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**NEWS BETWEEN MALAYSIA AND INDONESIA: EDITORIAL  
INTEREST IN CONFLICT OF INTEREST**



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### Abstract

How news editors in Malaysia and Indonesia handle conflicts of interest in publishing news about the two countries' relationship? This paper discusses a classic problem in journalism practice specifically the dilemma of media practitioners in maintaining their professional commitment and competing loyalties to the nation. The concept of conflict of interest refers to any potential to engage in unethical wrongdoings which may evade individuals' professional obligations. Using Malaysia-Indonesia relations as its case, six online news portal editors, three from Malaysia and Indonesia respectively, were interviewed and findings revealed that the Malaysian newsroom culture tends to be circumscribed by a subservient style of reporting. On contrary, Indonesia's relies on emotional expression. Nevertheless, both groups of respondents express dual loyalty to the profession and the country and often times choose to position themselves to be non-partisan. In conclusion, the two groups of editors experience undeniable subtle conflict of interest in themselves. However, within the Malaysia context, professional and national loyalties are not treated separately; while the situation is more prominent among Indonesian counterpart. This dilemma of theirs has profound impact toward the news produced.

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## 1. Introduction

Malaysia – Indonesia bilateral relationship is one of the important relationships in Asian region but has been intense throughout history. The relationship has natural dynamics that involves the process of cooperation and conflicts at the same time over decades particularly in issues such as cultural (*batik*, dance, foods and *angklung*) whereby the right to own has always been contested. The conflict of the two are mostly mediated by the media as evident by past research. The Indonesian media are more serious in reporting issues related to Malaysia and it is mostly done in a provocative manner particularly on the treatment of Indonesian migrant labours in Malaysia (Mulhanetti, 2015; Sasangka, 2005; Zakiah, 2012). The Malaysian media is equally responsible in generating ill feeling in its portrayal of negative stereotypes of Indonesian workers in Malaysia (Khadijah & Shakila, 2012). Here, the role of media staff – journalists or/and editors - in constructing the news in a given newsroom setting is important to analyse because their decision making throughout the process of news production could cause disharmony between Malaysia and Indonesia. News editor is a powerful force in the newsroom but indistinct figure in academic study. Editors direct the journalists and assess their work; they manage the converged (or otherwise) newsroom; and they decide just how much influence the audience will have - indicating that there is possibility of conflicting interests occur in their everyday routine (Adnan & Amri, 2016; Bharata & Nik Norma, 2019; Skjerdal, 2013; Selo et al., 2015; Wan Hassan et al., 2017). Conflict of interests arise when “contradictory goals and actions of different social subjects lead to a position where the conflict is impossible to avoid” (Soloski, 1989, pp. 220–222 in Skjerdal, 2013). In the context of Malaysia-Indonesia relations, the news decision process may become complicated as media staff have responsibilities to present the reality truthfully to adhere to journalism ethics and at the same time to maintain loyalty to their respected countries. These contradictory goals could lead to a position where the conflict of interest is impossible to avoid. Conflict of interest in journalism arise in circumstances in which there is a reason to be concerned that the judgment and performance of media staff might be unduly influenced by interests they have that lie outside their responsibilities as media staff (Skjerdal, 2013). Despite the importance of exploring editors’ interests in reporting on Malaysia – Indonesia relations, scattered research on it has very little focus on news editor as a variable. This study explored conflicting interests faced by editors – either to write for the public or on behalf of the country - in the process of constructing news on Malaysia-Indonesia issues. Conflict of interest or sometimes referred as dual loyalty among editors is against editorial-worthiness and could affect public sentiments on Malaysia – Indonesia relations.

### 1.1. Conceptual Framework

In a normative perspective, media is regarded as a third party, with no political interest to side. While in a constructivism perspective, media is taken as active actors whose big power for constructing their own agendas and interests or for supporting one of the competing interests. The formation of news is not separated from the term ‘ideology’ of the media. This ideology can be identified in the news production or in the process of media staff in constructing a certain reality which is known as framing.

Framing aims to explain problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation (Entman, 1993 in Skjerdal, 2013) and it is shaped by socio-political and economic forces within the society. These ideological forces can be divided into internal variable and external variable (Scheufele, 2006). Two sub-divisions of internal variable are individual level and institutional level. Within the individual level there are several elements that influence the media staff to frame the news such as individual belief and ideology, attitudes, socio-cultural background, experiential knowledge and professional norms. At institutional level, political orientation of medium can be exemplified. And at the external level, the pressure of political, authorities, interest groups and other elites as the variables of influence. Further, in conflict, Arno (1984) and Galtung (2005) identified two similar roles of news media as (i) conflict intensifier – the tendency of news media to sharpen the hostility among parties - and (ii) conflict diminisher – to diminish the conflict among those hostile parties. For Arno, the third media role is as storyteller, reporting facts surrounding the conflict with no dominant narrative frame. While Galtung contends that the third role of media should mediate the conflicting parties by communicating the process of negotiations or even providing a forum for on-going dialogue. The roles of media are determined by media staff depending on the ideological forces, either internal variables or external variables. This paper focuses on news editors' interests in the process of news production on Malaysia – Indonesia relationship.

## **2. Problem Statement**

This paper contends that media is a mediator of competing interests. Past studies on bilateral relationship between Malaysia and Indonesia showed that the media and media staff play important roles in mediating the conflict between the two countries. Scattered research on related issue examined media content, roles, framing and news constructions on specific issues such as Ambalat, cultural heritage (batik) and migrant labours (Adnan & Amri, 2016; Bharata & Nik Norma, 2019; Fauziah et al., 2018; Irwansyah, 2017; Mulharnetti, 2015; Rusdi et al., 2013; Wijayani et al., 2012; Wan Hassan et al., 2017) but lack of study on media staff newsroom routine. Media is perceived as powerful medium used by journalists and editors to either alleviate or reduce the rage among fellow nations by highlighting certain story angles repeatedly while excluding others. Their roles and interest in presenting the narrative of Malaysia – Indonesia relationship are crucial to explore because their work ethics always be tested; either to act as a media staff or nationalist of their country in narrating the issues to the audience. But this has not been examined extensively. Dual loyalty can be an ethical problem too. It can be described as having conflict of interest whereby at one end media staff want to keep their professionalism and on another end, they want to be nationalist. Hence, dual loyalty versus professionalism would challenge objectivity and truthfulness of the news presented to the public, simultaneously it could further complicate Malaysia – Indonesia relations. According to Skjerdal (2013) media practitioners may face with different kinds of conflicts of interest either individual or institutional but the primary interest should be focused on the public.

### **3. Research Questions**

Research questions are:

- What are editors' interests in constructing the news?
- How do editors recognize conflicting interest in the process of news construction?

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

- Exploring editors' interest in constructing the news; and,
- Examining editors' consciousness on conflicting interests they may face in constructing the news.

### **5. Research Methods**

This study employed in-depth interview method with six (6) news portal editors: three (3) from each country. In-depth interview is used to extract detailed information and deep understanding on how and why the respondents decide what to publish news on Malaysia or Indonesia in their media channels. Thus, the respondents were selected purposively based on their experiences in constructing news on the two countries' conflict. Two of Malaysian news sites are in Bahasa Malaysia and one is an English portal, while the three Indonesian news sites are in Bahasa Indonesia. Face-to-face interviews were conducted between 17 January and 3 February 2020 and the questions constructed were listed in Table 1 below. Each interview took about 40 to 50 minutes per respondent; all were audio recorded with permission and data was narratively analyzed using Labov's (2006) narrative structure: Abstract (summarize entire sequence of story told), Orientation (situational background), Complicating Action (the core story to describe sequences of events, problems and actions), Evaluation (highlights what is of the narrators' interest in handling the situation), Results/Resolution (the outcome of the story) and Coda (signals that the narrative is ending). Unlike thematic analysis which typically explores the 'what' in a text, narrative analysis goes deeper to understand the stories respondents create and how they represent themselves or their experiences, to themselves and to others. Respondents' names and organizations, they represent are anonymous to adhere research ethics procedure. Malaysian respondents are identified as MY1, MY2 and MY3; while Indonesian respondents are labelled as IN1, IN2 and IN3. All recorded interviews were transcribed, and words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs were coded to identify the six (6) Labov's narrative elements.

**Table 1.** In-depth Interview Questions

Research Questions	In-depth Interview Questions
To explore editors' interests in constructing the news.	a. What are your aims when constructing news on conflict story between Malaysia and Indonesia – particularly on issues such as Indonesian migrant and border disputes (Ambalat, Sipadan & Ligitan)? ( <i>Abstract, Orientation</i> ) b. What are the elements do you consider in constructing the news? ( <i>Evaluation</i> ) c. How do you construct your news to achieve your aims? ( <i>Evaluation, Results</i> )
To examine editors' consciousness on conflicting interests they may face in constructing the news	a. How do individual, organization and external factors influence your editorial decision? ( <i>Complicating Action</i> ) b. How do you handle them? ( <i>Complicating Action</i> )

## 6. Findings

This study examined interview data using narrative analysis by Labov (2006). This research finds that majority of the respondents express a combination of interests as aspiring professionalism and personal opportunism in the process of constructing news about issues between Malaysia and Indonesia. They have a sense of professionalism hence claiming to act neutral in making decision during the process of news construction. However, there is a subtle conflict of interest in them as they also believe in adhering to national interest especially among the Indonesian editors. Nationalistic style of reporting gives them a chance to 'serve' their country, they admitted. In the meantime, the Malaysian editors follow through a culture of self-censorship in the newsrooms and produce a subservient reporting style. This method helps to alleviate the tensions of the two nations. Prolonged practice of media control in Malaysia may have made this situation seem normal in many newsroom settings in the country.

The following discussion is based on the narrative structures and guided by the research questions. Malaysian respondents' stories are narrated first, follows by the Indonesian counterparts. Specifically, the Malaysian editors' narration on their interests (and conflicting interests) they may have in producing news on Malaysia – Indonesia conflict is basically grounded within the newsroom setting. In answering research question one that is on their aim when constructing news about Indonesia, all three respondents are in agreement that their aim is to report issue between the two nations as accurate as they can for public consumption. They made it clear that their target audience is the public. A respondent said, "I try to make the right decision when selecting what to present, what to publish so that people [Malaysians] know what exactly is going on" (MY3). On responding to the second research question: what elements they consider in constructing the news, the Malaysian respondents mentioned to present facts, events, and information to public in an accurate and unbiased manner. They added that most issues covered are recurring events, and some seemed insurmountable for example haze issue. In recurring story like this, one respondent said he always aims to warn, to educate and to inform public to take care of their health, wear face mask and alert about the Air Pollutant Index (API) reading with no intention to put blame on anyone (MY1).

Two important elements identified in constructing the news are (a) credible sources and (b) facts gathered from the sources. Dominant sources are from press conferences, press releases, government

officials or any other officials' bodies that involve in the bilateral relationship of the two countries. The Malaysian respondents also mentioned that putting facts in the right place is helpful. They admitted that news angle is important in capturing public attention, but they also believed - in the case of Malaysia and Indonesia conflict – facts could help more in harmonizing both parties' relations. Stories on Indonesia is often perceived sensation by public, but this is unavoidable, they stressed. For example, the issue on ill treatment of Indonesian domestic helpers by their Malaysian employers would normally win sympathy of the people of Malaysia and it normally able to trigger anger among Indonesians, whenever their media pick up the stories (MY2). This suggests that within their efforts to get the information across to their targeted audience, the editors unconsciously facing conflicting interests – how to present the stories in the right way according to their aims while adhering to the ethics of the profession and being able to harmonize the situation.

In the case of border sovereignty and territorial dispute, the Malaysian respondents' aim of reporting has always been distorted. For instance, news on the Ambalat territorial dispute which had a dominant discourse a few years back created feeling of anger among the Indonesians. Their anger was translated into the recruitment of Kontrantasi Volunteer Militias across Indonesia. It was to reminisce the 1963 Ganyang Malaysia campaign. A respondent (MY1) recalled his experience reporting on Sipadan and Ambalat stating that it was the hardest because the stories was picked up by Indonesian media and within days there were riots in Jakarta because of the news. It was not the aim of his reporting.

Two issues that would easily vent anger to the Indonesian media and public are migrant labours and territorial disputes, Malaysian respondents confirmed. They normally would put extra cautious in publishing the two issues by rechecking facts and making sure journalists to quote reliable sources so that public receive balanced information. One respondent (MY1) confirmed that credible sources would help the media to produce balanced news from credible source - for example, the court cases of abused Indonesian helpers - as no one could argue the decision made by the judge. He added "I make sure my journalists get the right sources and check again and again. We don't want to create war with our friends from seberang [Indonesia]" (MY1). Managing international relations from the newsroom is a challenging task for the editors. It must be done with extra cautious as it involves bilateral relationship between Malaysia and Indonesia. The respondents consider the issues so sensitive that more diplomatic way of reporting was taken into consideration. When asked about influential factors that could restrict their professionalism in constructing the news about Indonesia, they mentioned that they made their own decisions without interferences from neither in-house management nor outsiders.

In the meantime, the Indonesian editors narrated their story with mixed emotions. On their aim of reporting, all the respondents proudly affirmed that they are aiming to produce balanced news for the public and government as a way to serve the country. An Indonesian respondent clearly stated that he works to serve his people and his country and believes that the media staff are responsible to show the reality because it is their duty for the country (IN1). All the three respondents also in agreement that the government is their main targeted audience. This is because the government should be responsible and must take further actions on the conflict between Malaysia – Indonesia especially on territorial disputes and migrant labours. He added "...not that we [media] encourage war with you [Malaysia], but at least the [Indonesian] government should do something for our rights" (IN1).

In order to achieve the goal, the respondents strive to report in a comprehensive and investigative manner. For example, news on abused Indonesian helpers in Malaysia a couple of years ago was published for almost three weeks, one respondent told (IN2). But the decision to continue publishing the issue was not intended to provoke rather to give substantive information to the public. Another respondent claimed the Indonesian public always in high demand wanting to know more about the issue and he is responsible to accommodate their request not to provoke them. He said, “And we have no power to stop them [public] from rioting” (IN3). Another respondent mentioned that in sensitive issues, he would normally interview the Malaysia Embassy in Indonesia to ensure they produce comprehensive and balanced reporting. Only correct and unbiased information should be delivered to the Indonesian public and government, stressed the respondent (IN1). He added this effort is also to tie good relationship with Malaysia through the Embassy. It is his hope that by presenting different perspectives from different people could give broader picture on issues related to both countries. In the process of news construction, these editors also facing challenges in term of fulfilling the needs of the public demanding extensive stories on certain issues; especially about abused Indonesian helpers in Malaysia. A respondent (IN2) said, he feels obliged to provide the public with the stories and always refer to Malaysian media as sources of news. However, Indonesian respondents also told that reference made to the Malaysian media as news source sometimes can be frustrated. They feel that there are certain stories that are over magnified by the Malaysian media such as haze issue; while stories which they think should be given more attention such as territorial disputes, Indonesian migrant labours in Malaysia and cultural spat. One respondent (IN3) told that Malaysian media has always been framing Indonesia as an offender that caused the haze by burning the forest for plantations. But did not report that Malaysia is the owner of the plantations in Indonesia. Hence, they sometime must reinstate some stories published by the Malaysian media to give clearer picture about the issue to the public. In the issue of border disputes, for example, the history of the country's mapping is used as source of news to show how Sipadan and Ligitan are located within Indonesia's sovereign territory. In this sense, the Malaysian media may be the trigger for the way news on Malaysia is presented by Indonesian editors.

## **7. Conclusion**

It is the contention of this paper that editors are facing dilemma in maintaining their professional commitment and competing loyalties to the nations in constructing news on Malaysia – Indonesia issues. At the normative level, the editors express dual loyalty to the profession and the nation. However, they do not shift loyalties in the sense that they sometimes stay professional and occasionally swop to national loyalty depending on the issues they are working on. Respondents' loyalties are present at the same time, especially among the Malaysian respondents, which makes it even difficult to identify if they really having conflict of interest in their work. The situation is more prominent among the Indonesian counterpart and challenges them to compete loyalties throughout the news production process. This is a classic problem in journalism, specifically the dilemma of media practitioners who face multiple commitments within oneself. Normally they are unconscious of their inner ideology forces that may influence their decision making (Scheufele, 2006). This dilemma of theirs has profound impact toward the news content. The use of narrative structures by Labov (2006) helps to explore respondents'

sequences of stories systematic in order to have deeper understanding on how they present themselves and experiences. This paper concludes that to some extent, whether consciously or not, the media does act as mediator in the conflict between Malaysia and Indonesia. In this study, Malaysian media can be described as a storyteller that reporting facts about the issues with lack of dominant narrative and Indonesian media seems to act in between conflict intensifier and conflict diminisher (Arno, 1984; Galtung, 2005).

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