

Images and Issues of Superpowers: An Analysis of International News Coverage by the Government-Owned News Agency, Bernama in Four National Dailies in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The importance of media as image carriers has been discussed widely as their role has become more pronounced amidst controversies during the incidents of war and armed conflict. The media have the potential to portray individuals, groups of individuals or nations in a negative or positive light, or in whatever manner they wish. As Walter Lippmann (1922) said, we cannot deny that our opinions are formed in part by gathering pieces of information that have been reported through the mass media and comparing them with the images of events or people, which already have been stored in our mind; hence, negative portrayals may conjure negative perceptions in our minds without actual knowledge of those we are being led to condemn. This paper argues that there is evidence that, in an increasingly global communication environment, Malaysian media, especially the mainstream media, are dependent on both local and international news agencies for news coverage especially on the Superpowers. To what extent do the images of superpowers portrayed by the government-owned National News Agency, Bernama and also international news agencies determine portrayals in mainstream newspapers, and in whose words are these images constructed? Using framing analysis based on a content analysis study of Bernama's and international news agencies' coverage, this paper also seeks to describe the dominant images and identify who subsidizes or monopolizes the portrayal of superpowers.

Keywords: image, controversies, conflict, national news agencies, superpowers, international news, mainstream newspapers

Introduction

Southeast Asian nations, like any others, have economic, political, social, strategic and other interests that they wish to protect. Some of these interests are vital and have to be closely guarded for the sake of national security and national survival. For many decades, as a result of colonization by European powers and others, Southeast Asians have been thrust into a state of dependency. After having won their political freedom, most Southeast Asian nations were faced with great challenges in shaping their destinies.

The prevailing political, economic, and military relationships in the Southeast Asian nations, which are themselves considered relatively powerless, still favour the industrialized nations, many of which are former colonial powers. Against such a background, it is easy to understand why there is a sudden influx of new-breed patriotic leaders in Southeast Asian nations who zealously try to resist the tightening grasp of world superpowers on their countries. These leaders have made patriotism a fundamental value in order to create the spirit of unity and love for one's country.

One of the most prominent leaders in Southeast Asia is Malaysia's fourth Prime Minister, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, whose speeches and opinions on neutrality and freedom, have often been highly appraised but also heavily criticized. One of his popular statements is quoted below:

What is important in our friendships is the pure spirit of comradeship where both parties respect and value highly each other's freedom and sovereignty. For us, we want our relations to be bound by the principles of international relations where we are not worried even though we are weak and small (1983).

Twenty-eight years later, the current Prime Minister of Malaysia, Najib Tun Abdul Razak expressed similar lines of thoughts, but with more vigor and force. He said:

Our economies are so integrated and interdependent, and production processes are so dispersed across borders that it no longer makes sense for global powers to go to war; they simply have too much to lose... only a new multilateralism can help build a new world order where a just and equitable peace predicated on the rule of law is the norm rather than the exception. (2011)

The influence of superpowers, especially on economically, politically and socio-culturally weaker nations has been felt for decades. The domination of the strong superpowers over the weak nations of Southeast Asia affects Malaysia as a small-power nation. In this context, Malaysia, together with other Southeast Asian nations, has embarked on several possible solutions that could resolve the problem of superpower rivalry in the region. The well-known powers which are said to have a tight grip on the world's economy today and are especially influential in Southeast Asia, include the United States, Britain and Japan and, increasingly, China.

One major initiative, spearheaded by Malaysia, is the proposal to create a neutrality system in Southeast Asia. Neutralization does not mean an attempt to exclude the superpowers from Southeast Asia, but rather to limit their activities and presence to non-military spheres. In other words, neutralization is a safeguard against the rise of any superpower to a hegemonic position in this region. On August 8, 1967, the Southeast Asian nations, namely Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand, signed the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Declaration Pact, which pledged to represent the collective will of these nations. Today, ASEAN comprises ten member countries namely Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. The birth of ASEAN reflects a new spirit of unity among the Southeast Asian nations that will lead them toward a new era, politically, socially, technologically and economically. Most important are the mass media, which have become a prime symbol of national identity, along with culture, language and constitution.

Malaysian Mass Media

The press plays a pervasive role today as a purveyor of information. It has the potential to eradicate wrong impressions and stereotypes and to reduce social tensions; at the same time, it also can create fears and cause anxieties within a society. The role of the press becomes increasingly important with complex psychological warfare and mounting international tensions raging everywhere in the world today. The events of 9/11 in the USA, the Bali bombing, the 7/7 bombing in the UK, and the Mumbai hotel incident are enough to create fear among travellers.

Through the mass media, journalists can accomplish more than the understanding and influencing of public opinion. Through a healthy regard for truth, the press can help to inform

public opinion and make it more rational. In this way, it can enhance democratic society (Blumer 1967). William Buchanan and Haley Cantril (1953), in their classic book *How Nations See Each Other*, stressed that the mass media play an important role in shaping images and stereotypes about people and nations. They wrote (1953:204):

Media of communication obviously must bear some responsibility for the stereotypes held by members of their audiences. So must the leaders of the people who are the subject of the stereotypes since their acts, perceived at second hand through these media, are the events, which form and change the stereotypes.

Today news comes from all over the world via the new media—notably the Internet—as well as the traditional media such newspapers, radio, television and the news agencies. In Malaysia, the National News Agency, Bernama, provides local and international news to its subscribers. Established in 1968, this government-owned agency acts as a conduit between the government and the local mass media (Ali Salman, 2009). Due to financial constraints on the capacity to have foreign correspondents abroad, local newspapers obtain international news from Bernama as well as from the international news agencies, such as Reuters, Agence France Presse (AFP), and Associate Press (AP).

Since Bernama is one of the most important providers of foreign news and plays a pervasive role in shaping images of people and nations, it is important to study the performance of the National News Agency in their international news coverage.

Historically, Malaysia is a country of unique, multiethnic diversity. This primary situation affects the country in every way. The communications system mirrors this complexity of the nation. On the whole, the media in Malaysia reflect the situation of government and the society in which they operate. In his study of the Malaysian media, John A. Lent (1974) found that, increasingly since 1969, the authorities in Malaysia have used legislative, economic and socio-cultural methods to manipulate the media into a partnership supposedly for the sake of national development, stability and identity.

In a developing nation such as Malaysia, the functions of the media have been reoriented and adjusted to local needs. The media roles are closely and tightly connected to government objectives. In Malaysia, the mass media are not only required to inform, educate, and motivate the masses toward development goals stipulated by the government, but are also expected to go along hand-in-hand with the government's policies in order to remain viable and survive in the journalism business. The newspapers and other media are expected to help the government foster the spirit of understanding and strengthen friendship and unity among people.

Despite the current influx of new media such as the Internet and many alternative media, mainstream newspapers in Malaysia are still being regarded by Malaysians as the medium that plays the most significant role in providing information for decision makers and the attentive public. Television, radio and the Internet are considered as the fast media, especially for breaking news stories, but it is the newspapers which the public choose for more comprehensive and detailed coverage (Ali Salman, 2009).

The Malaysian government, for instance, is extremely sensitive about foreign coverage of its domestic and foreign policy; and also about local media coverage of foreign governments.

Hence, Bernama is given the priority for international news coverage especially when it involves Malaysian leaders. Bernama reporters or foreign correspondents are often responsible for providing international news coverage especially in countries where local newspapers could not send their own reporters due to monetary constraints.

Currently, Bernama has a limited number of foreign correspondents abroad, namely in Jakarta, Singapore, Bangkok, Beijing, New Delhi and Dubai. The international news coverage from these countries makes up only about 9 percent of news covered by Bernama correspondents every month. While 21% of foreign news come from the international news agencies, local news and domestic news made up about 70% (Ibrahim & Hasim, 2005). This data shows that the bulk of foreign news comes from international news agencies such as Reuters, AFP, AP and other news agencies from Asian countries such as Antara (Indonesia), Xin Hua (China), Nam News Network (NNN-ASEAN news network centered in Malaysia), Agencies (a combination of news from Reuters, AFP, AP), Bernama-Kyodo and others.

In recent years, Third World nations have made numerous attempts to launch an international news collection and distribution system by expanding their own national agencies, but costs are enormous. Furthermore, Western agencies are dominant, and rivalry among the Third World countries prevents cooperation in news exchange.

Nevertheless, the over reliance of many nation-states on the global media to provide news and information has led to the emergence of alternative world media like al-Jazeera, the Gulf-based satellite TV channel that stations their correspondents all over the globe, including Malaysia. This is just one alternative voice at odds with the orchestrated global media which have been in operation for decades. Perhaps today, CNN or BBC no longer monopolize the world audience. There are other international broadcasts that are already in the global media spectrum. Apart from Al-Jazeera from the Middle East, there is Televisa in Mexico, Globo Television in Brazil and Radio Caracas Television in Venezuela which have already entered the market, and there are also broadcasts from various Asian countries. Since 2005, Malaysia anchors the South-South Information Gateway (SSIG) that becomes a news dissemination centre for South-South nations. Malaysia also houses the Nam News Network (Non-aligned Movement News Network) that gives balanced coverage of ASEAN region.

Of late, coverage of international news has taken on a different slant. Recently, Islam has received worldwide coverage especially after the September 11, 2001 incident, the bombing of Afghanistan a month later, the attack on Iraq in 2003 and the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict. During this period, we have seen the escalation of the use of various terms by journalists all over the world in the effort of trying to make “sense” of what’s happening. Words and phrases such as “the war on terrorism”, “patriotism”, “military campaigns”, “murderers”, “oppressors”, “evil”, and many more, are used excessively regardless of whether they are accurate and objective.

Hence, this paper, which is an inquiry into international news selection and coverage by Bernama and subsequently carried by four mainstream newspapers in Malaysia (*Utusan Malaysia*, *News Straits Times*, *The Star* and *Berita Harian*), seeks to trace dominant trends pertaining to images of Superpowers and issues raised.

Data for this paper are extracted from a bigger research project pertaining to peace journalism conducted by the writers over a two-year period from 2008 until 2010 and funded by the university. This study seeks to find out to what extent the images of superpowers are portrayed by the government-owned News Agency, and in whose words are the images

constructed. Using a framing analysis perspective based on a content analysis study of Bernama's international news covered by four mainstream newspapers, this paper also seeks to address the questions of what are the dominant images and who subsidizes or monopolizes the image portrayal of superpowers which are projected by a government news agency.

News Coverage and Newsworthiness

With the current influx of information into the newsrooms and living rooms of the global society brought about by new media technology, journalists found that comprehensive accounts of the news are no longer enough to report facts truthfully. It is now necessary to report the truth about the facts.

According to Walter Lippmann in his classic book *Public Opinion* (1922), the truth could only be achieved through scientific method. Lippmann was perhaps the most provocative person of his era in encouraging the news media to use "facts" at all. John Hohenberg, a scholar in journalism ethics, said that the temptation is great, under the pressure of daily deadlines, to make assumptions based on previous experience and to approach a story with preconceived notions of what is likely to happen. When the journalist gives way to such tendencies, he invites error, slanted copy and libelous publications for which there is little or no defense.

Herbert J. Gans (1980), writing about the nature of the news of the mass media and particularly about newspapers, in *Deciding What's News*, said that in the last decade the news media have been "distorted". Gans used the term "distorted" instead of "biased," for it is much more disturbing concept.

Distortion means the manipulation of reality, whereas bias is derived from the individual's preconceived ideas and may or may not be realized by the individual. So, a reporter may write a story that carries his inferences and judgements based on his previous life experiences in war-torn Afghanistan and may write that the poor Afghans are unhappy because they have been experiencing hardship and poverty for so many years. The reporter's statement is not necessarily true. Some poor people live happily with the little they have. The concepts of poverty, sadness and happiness are all relative. In news writing, such biases, however, may be unintentional and merely reflect the reporter's unconscious mind. Distortion, however, implies the conscious and purposeful misrepresentation.

Gans (1980) further argued that the content of news is reflected in unilateral views. Reporters take favourable or unfavourable attitudes toward ideologies, policies and certain officials. They are often concerned with personalities instead of issues, and devote attention to dramatic actions and "anecdotal exaggerations" instead of actualities. One can see representations Western, Muslim and Asian subjects that are filled with anecdotal observations often of a sensational sort. Can we call the anecdotal exaggerations practiced by many journalists especially by the popular network news and international news agencies, objective news reporting?

William E. Rowley (cited in Mohb Rajib 1984: 37), a journalism professor made perhaps the most constructive comments about objective reporting when he concluded that the concept of objectivity can be defined along three lines, namely observational, aesthetic and ethical objectivity:

1. Factual or observational objectivity. Getting the hard data of our perception of the facts as straight as we can and in the right pattern that comes close as we can make it to fit the facts.
2. Dramatic or aesthetic objectivity. Getting and communicating the emotional quality of the event, the experience, the development, which is just as much a part of the “story” as a fact.
3. Moral or ethical objectivity. Getting the moral implications of the story as straight as we can. This is an act of conscience. It means clearing one’s head or preconceptions, prejudices, stereotypes, as one perceives and evaluates the facts, so as to present the moral issues involved in the situation clearly and justly.

In summarizing the concept of objectivity, we could conclude that journalists in the quest for objectivity try to reach it in three areas. First, the area of news selection or the way a reporter or editor uses the standard criteria to determine newsworthiness. Second, there is an ethical problem involving news that is detrimental to other parties or sources and may display bias. A reporter and editor must be objective, constructive, balanced and sensitive to the public and the government. The third area is the use and misuse of language. A reporter or editor must ensure that he uses appropriate words, sentences, captions and narrations to describe the reported events or “external reality”.

It is generally known that the media’s day-to-day diet could be dictated by various factors such as the government, media owners, advertisers, pressure groups, political parties to name a few. Hence, the media are not as free as one may want to believe (Mohd Rajib & Faridah 1996).

All press systems, as Merrill and Lowenstein (1971:174) wrote, are enslaved by their respective government philosophies and “forced” to operate within certain national ideological parameters. These journalism scholars contended that “No press system is truly free, regardless of how freedom is defined. Restrictions of every kind—but in differing degrees—are exerted on all national press systems”. This applies to Malaysian media system. The questions of press freedom are interpreted according to government priorities whilst decisions on media ethics have to be balanced against the larger interest of the nation.

The quality of a news source affects its news value, since elite sources are commonly assumed to produce news worthy stories. Gans (1980) identifies two types of sources, the knowns and unknowns. In a national survey of U.S television networks and news magazine coverage, he found that the knowns appeared four times more frequently than the unknowns. This shows that news using reliable, authoritative and known persons is valued highly. Such is the case in Malaysia, especially news from the mainstream newspapers.

Various attempts have been made by media practitioners to establish media professionalism and accountability. While various news media across in many countries look at media laws and regulations as the main controlling factor, there has been a trend among journalists over the decades, particularly journalists in Malaysia to resort to self-censorship. The act of self-censorship gives some leeway for journalists and editors to select, write and edit news before it goes into print. While news selection warrants some forms of press freedom, the choice of words in the news during the writing and editing processes, strives to put questions of ethical objectivity in the hands of journalists and editors.

International news and framing

In dealing with transborder flow of information in this borderless world, some foreign governments openly criticize certain technologically advanced nations which dominate the distribution of global news. The Associate Press (AP), United Press International (UPI), Reuters, Agence-France Presse (AFP) and Cable News Network (CNN) have been equated with the coverage of international news with a Western slant. Studies on the coverage of international news by these agencies found that majority of the news about foreign countries, including Malaysia, was negative while the agencies' countries of origins were more positive (See Mohd Rajib 1984; Faridah & Rahmah 1996; Mohd Rajib & Faridah 1996).

Today, Third World nations are concerned with the global flow of news and information based on quantitative and qualitative interpretations. In terms of quantity, there is a minimal coverage of the Third World by the Western media even though the Third World nations form nearly three-quarters of the world's population. Of the scanty coverage, news about the Third World is usually portrayed in a negative light, hence reinforcing stereotypes against those countries.

Many Third World leaders complain that the Western news agencies are disrupting the free flow of news, distorting the realities of the developing nations, and presenting negative images of the Third World. News from the Third World is too biased and too focused on issues of war, poverty, illiteracy, riots, revolutions, antics of national leaders, social disruption, natural calamity and the like.

Various studies on the coverage of international news by these international news agencies found that the majority of the news about foreign countries was negative directions while the agencies' countries of origins were more positive (Faridah & Rahmah 1996; Mohd Rajib & Faridah, 1996; Faridah Ibrahim & Mohd Safar 2005).

Faridah & Rajib (1996) looked at the coverage of human rights issues in five Malaysian dailies namely *Utusan Malaysia*, *News Straits Times*, *Sun*, *Berita Harian* and *The Star* from the perspective of source bias and journalistic bias. In the source bias category, it was found that AP focuses on neutral category (44.4%), followed by unfavourable (22.2%) and balanced (22.2%). Reuters gives more attention to favourable stories (35.6 %), with 33.3% balanced and 20% unfavourable. AFP focuses more on unfavourable material (36.4%). While the newspapers' own staff-journalists emphasize more favourable (39.4%) and neutral (36.7%) directions.

The findings also showed that the writers or journalists especially the western news agencies when writing about human rights' news are sometimes consciously or unconsciously involved in colouring stories and taking sides on certain issues they cover.

A local study in Malaysia on the usage of news sources and news agencies in 12 Malaysian newspapers (Faridah & Mohd Safar 2005) found that foreign news supplied by international news agencies, particularly Reuters, AFP and AP (Malaysian media use less news from UPI) is slanted more in negative and neutral directions as compared to positive and balanced directions. The study found that there is less news of negative orientation if the news is covered by the local news agency, Bernama or the newspaper's own staff. The study also found that local gatekeepers in both print and broadcast media have no choice but to use foreign news supplied by international news agencies because of superior footage and visuals as well as a wider, more extensive and up-to-date coverage. Furthermore, local media

organizations are handicapped due to the fact that they only have minimal number of foreign bureaus because of budget constraints.

In a way, the current situation echoes the main comments that were made during the New World Information Order debate in the 1980 where distorted, negative treatment of the Third World in the Western media is transferred to the Third World itself because of the latter's dependence on the Western news agencies.

Along with this argument, Galtung & Ruge (cited in Faridah & Mohd Safar 2005: 25) propose two principles concerning how news evaluation and selection operate. First, a story is more newsworthy if it contains more than one news factor. Second, lack of one factor can be compensated for by possessing another factor. For instance, a non-elite nation can get in the news through negativity (for examples coups, earthquakes, tsunamis). Without negative elements, news about non-elite nations will not find itself on the front page of leading world news dailies such as the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times* and *Le Monde*. Another criterion of news value is consonance (fulfilling political stereotypes) or having an elite or at least a well publicized leader (Libya's Colonel Gadaffi).

Galtung and Ruge identified twelve factors which have been found to be valid and enlightening for a wide range of news types in many countries. These twelve factors include conflict, recency, consonance, ambiguity, novelty, unexpectedness, threshold, relevance, personalization, eliteness, attribution and facticity. Having identified these factors, it is easy to understand why major stories in international news or local news are those that highlight negativities such as demonstrations, riot and wars. From the perspective of newsworthiness, these determinants are indicators that would discriminate well in separating newsworthy international events from non-newsworthy events.

The choice of negativity as a criterion for a newsworthy story has been a universal yardstick for a very long time. A very early study by Oliver Boyd Barrett (cited in Faridah and Mohd Safar 2005: 20) on the international news agencies found that news stories that were more likely to be selected by their correspondents for transmission if they were concerned with a capital city or major metropolis, if they had clear international repercussions, violence and well-established general market interest, and if the news sources were prestigious.

However, current trends show a more proactive practice by world news services such as CNN, BBC, and the international news agencies to hire locals to be their correspondents. According to Hachten (1999) although locals are hired, they normally report according to the interest of their employers. Furthermore, the Western media tend to place sensationalism and negativism ahead of serious news reporting and hence serious economic and political news also tends to be sensationalized. Such act of news maneuvering and slanting can also be categorized as news framing.

What then is news framing? The idea of "news frames" refers to interpretive structures that journalists use to set particular events within their broader context. News frames bundle key concepts, stock phrases, and iconic images to reinforce certain common ways of interpreting developments. Hence, the essence of framing is a selection process to prioritize some facts, images or developments over others, thereby unconsciously promoting one particular interpretation of events. According to Vogel and Frost (2009), framing strategies occur through a communication process that will enhance perceived persuasiveness and applicability of preferred ideas and concepts. Hence, frames of issues or events tend to follow a preferred orientation.

According to Valkenburg et al. (1999), journalists use frames to optimize audience accessibility to news. The concept of framing helps to focus on how news is presented and also how news is comprehended. Due to deadline pressures, reporters need to tell a story within a limited time or space. Hence, they use certain frames to simplify and give meaning to events, and to maintain audience interest. Lippmann (1922) once termed this the process of oversimplifications that may lead to stereotypical generalizations.

Although there are multifarious ways in which journalists can frame the news, Valkenburg et al. (1999: 551) contended that there are four common ways that worked very well with journalists. These include: (a) a conflict frame that emphasizes conflict among parties or individuals; (b) a human interest frame that focuses on an individual as an example or by emphasizing emotions; (c) a responsibility frame which attributes responsibility, crediting or blaming certain political institutions or individuals; and (d) an economic consequences frame which stresses the economic consequences for the audience.

The study

A content analysis of four Malaysian mainstream newspapers, namely *New Straits Times (NST)*, *Utusan Malaysia (UM)*, *The Star (TS)* and *Berita Harian (BH)* was conducted to find out to what extent are the international news covered by these newspapers comes from the government-owned news agency, Bernama, and what portion comes from the international news agencies, Reuters, Agence France Press (AFP), and Associate Press (AP). A total of ten issues in the month of August 2008 was randomly selected as news samples from the selected newspapers. The samples of news were from the newspapers' issues on the 1st, 2nd, 5th, 7th, 12th, 14th, 20th, 22nd, 28th and 30th August 2008.

Findings and discussion

As indicated in Table 1, the study found that, although Bernama produced a reasonable amount of foreign news for the month of August, the four newspapers used only a very few Bernama news items as compared to the foreign news provided by the international news agencies especially those produced by AP, Reuters and AFP. A lesser amount of news came from UPI. A total of 289 news stories were drawn from the six foreign Bernama bureaus in the month of August 2008, out of the total 2398 news produced for the year 2008 (*Bernama Annual Report 2008*). But the four newspapers only used less than 5% of the Bernama international news output.

The bulk of international news in the four mainstream newspapers came from the international news agencies. *Berita Harian* used a bigger proportion of Reuters (33.3%) and AFP (31.5%) news compared to only 2.6% news provided by Bernama foreign correspondents. *New Straits Times* used only 2.8% Bernama news compared to 37.8% AP and 30% Reuters. *Utusan Malaysia* used 2.7% Bernama news and 58.1% AP; while *The Star* used only 1.4% Bernama news compared to 41.1% AP and 41.1% AFP.

The study suggests that images of Superpowers portrayed in the newspapers are those being constructed by the international news agencies, particularly AP, Reuters and AFP. Hence, images are painted with a Western perspective. With a small intake of Bernama news, the findings of the study conclude that Bernama, as a government owned news agency has a marginal influence on the construction of Superpowers' images by the mainstream newspapers.

Table 1: Coverage of International News in Malaysian Mainstream Newspapers in the Month of August 20

Newspapers/ Agencies	BERNAMA		REUTERS		AP		AFP		AGENCIES & OTHERS		TOTAL	
BERITA HARIAN	3	2.6	38	33.3	36	31.5	25	21.9	12	10.5	114	100
NEW STRAITS TIMES	4	2.8	43	30.0	54	37.8	40	28.0	2	2.0	143	100
UTUSAN MALAYSIA	4	2.7	37	25.0	86	58.1	12	8.1	9	6.1	148	100
THE STAR	3	1.4	28	12.8	90	41.1	90	41.1	8	3.7	219	100
TOTAL	14		146		266		167		31		624	

Images of Superpowers

Every news item in the samples was analyzed in the directional analysis of news framing. Four frames were identified, namely favourable, unfavourable, neutral and balanced. Items favourable to the Superpowers include characterization of the Superpowers in an advantageous position, for instance, group consensus, harmony, cooperation, and peace. Items unfavourable to the Superpowers were those that placed them in a disadvantageous position, for instance, dissatisfaction, difference, disagreement, conflict, confrontation, hostility, blaming the other, etc. Neutral items were those that placed the Superpowers in neither a favourable nor unfavourable position. Items in the balanced category portrayed the Superpowers in both negative and positive categories.

An analysis of Superpowers covered by the four Malaysian national news dailies showed that several world Superpowers emerged as dominant in the day-to-day international news coverage. These Superpowers were The United States of America, Great Britain, Japan, Russia and the rising nation of China. D shows the frequency of coverage by each newspaper. The study showed that the United States and United Kingdom are still the major focus of international news by the local Malaysian media. To a lesser extent, news from the Eastern Block, such as Russia, also receives considerable attention. The two Asian nations that are most widely covered are Japan and China.

Story directions

In comparing the story direction with the national origin of the source, stories pertaining to the Western Superpowers were mostly neutral or unfavourable, but stories about Japan and China, were more neutral or favourable. Stories about the USA were 64.0% neutral and 20.3% unfavourable; the UK 57.1% neutral and 23.8% unfavourable; Russia, 46.5% neutral and 31.5% unfavourable. Stories about Japan were 57.7% neutral and 27.4% favourable and China, 66.0% neutral and 19.5% favourable. Although, the Malaysian newspapers retained the neutral manner in which Superpowers' stories were originally reported, judgmental verbs such as "demands", "tells", "blamed", "accused" were prevalent in stories. Such judgmental writing is not the work of local gatekeepers, but that of the international news agencies.

Table 2: Coverage of Dominant Superpowers

Newspapers/ Agencies	UNITED STATES		U.K		RUSSIA		JAPAN		CHINA		TOTAL	
BERITA HARIAN	43	38.0	21	18.0	19	16.6	19	16.9	12	10.5	114	100
NEW STRAITS TIMES	50	35.0	33	23.3	27	19.0	21	15.0	11	7.7	143	100
UTUSAN MALAYSIA	53	36.0	32	21.3	28	19.0	20	13.7	15	10.0	148	100
THE STAR	88	40.0	44	20.1	31	14.3	32	14.6	24	11.0	219	100
TOTAL	234		130		106		92		62		624	

Table 3: Comparison of Story Direction and Superpowers in All Newspapers

SUPER-POWERS/ DIRECTIONS	UNITED STATES		U.K		RUSSIA		JAPAN		CHINA	
FAVOURABLE	21	9.0	22	17.0	12	11.0	25	27.4	12	19.5
NEUTRAL	149	64.0	74	57.1	49	46.5	48	52.7	41	66.0
UNFAVOURABLE	48	20.3	30	23.8	33	31.5	12	12.7	7	11.0
BALANCED	16	6.7	4	2.1	12	11.0	7	7.3	2	3.5
TOTAL	234	100.0	130	100.0	106	100.0	92	100.0	62	100.0

Examples of news with different categories of directions are given in Table 4.

Table 4: Samples of news headlines and news directions

No.	Headlines	News-paper	Country	Source	Direction
1	Clooney jadi penasihat Barack Obama – 12/8/08 ; p 49/trans: Clooney becomes advisor to Barack Obama	BH	US	AFP	Neutral
2	Fukuda umum Kabinet baru – 2/8/08, p 48/trans: Fukuda announces new cabinet	BH	Japan	AP	Neutral
3	Kate desak Putera William melamar – 14/8/08, p 49/trans: Kate urges Prince William to propose	BH	UK	Reuters	Unfav
4	Obama janji pulih imej US – 30/8/08, p 58/trans: Obama promises to improve US image	BH	US	AFP	Fav
5	Russia slams Nato naval presence in Black Sea – 28/8/08, p 40	NST	Russia	AFP	Unfav

6	Students flock to Obama's side	NST	US	AFP	Fav
7	Film Star enters rehab for sex addiction – 30/8/08, p 38 (David Dichovny)	NST	US	AP	Unfav
8	Britons just don't want Labour leaders	NST	UK	Reuters	Unfav
9	World faced 'with growing instability, violence' – 7/8/08, p 32	NST	US	AFP	Unfav
10	Georgia, Rusia setuju rancangan damai EU – 14/8/08 p 32/trans: Georgia, Russia agree on EU peace plan	UM	Russia	Reuters	Fav
11	Penyelidik AS temui 'kaedah' kawal virus AIDS – 14/8/08 p 30/trans: US researcher discover 'new method' to control AIDS virus	UM	US	Reuters	Fav
12	Bas terbalik di Xinjiang, 24 terbunuh – 14/8/08, p 30/trans: Bas overturned in Xinjiang, 24 killed	UM	China	AFP	Neutral
13	Obama umum calon Naib Presiden hari ini – 20/8/08, p 32/trans: Obama announces candidate for Vice President today	UM	US	AFP	Neutral
14	48 flights delayed in New York – System back up yesterday after malfunction causes baggage pile-ups	Star	US	AP	Unfav
15	Torch run ends in Tiananmen – 7/8/08 p42	Star	China	Reuters	Neutral
16	Author who exposed horrors of Soviet gulag dies – 5/8/08 p38	Star	Russia	AP	Neutral

Conclusion

The most noticeable aspect of the findings obtained in this study is that the four Malaysian mainstream newspapers tended to take a neutral frame where Superpowers are concerned. In a way, such a stand by the newspapers echoed the Malaysian government's non-aligned position and neutrality in its foreign policies and international relations. From the coverage of foreign news by these newspapers, it can be seen that the newspapers indirectly seemed to have tried to place the dominant Superpowers in the distinctive frames set by the international news agencies. In this case, the government-owned National News Agency, Bernama has a marginal role in determining the direction of images for the Superpowers. The images of Superpowers are those framed by the international news agencies. From this perspective, it can be seen that the local mainstream newspapers have become more independent of the government-owned news agency in framing and shaping the images of specific Superpowers. Although the frames for the five dominant Superpowers are relatively neutral the United States, the United Kingdom and Russia are placed between the neutral and unfavourable frames, while Japan and China are placed in the neutral and favourable image frames. Valkenburg et al. (1999) contended that news framing helps the public to comprehend news based on the unconscious assumptions that are shaped by journalistic routines.

The dual images of Superpowers as reflected by the mainstream newspapers are considered important to the Malaysian government, which depends heavily on the national press to advance its domestic and foreign policies to the Malaysian and foreign public. It is important that the public sector, and in this case Bernama, being a government news agency should play

a stronger role in providing international news for local consumption. In so doing, Bernama will act as a natural impetus in providing a more balanced image of foreign countries considered important for Malaysia's political, social and economic well-being. On the other hand, the newspapers are aware that the Malaysian public forms images on the basis of information made available to them by the media. Because of this, the newspapers seem to take great care in transmitting images of other countries particularly the Superpowers, which could affect Malaysia and its neighbours politically, economically and socially. The study also confirms that the Western news agencies cover broader, albeit more comprehensive, news accounts of countries worldwide. This warrants the heavy use of news from these agencies by local gatekeepers.

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