM50,000 (US$16,111) or both (Majikan boleh, 2007).

Approximately two weeks after the gathering, the newspapers reported that five leaders of the movement were detained under the Internal Security Act, with police saying more could be picked up. The newspapers also reported that 31 Hindraf supporters were charged with attempted murder. For its part, *Malaysiakini* reported that Uthayakumar had expected to be arrested and thus had recorded a video message two weeks before the detention. In the video, he called on supporters to continue the struggle. He also urged them to look at the arrest positively because it could draw government and international attention to the marginalization of Indians in Malaysia. He added that he had no regrets and stressed that the sacrifice he had made for the struggle was worth it. *Malaysiakini* reported that the charismatic and jovial lawyer ended the video with a smile and waved goodbye—an image many would not be seeing for a while (Uthayakumar's parting, 2007).

The Responsibility Frame

Under the responsibility frame, the newspapers said it was the responsibility of the government and MIC to solve the Indian problems. A letter published in *The Star* also called for the government to allow some democratic space for people to express their sentiments in a peaceful manner (Vijayaratnam, 2007).

Opposition leader Lim Kit Siang urged the government to establish a cabinet task force to end the marginalization of Indians. He said the task force should be headed by Prime Minister Abdullah and should focus on the conversion of all partially aided Tamil primary schools into fully aided schools; RM500 million (US$161.1 million) should be allocated to upgrade the Tamil primary schools; and the demolition of Hindu temples and other places of worship should be stopped (Lim Kit Siang, 2007a). Similarly, Group of Concerned Citizens coordinator Charles Santiago said the government must reveal its political will to overcome the marginalization of Indians. He added that the people who attended the Hindraf rally were poor and vulnerable, thus the federal government had legal and moral obligations to solve their problems (Rais Yatim, 2007).

The Moral Frame

The moral frame of the newspapers emphasized cooperation and unity. For example, then-Deputy Prime Minister Najib stressed that the government preferred negotiations instead of confrontations to resolve the religious and ethnic issues because the country could not afford another racial riot. He also said that if all parties would discuss and adopt a give-and-take policy, then they would be able to find solutions to the many problems involving sensitive religious or racial issues (Govt: Let's talk, 2007). Moreover, it was reported that Prime Minister Abdullah said that he were a Malay and a Muslim, and thus a leader for all the people. He would definitely be fair and reliable, treating the non-*bumi* equally (If PM agrees, 2007b).

The Human Interest Frame

The newspapers brought an emotional angle to the presentation of news by adopting a human interest frame. For example, Tony Pua, the economic adviser to DAP secretary-general Lim Guan Eng, wrote a letter to *Malaysiakini* that provided more insight about V. Ganabathirau, who was one of the arrested Hindraf leaders. Tony wrote that he had known Gana for only eight months but he would nonetheless vouch for him with his life. He asserted that Gana was not a racist, religious fanatic, or terrorist. Instead, Tony said Gana was the complete opposite of how the Abdullah administration had painted him through the mainstream mouthpieces. Tony described Gana as a full-blooded Malaysian who strongly believed that all Malaysians—regardless of ethnicity—must have equal opportunities to succeed (Pua, 2007).

According to Tony, Gana was the youngest of three brothers who grew up in a poor family. He took up odd jobs to help support himself and his family after finishing Form 5 (high school). However, that did not prevent him from taking part-time courses to pursue his ambition of becoming an officer of the court. Tony wrote that Gana's dream came true in his late 20s when he graduated with a law degree from the University of London's external program. He also noted that Gana had spent a lot of time working to help the underprivileged and marginalized community. Furthermore, Tony slammed Prime Minister Abdullah for invoking the draconian Internal Security Act in hopes of sweeping everything under the carpet. He said that his eyes were moist as he wrote the letter but he firmly believed that Gana would be a stronger man post-detention. He also foresaw Gana as a future leader of the country, a rare breed with much-needed caring, intelligence and dedication who would contribute immensely to creating a better Malaysia for the future generations (Pua, 2007).

Slants of the Articles

An analysis of the slant of the articles revealed that supportiveness toward the Hindraf movement was most apparent in *Malaysiakini. Utusan Malaysia* was most critical in its coverage of Hindraf (82.42%) while *Sin Chew Daily* appeared to be the most neutral (see Table 4).

Table 4. Slants for Hindraf.

	Utusan Malaysia (n = 165) %	The Star (n = 185) %	Sin Chew Daily (n = 513) %	Malaysiakini (n = 342) %
Supportive	1.82	13.51	20.27	63.75
Critical	82.42	61.08	44.83	19.88
Neutral	16.30	25.41	34.90	16.37

Discussion

A total of 1,205 articles on Hindraf were harvested from the four newspapers, with *Sin Chew Daily* scoring the highest number of articles but *Malaysiakini* topping in terms of the average number of words. The data demonstrated that there was a wide gap between the numbers of article published by the four newspapers. *Sin Chew Daily* had 513 articles, while the fewest were published by *Utusan Malaysia* with only 165 articles, leading to a difference of 348 articles between the two. Although *Sin Chew Daily* published the highest number of articles, a closer look at the data suggested that the Chinese newspaper only provided coverage in the category of hard news and very few opinion pieces.

Fahmy (2005) suggested that the source of news stories determines the basic nature of the articles and influences the flow of information through the media. Entman (1993) even argued that to some extent, the source is the story. This study found that there was remarkable consistency across the three mainstream newspapers that used UMNO leaders as the major news source. In fact, the heavy reliance on UMNO sources led to a one-dimensional interpretation of the Hindraf movement. It also had further impact on the news frames of the mainstream newspapers. Besides, *Utusan Malaysia* and *The Star* also depended on the Royal Police Malaysia (PDRM) as their second-most prevalent news source. These findings were in line with scholars' assertion that mass media often rely heavily on official definitions for protest coverage, leading to the marginalization of the protest group—a phenomenon that has been labeled a "protest paradigm" (Boyle et al., 2004; Dardis, 2006; Thomas, 2006). Knobloch-Westerwick and Taylor (2008) also saw that authorities invest a lot of effort into deflecting, deflating, or diffusing blame for negative events so that the public does not view them as the cause of harm. Therefore, Schudson (2000) asserted that news media reflect not a world out there but the practices of those who have the power to determine the experience of others.

It was significant to note that conflict was the most salient frame across the four newspapers, regardless of whether it was mainstream or alternative. However, the aspects of conflict highlighted by the newspapers differed. *Utusan Malaysia* likened Hindraf to a challenge of Malay privileges. The Malay newspaper claimed that Hindraf's declaration to be an enemy of UMNO was an effort to threaten the Malays because UMNO had been the representative of Malays since independence. These findings

demonstrated that *Utusan Malaysia* was trying to deflect the reason behind the protest or to address the grievances of the Indian community. Instead, it constructed an antagonist frontier without acknowledging sensitivities surrounding the community. Scholars (Boyle et al., 2004; Dardis, 2006; Jha, 2008; Van Dijk, 1989) found that media used binary oppositions in constructing prejudices in their news coverage of interethnic relations, where frames favoring their ethnic group were especially dominant. By pointing to and exaggerating ethnic differences, and through continuous and intense exposure to prejudicial images, the media presented two opposing forces, "us" versus "them," by placing the protesters on the "them" side of the argument. For example, *Utusan Malaysia* reported that UMNO and Malays had tolerated the non-*bumiputera* (non-indigenous people) in the country, like accepting and respecting the social contract, practicing power sharing, allowing religious freedom, and so forth. On the other hand, the Indian community, or non-*bumiputera* in general, was presented as demanding and disrespectful of the social contract, having no sense of gratitude for the Malays, UMNO or the government, and not being loyal to the king and the country. The Malays also were portrayed as the giving and accepting host, while the non-Malays were shown as the receiving and frightening minority in the country. *Utusan Malaysia* reaches approximately 859,000 readers (Selva, 2010), so the effect of this coverage on such a large public is not difficult to speculate.

It was noteworthy that the MIC president Samy was criticized by *Utusan Malaysia* for sympathizing with Hindraf, while condemned by other newspapers in this study for not doing enough for the Indian community. In his discussion on nation building in Malaysia, Ramasamy (2004) saw that the MIC was a weak party within the BN coalition and its survival in Malaysian politics depended very much on UMNO. He explained that the emergence of UMNO in championing Malay rights and privileges on the grounds of their *bumiputera* status created problems for other ethnic political parties in the BN coalition. The component parties within the BN basically function without any real power. Given the absence of inter-elite bargaining and compromise, the MIC has been unable to effectively articulate the concerns and anxieties of the Indians. Nevertheless, Ramasamy (2004) asserted that the problems faced by Indians in obtaining effective representation could not be solely blamed on UMNO or the nature of interethnic politics within the BN coalition. Instead, the MIC leadership was to some extent responsible for the political problems faced by the Indian community. He pointed out that the Indian community was highly authoritarian and there was a big gap between the MIC leadership and the rank and file. Decisions often were made without any consultation. Party meetings and annual assemblies were meant to obtain the endorsement of decisions already taken rather to holding healthy debates about issues affecting the community.

In addition, the conflict frame in the mainstream newspapers (especially *Utusan Malaysia*) also criticize the Hindraf movement and the opposition parties. Dissident opinions were treated as a threat in the coverage, and their perceived anti-nationalist actions were criminalized. Nevertheless, Cottle (2008) maintained a supportive stand toward demonstration. He contended that if the government doesn't listen, peaceful protest, blockades, and demonstrations would be the legitimate means to express the people's concerns. He also said that demonstrations and protests had historically performed a crucial role in the development and subsequent enactments of democracy. In liberal democratic political theory, demonstrations and protests constitute a bridge helping to overcome possible disconnects among the public, opinion formation, and policy makers. Cottle (2008) also stressed that mass demonstrations

remain at the forefront of struggles for citizenship rights and democracy in non-democratic regimes around the world. In marked contrast to the mainstream newspapers, *Malaysiakini* reflected many more voices that supported the Hindraf movement while devoting much attention to remarks that condemned the authorities.

By engaging the consequences frame, the mainstream newspapers focused on reporting the disruption of order, damages, and losses due to the Hindraf gathering. Scholars noted that under the protest paradigm, the ruling elite often used media to suggest to their audience that the "others" posed fundamental threats to security and the well-being of the society, and that the only effective means of escaping this challenge was the elimination of the protest group (Arpan et al., 2006; Jha, 2008; McCluskey, Stein, Boyle, & McLeod, 2009). This position adequately explained the strong call from *Utusan Malaysia* for government use of the Internal Security Act against the Hindraf leaders, as well as the justification given by *The Star* and *Sin Chew Daily* on the use of the act.

Weinstein (1978) said that national security in Southeast Asia was often considered in reference to internal challenges. Whereas in most developed countries, national security was mainly associated with potential external threats, Weinstein (1978) saw that many security problems in Southeast Asia actually stemmed from internal conflicts, where the minority ethnic groups were unwilling to accept the hegemony of the dominant group. The lack of confidence in political institutions, prevalence of corruption, and absence of consensus on political rules also fostered an almost constant threat of instability. According to Weinstein (1978), the political leaders in Southeast Asia tended to interpret any threat to their leadership as a challenge to national security. Therefore, the central analytic problem was to distinguish between threats to the security of the nation and threats to the security of certain ruling groups. More importantly, Weinstein (1978) asserted that the ruling elites needed to see their national responsibilities in broader terms than the preservation of their own privileges. This study found it surprising that the comment made by Weinstein more than 30 years ago was still applicable today, specifically to the analysis of the Hindraf incident. It therefore could be said that the sociopolitical system, as well as the quality of leadership in this country, had not progressed much within the years.

Conclusion

This study found that the three mainstream newspapers displayed a form of coverage that communicated a certain shared perspective through their frames. Through focusing on the conflict frame, their representation of Hindraf articulated a hegemonic discourse that was prejudicial to the interests of the group and contrary to a spirit of democratic inquiry and openness. The dissimilar coverage of the same issue by *Malaysiakini* denoted the varied points of view held by the newspaper, which were rooted in the different political beliefs, cultural assumptions, and institutional practices—in short, the ideological positions.

Most social scientists agree that the existence of conflict itself is an inevitable part of human interaction; the question should not be how to prevent it, but rather how to deal with it in such a way as to produce the best possible and least violent outcomes for all the parties concerned (Hanitzsch, 2004;

Price & Thompson, 2002; Wolfsfeld, 2004). Research also has shown that audience members will try to get more information from the media to enhance their understanding, particularly during times of conflict (Peng, 2008; Seow, Crispin & Hun, 2006). Therefore, media are expected to provide as much information as possible about the roots of the problem and to encourage a rational public debate concerning the various options for ending it.

Last but not least, it is crucial for journalists to understand that interethnic conflicts always are intertwined with a range of causal factors—political, economic, and social. Journalists should be savvy and not allow themselves to be used because there are other forces at play in interethnic conflicts, such as politics and narrow communal interests (Loo & Mustafa, 2010). To overly emphasize the conflicts either as episodic events or inevitable consequences without clearly explaining their political, economic, and social motivations is to distort the *why*, the *how*, and the *what* that actually took place. Consequently, the lack of contextual reporting only exacerbates the misunderstanding among the general public. Examining the underlying causes of interethnic conflicts would help to inform and educate the public, thus contributing to the bridging of the perceptual gaps among the different ethnic groups.

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