

COVERING RELIGIOUS CONFLICT IN MALAYSIA: HOW *SIN CHEW DAILY* FRAMED THE LINA JOY CONTROVERSY

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the author reports the outcome of a thorough analysis of how Malaysian Chinese newspaper—*Sin Chew Daily* reported one of the most controversial religious problems encountered in Malaysia's recent history—the Lina Joy's religious conversion. Lina Joy's decision to pursue changes to her National Registration Identity Card after renouncing Islam to become a Christian in 1990 sparked off complex legal procedure that attracted great attention from the media. *Sin Chew Daily* is the largest circulating Chinese language newspaper that seems disinclined to the dominant Islamic perspective in Malaysia. Considered an interesting case to examine how major local media represented this conflict, *Sin Chew Daily* was analysed with the objectives of determining (1) the pattern of coverage of Lina Joy's case; (2) the predominant news sources used by the newspaper; (3) the news frame used by the newspaper; and (4) the slant of the news articles towards the parties in conflict. Findings show that *Sin Chew Daily* devoted a huge percentage of its attention to getting straight news stories from representatives of professional organisations, indicating more of surveillance than correlational and creative role. While conflict frame made the strongest showing on the pages of the paper, *Sin Chew Daily* was also found to have been sympathetic toward Lina Joy and critical of Court ruling on the case.

Keywords: *news reporting, interethnic relations, multicultural communication, vernacular newspaper, framing analysis*

INTRODUCTION

The last few years have seen a number of religious and ethnic tensions in Malaysia, which continues to impact on the lives of Malaysians from all walks of life. Recent cases of interethnic tension include the *Kampung Medan* clashes, *Suqiu* controversy over the share of equity capital by the different ethnic groups, *keris* wielding

incidents, *Negarakuku* incident, controversy over a tertiary education textbook on “ethnic relations”, controversy over freedom of faith and body snatching, Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf), cow-head protest, *Biro Tata Negara* (BTN) debacle, disputes over the use of the word “Allah” and arson attacks, etc. On the other hand, Islam is increasingly becoming a major symbol of Malay-ness in Malaysia that faith is inseparable from the Malay ethno-cultural heritage. The division between the Malays and non-Malays is widened by the religious divide between Muslims and non-Muslims, creating a distinct, acute awareness of the “other”. Thus, the effect has been to aggravate the inter-ethnic fracture in Malaysian society (Lee, 2002; Lee, 2004; Neo, 2006; Ooi, 1991).

According to Mustafa (2010), religion, ethnicity and related issues have always been a difficult area of reporting in multicultural societies. Where religion stories are routinely judged and framed by the media to, albeit inadvertently, misrepresent and disrespect the essence of what adherents of different faiths believe in, religion stories do provide the fuel for prolonged conflicts—even violence in societies that are historically divided by tribal and cultural rivalries.

Mass communication is an important tool towards the integration of societies. Media can act as a change agent, which can help to educate each subgroup and transform the traditionally segmented and divided society into a cohesive and integrated one where differences no longer become sources of conflict (Viswanath and Arora, 2000). The structure of newspapers in Malaysia is strongly influenced by the multi-lingual nature of the nation’s population and portrays its pluralistic nature. Newspapers are published in different languages to cater for the respective major ethnic groups. Samad (1991) observed that newspapers in Malaysia play a very important role in the ethnic society while their approaches to problems are different. He explained that this is because each ethnic group has a different living standard, economic development and progress. Muthalib and Wong (2002) asserted that readers of the newspapers learn about issues of significance to their community, and how much importance to attach to the issues, based on the amount of coverage given to them. Scholars also found that in Malaysia, the vernacular newspapers play a central role in shaping political and social reality because the editors and journalists are usually members of the community elite (Kua, 2002; Lent, 1990; Mansor, 2005).

THE LINA JOY’S CONTROVERSY

Born Azlina Jailani and raised in a Malay Muslim family, Lina Joy declared herself a Christian in 1990. In 1999, Joy succeeded in legally changing her name, and began pursuing a change of her particulars on her National Registration Identity Card (NRIC). Around the time of her name change, the National Registration Department (NRD) began placing the word “Islam” on the NRIC of those identified as Muslim by the NRD. Joy’s new NRIC with her new legal name thus carried the word “Islam”, which made her file a suit in the High Court, arguing that she was legally entitled to an identity card without the word “Islam”. This move was controversial because Joy bypassed the *Syariah* (Islamic religious) courts. She argued that because she no longer considered herself a Muslim, she was no longer under the jurisdiction of the *Syariah* courts; the NRD however countered that under the law they could not

change her legally registered religion from Islam to Christianity without her first receiving a certificate of apostasy from a Syariah court.

The case made its way through the courts, with the Court of Appeal ruling against Joy. The apex Federal Court issued a final judgment on the case on May 30, 2007, which held that only after Joy has received a certificate of apostasy from a Syariah court, can she embrace Christianity. The Federal Court's decision on Lina Joy has provoked further discussion on the fundamental freedom of conscience as guaranteed by the Malaysian Constitution. The Federal Constitution states that while Islam is the religion of the federation, other religions may be practiced in peace and harmony throughout the country. The Lina Joy's case became a focal point of tensions between Muslims and religious minorities. While some Muslims welcomed the ruling as ensuring adherence to Islamic law, Muslim norms and practices, many religious minorities felt that the judgment was an infringement of Joy's constitutional rights.

The Lina Joy's case brought to centre stage the issue of Muslims in Malaysia who want to convert out of Islam. The balance of religious relations in Malaysia has often been painted as precarious. The debates following the Lina Joy controversy undoubtedly lent credence to this charge. Impassioned cries from both those who supported a Malaysian's right to convert and those who fought to safeguard the sanctity of Islamic religious procedures brought tensions to an unprecedented height. Since the Federal Court's decision on Lina Joy, many things have been said about the thorny issue in the mainstream media, online newspapers and blogs.

OBJECTIVES AND SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

The objective of this study is to analyse the coverage of Lina Joy's conversion issue by a Malaysian Chinese Newspaper, *Sin Chew Daily*. Using a framing analysis, this study asks the following questions: What is the extent of coverage of Lina Joy's case? What are the news sources used by the newspapers? What is the news frame used by the newspaper? What is the slant of the news articles?

The findings of this study will provide useful information about the Lina Joy's case objectively. By examining the coverage of the incident by the mainstream Chinese newspapers, this study will provide insight into the concerns and attitudes of the Chinese communities including the Chinese media practitioners in Malaysia based on their perspectives and agendas. Malaysian vernacular newspapers tend to focus on events important to their respective communities. Therefore, it is typical that *Sin Chew Daily* is focusing on issues pertinent to the Chinese community that comprises the bulk of the newspaper readers. The results of this study will also provide a better understanding of how the Chinese vernacular newspaper reports about other group. This study is hopes to foster media awareness of a need for possible reorientation of their role towards promoting integration.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Much of the media scholarship which has focused on the news industry has tended to view the sector in mostly negative terms when it comes to evaluating the media's role as information-giver and advocate for the public sphere (Ross, 2007). This is

largely because of the view that news workers, through a decision-making process which deliberately selects some stories and excludes others, frame and set the news agenda, determine what we see, read and hear. The relatively uncontroversial theory that has emerged from studies of news over the past decades suggests that the frames within which stories are worked contain particular ideological biases, which the news consumer is presented with as simple “truth”. Ross (2007) pointed out that it is precisely this masking of artifice by passing it off as apparent “reality” which makes journalism more art than craft: it is the pretence of offering us an unvarnished and unmediated truth which gives the practice of journalism its dangerous power.

Framing is “the process of calling attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring others, which might lead to different reactions” (Griffin, 2003: 156). Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007: 11) described framing as “the selection of a restricted number of thematically related attributes for inclusion in the media agenda when a particular object is discussed.” In addition, Tankard, Hendrickson, Silberman, Bliss, and Ghanem (cited in Weaver, 2007) considered media frame as “the central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration.”

Framing analysis elaborates how media professionals “package” information for audience reception and how that information is represented or portrayed. News framing is a dynamic cultural process that reflects decisions about what is deemed significant or newsworthy, the constraints imposed by newsroom work and routines and the cultural assumptions editors and journalists make about their audiences (Blood & Holland, 2004). As Gamson (cited in Blood & Holland, 2004) argued, journalists’ sense of news values leads them to present issues within certain frames, often reflecting broader cultural themes and narratives that help define ideas available to audience as they talk and think about the issue.

Media framing is important because it can have subtle but powerful effects on the audience. The study of media framing can help us identify and examine crucial points in the opinion change process where these powerful effects are taking place. Framing might give quantitative researchers a way to approach ideology, a subject dealt with until now mostly by critical theorists. Framing may even give quantitative researchers a means to examine the hypothesis of media hegemony, one that has been difficult to validate empirically. Media hegemony can be viewed as a situation in which one frame is so dominant that people accept it without notice or question. Thinking in terms of framing might force researchers to be more specific about media hegemony and pose some testable hypotheses (Tankard, 2008).

METHODOLOGY

There are two possible approaches to content analysing frames in the news: inductive or priori coding, and deductive or emergent coding (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Wimmer and Dominick, 2006). The inductive approach analyse a news story with an open view to attempts to reveal the array of possible frames, beginning with very broad ideas of these themes. This approach can detect the many possible ways in which an issue can be framed, but this method is labour intensive, often based on small samples, and can be difficult to replicate. A deductive approach involves predefining certain frames as content analytic variables to verify the extent to

which these frames occur in the news. This approach makes it necessary to have a clear idea of the kinds of frames likely to be in the news, because the frames that are not defined a priori may be overlooked. This approach can be replicated easily, can cope with large samples, and can easily detect differences in framing between media (e.g., television vs. press) and within media.

The Chinese newspaper, *Sin Chew Daily* is chosen for this study because it has the largest circulation among the Chinese-language newspapers published in Malaysia. The sample is drawn from May 30 to June 30, 2007, as the time frame represented the peak period of the issue. The unit of analysis for this study is newspaper article, comprising straight news, editorial, column, opinion and letter. The articles are collected via database search, which are pulled from the newspaper's online service by using five keywords: (1) Azlina Jailani, (2) Lina Joy, (3) apostasy, (4) religious conversion, and (5) freedom of faith. The sample consisted of 35 articles derived from the newspaper.

The independent variables are: (1) extent of coverage, (2) news sources, (3) news frames; and (4) slants of article. The dependent variable was the coverage of Lina Joy's case by the newspaper. Extent of coverage is studied from five angles: (1) number of news items, (2) type of news items, and (3) size of news items. The categories for news source are: (1) leaders from the ruling parties, (2) leaders from the opposition parties, (3) representatives from professional organisations, (4) representatives from religious organisations, and (5) common civilians.

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

- Conflict—emphasises conflict or disagreement between individuals, groups, parties or institutions as a means of capturing audience interest; dichotomises or labels the good and bad; news item refers to two sides instead of more than two sides of the issue/problem; news items refers to winners and losers.
- Human interest—an effort to personalise the news, dramatise or emotionalise the news in order to capture and retain audience interest; emphasise how individuals and groups are affected by the event, issue or problem; news items goes into the private or personal lives of the actors.
- Consequences—reports an event, issue or problem in terms of the consequences it have on individuals, groups, parties, institutions or the country; reports the outcome of a court case.
- Moral—puts the event, issue or problem in the context of religious tenets or moral prescriptions; emphasises on collaboration and fellowship.
- Responsibility—presents an event, issue or problem in such a way as to attribute responsibility for its cause or solution to either the government or to an individual, group, party or institution; news items suggests the issue or problem requires urgent action.
- Others—any content that could not fit the above four categories.

The categories for slant of the news items were divided into: (1) supportive towards Lina Joy, (2) neutral, and (3) critical towards Lina Joy.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The following presents the results of the study with some basic information regarding the frequency and percentage of the variables:

Extent of coverage

Table 1 show that Lina Joy’s conversion case was covered in 35 articles with a total of 665 words.

Table 1: Extent of Coverage (n=35)

Type of Article	Percentage
Straight news	77.60
Editorials	0.80
Columns	21.60
Letters	0
Opinions	0
Size	665 words

The newspaper has most of their coverage in the form of straight news (77.60%) It devotes very little space (0.8%) for editorials in their coverage.

News sources

Table 2: News Sources

Type of Sources	Percentage
Leaders from the ruling parties	17.14
Leaders from the opposition parties	14.29
Representatives from professional organisations	34.29
Representatives from religious organisations	8.57
Common civilians	20.00
Others	5.71

Sin Chew Daily obtained most of its information from the representatives of professional organisations (34.29%), followed by common civilians (20.00%), leaders from the ruling parties (17.14%), leaders from the opposition parties (14.29%), representatives from religious organisations (8.57%) and others (5.71%). Besides UMNO, leaders from other BN component parties were also quoted by *Sin Chew*

Daily. They included the representatives from the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Malaysian People's Movement Party (Gerakan).

News frames

Table 3: News Frames

Frames	Percent
Conflict	62.86
Human Interest	2.86
Consequences	5.71
Moral	8.57
Responsibility	8.57
Others	11.43

The conflict frame made the strongest showing in Lina Joy's coverage by *Sin Chew Daily* (62.86%). For example, it was reported that the then Executive Director of Sisters in Islam (SIS), Zainah Anwar was disappointed as the Federal Constitution was not upheld. She also mentioned that Lina Joy was stripped of her rights as a wife and a mother because she could not even have the most fundamental right to choose her religion; and it was indeed a tragedy (*Sin Chew Daily*, 31 May 2007). The MCCBCHS (Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism) also expressed their disappointment toward the court's decision. It was mentioned that forcing a follower of another religion to obtain a certificate of apostasy from the Syariah Court was an extreme restriction towards freedom of religion (*Sin Chew Daily*, 31 May 2007b).

The second focus of *Sin Chew Daily* was on others (11.43%), in which the background of Lina Joy's case was reported. The moral (8.57%) and responsibility (8.57%) frames were the third concern of *Sin Chew Daily*. Reflecting the moral frame, a column article in *Sin Chew Daily* called for understanding and forgiveness toward those who want to renounce Islam. The writer said Lina Joy's case reflected that Malaysia is stuck at a deadlock and politics in the country have been in a stagnant condition. What made the situation worse, according to the writer is that the conservative Malays in the country have been labelling Lina Joy as traitor. The writer did not understand why the Muslims were 'obsessed' with demanding Lina Joy to remain a Muslim. He pointed out that the number of non-Muslims converting to Islam is more than those who renounce Islam. And he wondered why these people was not regarded as traitors too, and why the Muslims in the country practised double standard in this sense. The writer further addressed that those who convert to Islam have been estranged by their friends and relatives, but they persisted with strong faith, and the Muslims praised them for the courage and perseverance. So, the writer asked why Muslims could not demonstrate the same spirit of understanding towards those who want to renounce (*Sin Chew Daily*, 10 June 2007).

Through adopting the responsibility frame, *Sin Chew Daily* also attributed the responsibility to solve jurisdictional conflict and to protect freedom of religion to the Government. DAP MP for Seputeh, Teresa Kok was quoted as saying that the

Government must amend the Federal Constitution to ensure that the jurisdiction of Syariah Court would not go beyond the Civil Court (*Sin Chew Daily*, 31 May 2007c).

The consequences frame made up 5.71% of *Sin Chew Daily's* coverage on Lina Joy, where the court's decision was reported. Then, the human interest frame accounted for 2.86%, where the reaction and disappointment of Lina Joy was reported.

Slants

Table 4 demonstrated that *Sin Chew Daily* coverage appeared to be more supportive and sympathetic toward Lina Joy (42.86%) than neutral (22.86%) or critical (34%). This is quite obvious because the sources of news (as shown in Table 2) come primarily from representatives from professional organisations as well as common civilians who are more accommodating to Lina Joy. However, the fact that more than half is either critical or neutral, *Sin Chew Daily* seems to have presented a rather balanced perspective about the controversy.

Table 4: Slant

Slant	Percent
Supportive	42.86
Critical	34.28
Neutral	22.86

DISCUSSION

The newspaper devoted most of its coverage to straight news. There is a clear absence of readers' comment on the issues. In the news industry, the public opinion is not just a way to validate and supplement the news but also a great way to increase the awareness of people about a particular topic. However, *Sin Chew Daily* places more emphasis on the describing function of the event. By devoting most of their articles to the straight news, the newspaper performed surveillance instead of correlation function. The finding also showed that the newspaper's readers were more the observers and less the active players.

A closer examination of *Sin Chiew's* news sources revealed that there was a clear source of diversity, and voices of dissent were not shut out of the media. While the results suggested a multidimensional interpretation of the issues, the reliance on certain professional and religious organisations as news source poses a question of bias and objectivity. This study also shows that the newspaper uses common civilians as well as politicians and personalities from professional organisations as important sources. News sources provide information, context and opinion that define and shape how the news story is presented. Sources are considered one the most important dimensions of news framing: whom the reporter selects as sources of information powerfully influences how that story is told. In this case, *Sin Chew Daily* has presented a diversity of ideas projecting a rather balanced view about the controversy.

As mainstream newspapers, although *Sin Chew Daily* is not expected to be covering the dissenting voices to any great extent, it would be reasonable to expect that the different actors' voice be represented. Through their conflict frames and coverage on the different stances of the various parties involved, *Sin Chew Daily* managed to reflect the multifaceted nature of Lina Joy's case to a certain extent. Some of their articles touched on the deeper issues but little was done to dig deeper or to follow up on the ideas.

Teoh (cited in Loo & Mustafa, 2010) stated that instead of reporting on issues only when they arise, it would be good for journalists to write on religion and faith issues on a regular basis to try and bring about greater understanding. Additionally, journalists ought to also go beyond the conflict angle into human interest frame. Vitug (cited in Loo & Mustafa, 2010) asserted that journalists should also examine the "unseen" impact of conflicts—psychological and emotional scars. Drawing on examples of such impact would serve as a grim reminder to the media audiences—and the people involved—of the personal, familial, social, economic and political costs of prolonged conflict.

It is of significant concern that the newspapers had reported that Lina Joy's case has been politicised in Malaysia. This assertion resonated with the findings documented by various scholars. Syed Husin Ali (2008) acknowledged that in Malaysia, the political structures and processes are still very ethnic in nature. He criticised that a small minority of desperate politicians from all divides are often guilty of turning even genuine grievances into ethnic dissatisfactions, whether it is to promote their own egos, strengthen their own parties or weaken the leaders and parties that are in opposition to them. In his discussion on the transformation of race relations in Malaysia, Lee (2004) noted that the Islamic field is central to the definition of race relations since the Malay-Muslim majority exerts a strong influence on cultural and political developments in the country.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how Malaysian Chinese newspaper, *Sin Chew Daily*, reported one of the most controversial religious problems encountered in Malaysia's recent history—the Lina Joy's religious conversion. It is found that conflict was the most salient, important and enduring frame in the newspaper. News framing can eliminate voices and weaken arguments; the media can frame issues in ways that favour a particular side without showing an explicit bias (Tankard, 2008). While conflict is the most obvious frame in this study, *Sin Chew Daily* seems to have presented a rather balanced perspective about the controversy. This is important for any media organisation that seeks to educate the public about the necessity of maintaining respect for each other's religions in order to avoid any outbreak of ethnic bloodshed that has been experienced in the history of the country.

The questions of religion and ethnicity are extremely sensitive in Malaysia and might result in serious repercussions such as ethnic tensions if these matters are not discussed in a mature and respectful manner. For this reason, Malaysian media are discouraged from talking about provocative issues such as ethnicity and religion. Anyone caught stirring others on these issues are punishable under the

controversial Internal Security Act (ISA) where people can be held in detention without any evidence of their crime.

While this underscores the tolerant nature of Malaysians, their unwillingness to discuss about their religion may be viewed as a handicap to the religious maturity of the country. Malaysian media, therefore, still have a long way to go before fully learning about how to exercise their rights to freedom of expression. Malaysian media are also discouraged from talking about provocative issues such as ethnicity and religion. Anyone caught stirring others on these issues are punishable under the controversial Internal Security Act (ISA) where people can be held in detention without any evidence of their crime.

However, the Malaysian government's support of inter-faith dialogue can be observed in the World Council of Churches' meeting in Malaysia in 2004 or the Global Dharma Youth Conference in 2007 as well as the World Buddhist Conference in 2010. There have been several other such big gatherings to reflect the tolerant and respectful nature of Malaysians and the government.

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