

The Potential Role of News Media in the Regional Conflict: Reading the Representation of the Potential Role of Indonesian News Media in the Conflict over *Ambalat* Disputed Island between Indonesia and Malaysia

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Abstract: Seperti halnya aktivitas sosial lainnya, praktek jurnanisme sebagai bagian dari proses produksi pesan media massa boleh dikatakan tidak akan pernah dapat lepas dari pengaruh gravitasi kepentingan ideologis yang mengelilinginya. Pada titik ini, keterkaitan praktek-praktek jurnanisme dengan kepentingan ideologis yang melingkupinya dapat diidentifikasi dari kecenderungan para jurnalis ketika melakukan framing (pembingkaihan) terhadap realitas sosial yang diangkat sebagai realitas media. Seorang jurnalis akan selalu melakukan seleksi dan sekaligus memberikan prioritas terhadap elemen-elemen fakta tertentu dari realitas sosial tersebut dengan mendasarkan diri pada pertimbangan-pertimbangan ideologis yang hampir selalu dipengaruhi oleh konstelasi kepentingan di sekitarnya. Demikianpun sebaliknya, media massa sekaligus juga memiliki kekuatan strategis sebagai stimulator bagi munculnya sejumlah konstruksi sosial yang berpengaruh bagi publik. Berangkat dari dua pengandaian di atas, tulisan ini ditujukan untuk melihat secara sederhana peran potensial media massa dalam konflik seperti yang terepresentasikan dalam kecenderungan pemberitaannya untuk berpihak terhadap pihak-pihak yang bertikai.

Key words: kepentingan ideologis, konflik, pembingkaihan peran potensial media.

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If we visited the website of *Universiti Sains Malaysia* (Malaysia University of Science) on Thursday, 3 March 2005, we would find that this high profile website was defaced with the picture of Indonesian flag and a picture of Sukarno, the first Indonesian president, accompanied by the words *Gerakan Ganyang Malaysia* (Movement to Crush Malaysia). During the following days, such visual images also defaced other high profile websites of some Malaysian institutions such as the *Perak* Veterinary Department, the National Productivity Council, the Multimedia University, the Public Work Department, and the Human Right Commission of Malaysia. As stated by Budi Raharjo, the head of Indonesia's Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT), at least there were 48 Malaysian websites had been hacked and defaced during the diplomatic tension between Indonesia and Malaysia... As well, there were 36 Indonesian websites had been hacked and defaced by Malaysian hackers (Media Indonesia, 19/03/2005).

The involvement of hackers in the diplomatic tension between Indonesia and Malaysia is just one example of evidence, which reestablishes obviously the existence of media space as a battlefield for citizen warfare in which individuals or groups can express their nationalism sentiments. Furthermore, as represented in those challenging messages posted through such activities, media content seems not merely to reflect the level of conflict but has a functional relationship to the conflict itself. It has potentials either to intensify or diminish the conflict itself particularly by considering the capability of mass media as agenda setter for public.

Based on this regard, it is very interesting to further explore the potential role of Indonesian news media in the diplomatic conflict over the disputed Ambalat Island between Indonesia and Malaysia. Guided by the assumption that mass media have strategic role in diminishing or intensifying the conflict, this paper is aimed at identifying whether Indonesian news media, which are represented by *Media Indonesia* Online Newspaper, tend to be conflict intensifier or to be conflict diminisher. *Media Indonesia* Online Newspaper is chosen on the basis of its geographic dispersion and its importance as national agenda setter.

In order to identify the ideological tendency of *Media Indonesia* to reconstruct the diplomatic conflict between Indonesia and Malaysia in its news accounts, the combination of qualitative content analysis and framing analysis will be employed to identify the potential role of this news media. So far, there are 114 news accounts, which will be quantitatively analyzed.

Furthermore, in order to sharpen the analysis of those news accounts, there are also 2 editorial articles, which will be qualitatively analyzed. Those news accounts and editorial articles were exposed by *Media Indonesia* during Malaysia-Indonesia diplomatic tension occurring in March to May 2005.

NEWS FRAMES AS THE REPRESENTATION OF THE POTENTIAL ROLE OF NEWS MEDIA IN THE POLITICAL CONFLICT

It is commonly believed that recently news media as public space have become a battlefield in which individuals or groups potentially express their opposing discourses and tries to make or to influence public opinion. In line with this regard, there are at least two different perspectives which can be brought forward for exploring the role of news media in the construction of reality.

The first one is the normative perspective. In this perspective, news media are regarded merely as third parties, which should have no political pretension to side with one of those hostile interest groups. Therefore it can be understood if news media are also often regarded as a value-free space where each group can freely express its political interests without the ideological intervention of news media. At this point, the involvement of news media in the construction of reality is no more than facilitating the articulation of each ideological interest.

On the other hand, in line with constructivism perspective news media are regarded as active actors whose big power for constructing their own political agendas and interests or for supporting one of the competing interest which conforms to their own political ideology. Different from the former perspective, this perspective seems to be more comprehensive to explain the ideological leaning represented in the news accounts particularly in the context of news media role in the political conflict.

As regarded in the constructivism perspective, the formation of news accounts can't be separated from the term of "ideology". In this perspective, ideology as a set of values govern how individuals and groups see the world is positioned as an important factor which will conduct the ways in which each news represent reality. Therefore, it can be said that each news exposed by a certain news media institution tends to be colored by a point of view, leans a certain direction and implicitly takes sides (Mc Quail, 1985:194).

The influence of the ideology especially can be identified in the news production or in the process of each institution in constructing a certain reality. According to Robert Entman (1993), the process of institution in constructing reality is called as “framing” and the manifestation of this process is called as “frame”. Entman tries to define the term of framing as a process to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text. Closely-linked to this definition, Entman also underlines that framing is aimed to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation. In this sense, it can be simply stated that each news exposed a certain news media institution has an ideological leaning to take side with a certain group, to marginalize or to centralize a certain interest and to narrow or to broaden a certain discourse.

The framing of news stories by journalists does not develop in a political vacuum; it's shaped by socio-political and economic forces within the society. In this context, Scheufele Dietram simply classifies those ideological forces into internal variable and external variable (Scheufe, 1999:109). The internal variable can also be subdivided into the individual level and the institutional level. At the individual level there several potential variables of influence such as individual ideology, attitudes, socio-cultural background of each person (journalist), experiential knowledge and professional norms. At the institutional level, several potential variables, which can be exemplified, are types or political orientation of medium. It can be understood by exploring the historical background of each institution. And at the external level, we can place the pressure of political, authorities, interest groups and other elites as the variables of influence.

However, we must also remember that the scale of the ideological leaning in taking side or not reflected on each news basically depends on the dynamic of bargaining process and the tension among those variables and whether there is strong resonance or not between variables at the internal level and variables at the external level. At this point, this regard strengthens the ideas suggested in the constructivism perspective in the sense that news media are an active actor in constructing realities.

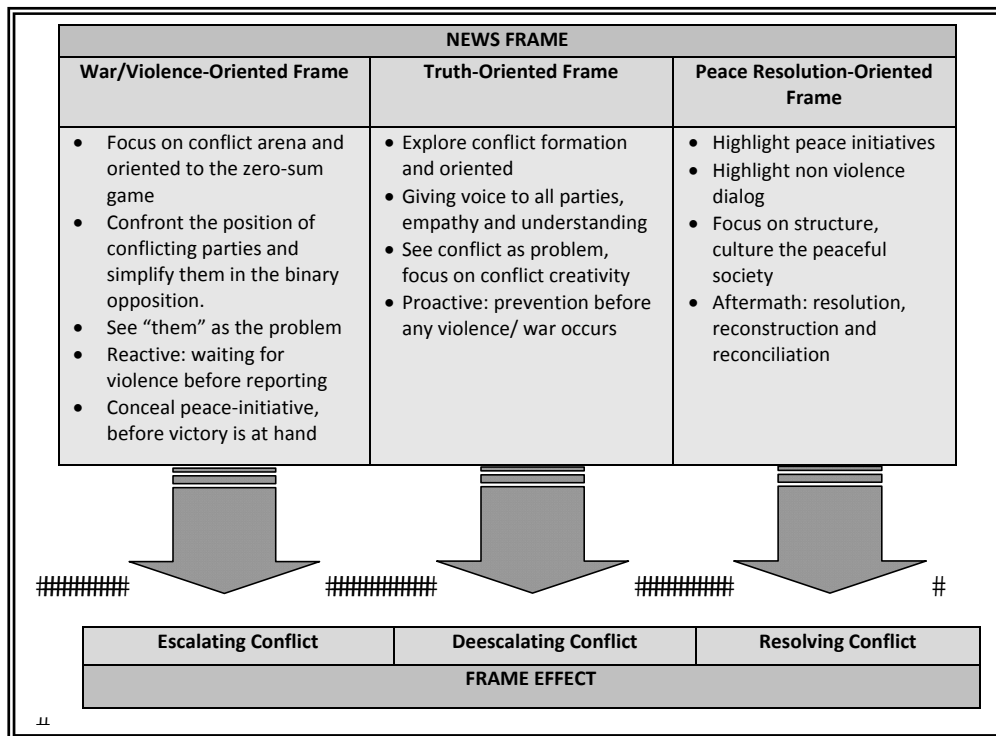
Closely-related to this perspective, Andrew Arno implies potential roles of news media by classifying them into to three main categories (Arno, 1984:229-238). The first category is conflict intensifier. This category refers to the tendency of news media to sharpen the hostility among parties involving in a certain conflict. The second category is conflict diminisher. In contrast, this category refers to the ideological leaning of news media to diminish the conflict among those hostile parties. The third category is story teller. Different from previous categories, this category refers to the tendency of new media just

report facts surrounding the conflict. In this sense, there is no dominant narrative frame than outlining the basic element of fact such as who, where, when, why, and how.

Similarly, Johan Galtung also identifies three main categories of news media roles in the conflict (Galtung, 1981:259-298) The first and second roles of news media suggested by Galtung seems to be similar to the categories suggested by Arno in the sense that news media can play potential role as conflict escalator or conflict de-escalator. The third category is news media as go-between actors. By the third category, Galtung means the role of news media as a channel of communication mediating between conflicting parties by fostering communication, generating alternative options to violent conflict, reflecting the ordinary person's desire for peace, communicating the process of negotiations or even providing a forum for on-going dialogue. Regarding this classification, it seems that Galtung tends to contextualize his classification in the functional contribution of news media for the conflict resolution.

Furthermore, Galtung also suggests several kinds of news frame through which each category of news media roles in a certain conflict can be identified. In order to further specify these frames, the following figure shows the characters of these frames and their potential effects for the conflict occurrence.

Figure 1 News Frames



As shown in Figure 1, the use of each kind of frame may result in different effect to the conflict resolution. In particular, it can be understood by considering the strategic position of news media as agenda setters or construction stimulators for the formulation of public opinion and collective frame of public to identify their problem. As stated by William A. Gamson, this collective frame will be implemented potentially in the collective action (Gamson, 1992:1-8). Similarly, Andrew Arno also underlines the strategic role of news media to stimulate public collective action in responding socio-political problems. In this sense, new media is regarded as powerfully influencing the way conflict behavior is expressed and interpreted. Regarding the war oriented frame, Arno also implies that news media are also capable of causing considerable damage when no-one is intentionally wielding it at all. Under ideal condition news media are supposed to have a mind of its own and operate according to professional codes of conduct. But its culture of professional and financial instincts can drive the media to practices which obsess with violence and influence opinion in socially destabilizing ways.

Under less than ideal condition, media bias, inaccuracy and sensationalism can generate xenophobia and violent conflict.

In order to further identify the ideological leaning represented in such kind of frame as suggested by Galtung, it may also be necessary to refer to the ideas suggested by Zhongdang Pan and Gerald Kosicki in the sense that both media analysts provide more operational theoretical frame to analyze the structural framing devices of news accounts. Framing devices in news discourse, according to Zhongdang Pan and Gerald Kosicki, can be classified into four categories representing four structural dimensions of news discourse (Pan and Kosicki, 1993:58-62). These devices consist of:

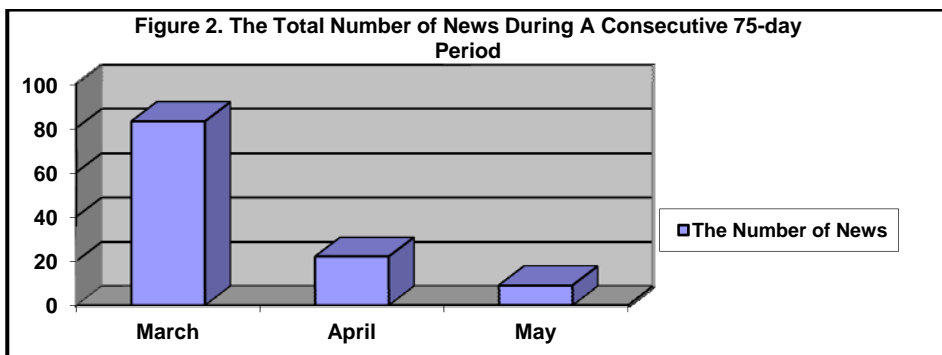
- a. *Syntactical Structure*: as a placement of a particular news event or story in a certain news structure (headline, lead, background and closure) thus influencing interpretation of the event. For example, a headline is the most salient cue to activate certain semantically related concepts in readers' minds.
- b. *Scriptural Structure*: as the representation of the newsworthiness element. For the example, the absence of a source as a competent actor in a certain conflict news may express the ideological leaning of news media institution to take side with a certain group.
- c. *Thematical structure* as the story line of news. By using this structure we can evaluate how each institution dramatize or select and salient some strategic topics.
- d. *Rhetorical Structure*: as stylistic choices made by journalist. This structure consists of several elements such as metaphors, exemplars, catchphrases, depictions and visual images. This structure refers to the tendency of news to tout its fact. Journalists use this structure to maximize their observation and interpretation as fact or to increase the effectiveness of news. For evaluating the ideological leaning reflected on this structure, we must connect it with its semantic meaning or socio-cultural meaning.

By combining the theoretical frameworks described above, therefore, it may be quite clear to further understand news frames as the representation of potential roles played by news media in the political conflict.

READING THE REPRESENTATION OF THE POTENTIAL ROLE OF INDONESIAN NEWS MEDIA IN THE CONFLICT OVER *AMBALAT* DISPUTED ISLAND

As well as the ideas as suggested in the constructivism perspective, the evaluation to the potential role played by Indonesian news media is also started from the same assumption in the sense that news media potential role as the representation of ideological leaning can be identified from the structural devices of news framing. In this regard there are five aspects of news accounts on *Ambalat* case, which will be explored. The first aspect is disposition of the relationship between Malaysia and Indonesia. This aspect refers particularly to the thematic structure as suggested by Pan and Kosicki. The evaluation to this aspect is particularly aimed to identify whether Indonesian news media tend to de-legitimize Malaysia or to treat this country as equal as Indonesia as its own country. The second aspect is suggested solution. This aspect also refers to the thematic structure. By regarding that news media tend potentially to centralize certain remedies or to marginalize them, the evaluation to this aspect is aimed mainly to identify the extent to which Indonesian media comprehensively suggests productive solution conducted to the embodiment of conflict resolution between Malaysia and Indonesia. As suggested by Pan and Kosicki, both aspects will be analyze by identifying the presence of catchphrases, keywords, metaphors, and depictions in the 114 news account exposed by *Media Indonesia* Online Newspaper. All of the content of those news accounts will be analyzed entirely rather than just subject header. In addition, in order to sharpen the analysis, there are also 2 editorial articles exposed during a consecutive 75-day period.

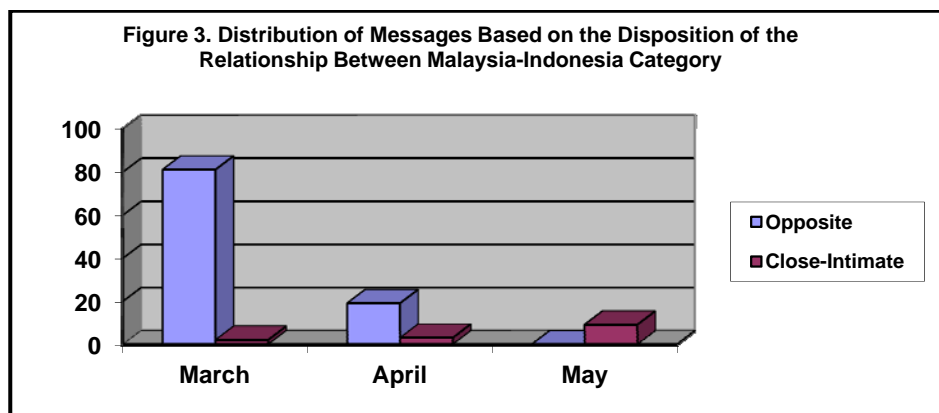
In general, the distribution of news accounts exposed by *Media Indonesia* during the time span of research can be seen in the following figure.



A first glance at the distribution of news accounts published during the chosen time span suggests that there is a parallelism of the development of the conflict and the intensity of *Media Indonesia* to report the facts surrounding the conflict. As shown in *Figure 2*, news accounts on *Ambalat* case are concentrated in March when the political tension between Malaysia and Indonesia increased significantly. There are 83 news (73%) exposed during March, whilst there are only 22 news (20%) and 9 news (7%) exposed during April and May respectively.

THE DISPOSITION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MALAYSIA-INDONESIA

As suggested by Galtung, the ideological leaning of news media in covering certain conflict can be identified from the way of that media to profile each parties involved in the conflict. In general, there are two possibilities regarding the way of news media to profile those conflicting parties. The first possibility is the tendency of news media to marginalize or de-legitimize certain party and at the same time to centralize or legitimize other party. The second possibility is the tendency to treat all conflicting parties equally. Those tendencies are represented generally in the effort of news media to expose truth or in contrast to hide untruth, the use of keywords or catchphrases, depictions and metaphor. In the same regard, this category is subdivided into two subcategories. The first subcategory is “opposite”, which refers to the tendency of *Media Indonesia* to confront Indonesia and Malaysia or to present bad image of Malaysia. The second subcategory is “close-intimate”, which refers to the tendency to be impartial and to present good image of both countries. The following table shows the distribution of each subcategory.



As can be seen in *Figure 3*, during the periods of March and April *Media Indonesia* tended to position Malaysia and Indonesia in the construction of binary opposition. In March there are 81 news or 97% of the total number of news exposed in this month, which represent this construction. As well, there are 19 news or 86% of the total number of news exposed in April, which also represent the similar construction. In terms of rhetorical structure, this tendency can be identified from the use of keywords and catchphrases such as *negara serakah* (greedy country), *agresor* (aggressor), *mencaplok* (to annex), *merampok* (to robe), *meremehkan* (to underestimate), and so on. Such keywords and catchphrases are generally aimed to profile the image of Malaysia and its action as the national enemy and on contrary to profile the image of Indonesia merely as a victim.

The similar tendency is also reflected in the editorial article exposed on 5 March 2005. In this editorial article, *Media Indonesia* used explicitly bad depictions to de-legitimate Malaysia. These depictions can be seen in the following citations, which have been translated from Indonesian to English. In the lead of the editorial article, the editor wrote:

“There are signs that Malaysia will be expansionist country, which excessively expands its territory by annexing the territory of other countries. If we don’t remind this country, it will be will be new-colonizer” (Media Indonesia, 5/03/2005).

In terms of scriptural structure of news framing as suggested by Pan and Kosicki, the placement of such citation and the use of keywords such as “we” indicate obviously its effort to provoke audiences to take the same position in opposing Malaysia. This tendency is strengthened by the following citation written in the body of this article.

“After succeeding in occupying *Sipadan* and *Ligitan* islands, Malaysia is apparent to show its arrogant attitude and to underestimate the sovereignty of our country. Malaysia thinks that it will be easy to robe our territory” (Media Indonesia, 05/03/2005).

By intensely using such keywords and depiction, it is apparent that *Media Indonesia* tended to stimulate Indonesian public to position Malaysia as the source of problem in the *Ambalat* case. At this point, regarding this tendency, it may not be too exaggerate to state that during the periods of March and April, *Media Indonesia* seemed to play its role as conflict intensifier rather than conflict de-escalator or conflict resolver.

Different from the ideological leaning shown during the previous periods, during the period of May *Media Indonesia* tend to change its political attitude. In particular, this tendency is represented in the total number of news accounts exposed during this period, which are included in the subcategory of close-intimate. There are 9 news accounts (100% of all news exposed in May), which are included in this sub-category. In those news accounts, *Media Indonesia* is apparent to show more cooperative attitude. As well, it can be identified from the use of keywords and catchphrases such as *dua negeri berdaulat* (two sovereign countries), *cinta damai* (peace lover), *negeri yang berpengaruh di Asia* (Asian influencing countries).

The change of *Media Indonesia*'s political attitude is also reflected in the editorial article exposed on 14 May 2005. Although the editor of *Media Indonesia* wrote the depiction in the end of this article, in terms of semantic meaning it shows quite clearly more respective attitude of this newspaper. The depiction can be seen in the following citation:

“As well as Indonesia, we believe that Malaysia as the leading country in Asian has many comparative advantages included high skill of diplomacy, interesting performance, high consciousness of international relation ethics, and also excellent capability in understanding the problem of other countries.” (Media Indonesia, 14/05/2005)

THE SUGGESTED SOLUTION

As stated before, the evaluation of this category is mainly aimed to identify the extent to which *Media Indonesia* tended to contribute to the embodiment of conflict resolution. Regarding this aim, there two subcategories, which are set out as the operationalization of this category. There first subcategory is confrontation whilst the second is peace resolution. A certain news account will be classified in the first subcategory if it represented the preference to the violent solution rather than non-violent solution. Included in this subcategory are news accounts on several evidences such as the burning of Malaysian flag, activities of Front for Crushing Malaysia, military movement and other evidences representing hostility. In turn, a certain news account will be categorized in the second subcategory if it represented the preference to the non-violent solution rather than violent solution. Included in this subcategory are news accounts on several evidences such as diplomatic negotiations. The distribution of news accounts based on this category can be seen in the following figure:

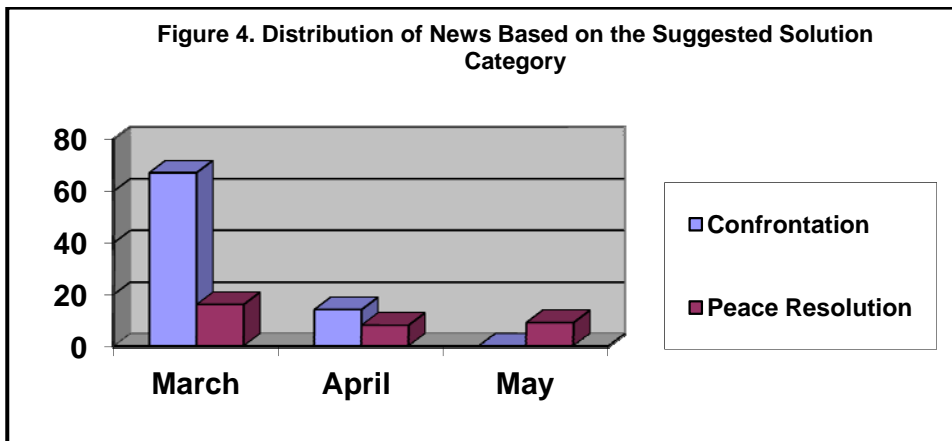


Figure 4 shows quite clearly that news accounts exposed by *Media Indonesia* during the periods of March and April tended to represent confrontation suggestion. There are 67 news accounts (81%) exposed in March, which represent this suggestion. Similarly, there are 14 news accounts (64%) exposed in April, which seemed to suggest the same solution. More or less, these proportions indicate the confrontationist social commitment or *Media Indonesia* to solve the conflict particularly by comparing to the proportion of news accounts representing peace resolution. As well, in terms of frame effect, the domination of confrontation-oriented news accounts stimulate potentially public feeling to be threatened by Malaysia and at the same time stimulate mistrust against this country.

This tendency is also strengthened by the editorial article exposed on 5 March 2005. In this article, *Media Indonesia* explicitly suggested violent solution. It can be seen in the following citation:

“Our President has instructed Indonesian Mariner Corps to protect *Ambalat* Block, but we still worry that the instruction is too soft to face a greedy country, which underestimate our capability to protect our sovereignty.” (Media Indonesia, 05/03/2005)

In contrast, during the period of May *Media Indonesia* tended to expose news accounts representing peace resolution. All of news accounts (9 news) exposed during this period are included in the second category. In particular, the tendency of *Media Indonesia* to expose peace resolution oriented message can be read as the representation of cooperative social commitment in supporting reconciliation between Malaysia and Indonesia. In terms of frame effect, this representation has potential to reduce the collective feeling to be

threatened by the enemy. As well, the same tendency is also reflected in the editorial article exposed on 14 May 2005. In this article, *Media Indonesia* underlined the importance of peace solution. It can be seen in the following citation:

“Recently, peace must be the first choice to face the difference. This era must be the peaceful era. Political solution by violence should be forgotten.” (Media Indonesia, 14/05/2005).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Primarily this study finds that during the consecutive 75-day period, *Media Indonesia* tended to change its role. During the period of March to April, this news media tended to be conflict escalator, whilst during the period of May it tended to be conflict de-escalator or even to be conflict resolver. However, by comparing the number of news accounts representing war oriented frame and truth oriented frame or peace resolution frame, this news media tended to show generally its role as conflict escalator.

Regarding this tendency, it may be interesting to question why *Media Indonesia* tended to be obsessed by the conflict between Malaysia and Indonesia. Although this study has no quite strong data to answer that question, there are a number of hypotheses which may be appropriate to answer it.

The first hypothesis is closely related to the terms of the economic imperative influencing the journalism practices. In line with the growing impact of commercialism on the media, it seems that the reporting of conflict is often regarded nothing else but commodity itself to maximize audiences, advertisers and revenues. Therefore, it can be understood that news media can not afford to be a responsible forum for the socialization of conflict resolution. Conflict sells better, and is financially satisfying. Increasingly, news is seen as entertainment, by media owners and by consumers. More or less, this situation will force journalist merely seeks immediacy, drama, and simple images which favor stereotypes. Immediacy does not favor peace building as news story because it is almost always a time consuming process rather than an instant event. In the same regard, journalists of *Media Indonesia* may face the same situation, which prevented them to conduct the news accounts on *Ambalat* case to the conflict resolution.

The second hypothesis can be started from the perspective of the political imperative. As suggested by Walter Lippmann, news media often become nothing else but political propaganda media for government particularly in the case confronted a certain country to the other country (Lippmann, 1992:78-89). In this sense, journalists often tend to be puppets that simply respond to the pull of the most powerful strings. This hypothesis may be reasonable particularly by considering that during the conflict *Media Indonesia* tended to chose news sources representing Indonesian government. As well, the hypothesis will be strong particularly by relating to the tendency of *Media Indonesia* to change its news frames in line with the change of Indonesian government's responses.

Finally, for further exploration, there is a recommendation, which can be brought forward here, particularly by considering the weakness found in this paper. In terms of research objects, it must be admitted that this paper has not been able to identify completely the potential role of news media involved in the case of *Ambalat*. Regarding this weakness, it is strongly recommended that further empirical study also widens the scope of exploration by comparing the ideological leaning of Indonesian news media and of Malaysian news media in constructing realities surrounding the case of *Ambalat*. In this sense, it will be fruitful to compare the ideological leaning of news media of both countries in the sense that the role of news media in this case can be identified more comprehensively. As well, the comparison will also widen automatically the scope of analysis in the sense that the influence of patriotism spirit or other primordial variables to the news accounts can be identified.



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