

MEDIA FRAMING OF WASTE ISSUES IN SELECTED MALAYSIAN NEWSPAPERS

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ABSTRACT

Human beings generate waste everyday in their lives. Due to population growth, improvements in standards of living and changing lifestyles of the people, more wastes will be generated. Hence, members of the public need to be informed, educated, acknowledged and reminded of their role to reduce wastes and to overcome waste problems. The media have a role as information transmitter and educator to the public; exposing and creating awareness among the public regarding environmental issues inclusive of waste control and management issues. This paper reports parts of a content analysis study which examined how environmental issues were covered and how waste issues were framed in selected Malaysian English-language newspapers. Articles regarding environmental issues published from January 2003 to December 2007 in The Sun and New Straits Times were analyzed. The study found 7,962 articles on environmental issues. Waste issues made up 7.7% of this coverage. For this paper, the 616 articles on waste issues were further examined to determine the presence of Entman's (1993) four framing functions: to define problems, to diagnose causes, to make moral judgments, and to suggest solutions. Most prominent framing function was suggestion of solutions (47.1%) followed by problem definition (38%). Moral evaluations had the least presence with only 12.2%. The analysis also found another framing function: stating consequences in 34.9% of all waste articles. The paper concludes that media framing of waste issues in selected Malaysian newspapers focused on defining problems, stating consequences as well as suggesting solutions. Thus, media were to some extent performing the role of information transmitter and educator to the public.

Keywords: *content analysis, media framing, environmental issues, waste issues.*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a developing country that should consider environmental degradation as equally important as development. Development

without appropriate planning and measure could trigger various catastrophes. According to Kandula (2004:267), attempting development only by increasing economic profits and in isolation from concerns of human and environmental well-being can have undesirable consequences. Kandula (2004: 268) added that when developmental activity focuses only on economic growth and ignores social and environmental well-being, it cannot be sustained.

Malaysia should opt for a sustainable development to stop further destruction to the environment. Sustainable development can be briefly understood as using, conserving, and enhancing the community's resources so that ecological processes, on which life depends, are maintained and the total quality of life, now and in the future, can be increased. According to World Conservation Strategy (1980), for development to be sustainable, it must take account of social and ecological factors, as well as economic ones; of the living and the non-living resource base; and of the long- and short-term advantages and disadvantages of alternative actions.

In Malaysia, solid waste is currently one of the most debatable environmental issues (Zolkifly, 1998 & Abdul Ghani *et.al.*, 2006). It was reported in the Ninth Malaysia Plan that the amount of solid waste generated in Peninsular Malaysia increased from 16,200 tonnes per day in 2001 to 19,100 tonnes in 2005 or an average of 0.8 kg per capita per day. Solid waste in Malaysia comprises on average 45.0 per cent food waste, 24.0 per cent plastic, 7.0 per cent paper, 6.0 per cent iron, and 3.0 per cent glass and others (SMI Association of Malaysia, 2007).

The waste problem has become so grave that a cabinet committee on solid waste management had to be set up in early 2006. At the end of April 2006, the then Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Abdul Razak, who headed the panel, ordered sixteen of the dumpsites that posed a threat to public health to be closed immediately. Another 33 that were situated close to water sources would have to be shut down as soon as possible (Bhattacharjee, 2006). Given the seriousness of waste issues, this study seeks to ascertain the extent of how the country's mass media portray them as problems in need of solutions.

Studies on the effect of mass media relating to the topic of environment, in recent years, primarily have focused much on the attitudinal or behavioural change as on the cognitive change of the audience. This suggests a significant role of the mass media in shaping the public's perception of environmental problems. Englehardt and Barney (2002: 84) described the media's responsibility in informing the community as

a primary function of the media professional to distribute information that will help individuals to make informed decisions.

This study was informed by media framing theory. As many media researchers have noted, media framing focuses on the specific ways issues are presented and how the public issues are expressed to the audience (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Tankard *et.al.*, 1991; Entman, 1993). Cappella and Jamieson (1997) stressed that “framing is the key to how journalists organize news” (as quoted in Goodman and Goodman 2006: 361).

While researchers have presented many aspects of framing, this study focused on the framing functions as described by Entman (1993). According to Entman (1993), the four general functions of framing are problem definition (determine what a causal agent is doing with what costs and benefits), problem diagnosis (identify the forces creating the problem), moral judgments (evaluate causal agents and effects) and remedies to the problem (offer and justify treatments for the problems and predict their likely effect). These four functions can coexist in the same media presentation, and all four may not be present in every frame (Sieff, 2003: 263).

Thus, this paper seeks to answer how environmental issues of consequence such as waste issues being are covered by the selected Malaysian English daily newspapers. Specifically, how did *The Sun* and *New Straits Times* frame waste issues?

2. METHOD

Articles on waste issues published in *The Sun* and the *New Straits Times* from January 2003 to December 2007 were collected manually to identify the existing framing functions in the headlines and applicable paragraphs. Analyses were carried out based on Entman’s (1993) framing functions or any other applicable frames: 1) To define it as a problem, 2) To diagnose causes, 3) To make moral judgment, and 4) To suggest solutions. In order to capture the presence of other frame another category was added (coded as 5: Other frame).

For this study, the Entman’s four frames were operationalized as below:

- 1) To define problems. Problem definition of a waste issue is usually found in earlier construction of the story although

sometimes they may be found in any other construction of the story. Basically, definition refers to phrases used to describe the waste issues as an introduction to the story.

- 2) To diagnose causes. Causes are factors or reasons or forces that create the waste issue. These factors may include the lack of modern technology or funds in handling waste, ignorance of the public in their duty to separate and reduce waste from home, poor administration in waste management, or others.
- 3) To make moral judgments. This refers to the emphasis on precautions and the awareness of the probability effects that comes from the waste issue. They may come in the form of opinion or decision.
- 4) To suggest solutions. Remedies or treatment are solutions to the waste issues. It usually comes in the form of suggestion to outcome the problem arose for the better living of the people today and tomorrow.

Besides the above four frames, the study also recorded an additional frame that emerged from the analysis: to state consequences:

- 5) To state consequences. Consequences are the impacts or effects of waste issue. Consequences may come in the form of predicting or foretelling the probability outcome due to waste problems, including mentioning that the problems occurred could hinder or hamper the country's sustainable development, for instance.

Selected waste articles were also analyzed based on the types of frames. The newspapers' portrayal of waste issues were examined on either they bend towards giving information that sounded positive, negative, or neutral (Goodman & Goodman, 2006: 372). Positive frames refer to the presentation of news story in a calming tone. Positive stories could change the public's perceptions towards waste issues when the public were provided with quality information that could enhance their knowledge on waste issues and help them in making informed decisions. Negative frames refer to the presentation of news story in an alarming tone. Normally, negative stories would make the public feel uneasy, scared, and worried. Neutral frames refer to the presentation of news story in a balanced tone. Usually it comes in the tone of giving announcement. Neutral stories neither contain positive tone nor negative tone.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There were a total of 616 waste articles that were published in *The Sun* (TS) and *New Straits Times* (NST) during the five-year study period of which 439 were in the NST and 177 were in TS (Figure 1).

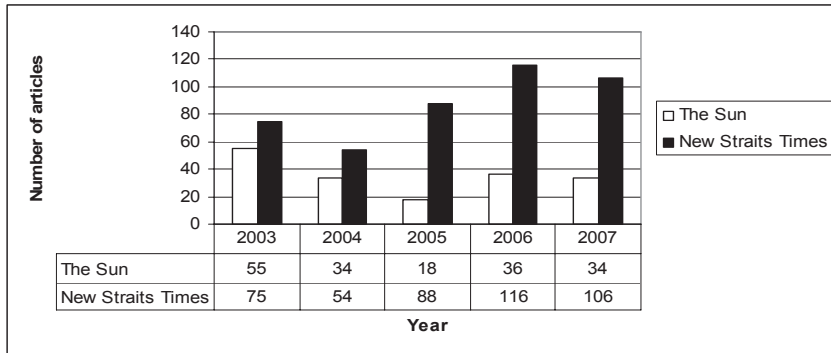


Figure 1: Wastes-related Articles in *The Sun* and *New Straits Times*, 2003 – 2007

Table 1 shows that of the 616 waste articles, a majority (79.06%) had at least one framing functions and about one-fifth (20.94%) had none.

Table 1: Percentage of all waste articles with the number of framing functions present in all waste articles, 2003 – 2007

Number of framing functions present	Percentage of all waste articles
0	20.94
1	28.57
2	28.90
3	13.96
4	5.84
5	1.79

Table 2 reveals an interesting finding that is a substantial presence (22.12%) of another framing function, i.e. consequences or impacts statement alongside Entman's (1993) framing function of solution suggestion (29.84%) and problem definition (24.07%).

Table 2: Percentage of framing functions present in waste articles in *The Sun* (TS) and *New Straits Times* (NST), 2003 – 2007

Presence of framing functions	NST	TS	Total
1) To define problem(s)	23.93	24.41	24.07
2) To state cause(s)	17.13	14.24	16.26
3) To make moral evaluation/judgment(s)	6.06	11.53	7.72
4) To suggest solution(s)	31.17	26.78	29.84
5) To state consequence/impact(s)	21.71	23.05	22.12

However, due to technical constraints, only 47 waste articles that contain four and five framing functions present were selected for illustrations of which 32 waste articles were in NST and 15 were in TS. Headlines of the articles as shown in Table 3 indicated the range of themes (frames) of the coverage.

In Table 3, a total of 22 headlines of waste articles were portrayed in negative tone, 16 in positive tone, and 9 in neutral tone. Even though a dominant number of headlines were presented in alarming manner which stressed upon the state of urgency of the waste issues and demand for an immediate action, they were actually effective in the terms of gaining attention from the readers who come from all walks of life so that they may be alerted and aware of the crucial waste problems. Meanwhile, positive headlines were mostly presented in the form of solution and giving suggestion in a bright tone. On the other hand, neutral headlines were mostly mere statements and brief information about the waste issue, and they may sometimes contained both positive and negative tone which is otherwise known as mixed tone.

Table 3: Headlines of waste articles published in *The Sun* (TS) and *New Straits Times* (NST), 2003 – 2007

No.	Headlines of waste articles	Newspaper/ Date	Tone of headlines
1	'Impose stiff penalties in toxic waste cases'	NST/ 6 January 2003	Negative
2	Come clean on incinerator safety	TS/ 8 January 2003	Positive
3	Poor work ethic fatal to incinerator safety	TS/ 23 January 2003	Negative
4	Ensuring a healthy, sustainable environment	NST/ 19 February 2003	Positive
5	Come down hard on illegal dumping	NST/ 16 December 2003	Negative
6	Residents upset over bin move	NST/ 23 December 2003	Negative
7	Fix recycling on one day a month	TS/ 16 January 2004	Positive
8	Waste collection deal in the dumps	TS/ 11 February 2004	Negative
9	More needs to be done to protect our environment	NST/ 3 May 2004	Neutral
10	Unit Combi to keep Penang clean and sparkling	NST/ 2 June 2004	Positive
11	Factory suspected of importing toxic chemicals sealed	NST/ 9 June 2004	Neutral
12	Dumping organic waste a costly habit	TS/ 15 June 2004	Negative
13	Illegal dumpers giving them bad name	NST/ 26 July 2004	Negative
14	Give the facts on managing waste	TS/ 27 September 2004	Positive
15	Clearing the tarnished pearl	TS/ 22 February 2005	Positive
16	Typhoid: MB blames it on littering 'culture'	NST/ 21 April 2005	Negative
17	On the right track but still long way to go	NST/ 22 April 2005	Neutral (Mixed)
18	Waste from NS camp flowing into sea	NST/ 3 May 2005	Neutral
19	Tanjung Tuan threatened by pollution	NST/ 9 May 2005	Negative
20	More like trashing, not hashing	NST/ 18 May 2005	Negative
21	Oil slick poses fire danger	NST/ 28 June 2005	Negative
22	DOE detains tanker over Kota Tinggi oil spill	NST/ 29 June 2005	Neutral
23	New dumping ground an environmental threat	NST/ 26 July 2005	Negative
24	Soiled diapers in garbage raising a stink	NST/ 9 November 2005	Negative
25	New site still unacceptable	NST/ 3 January 2006	Neutral
26	Legendary mountain turning into dumpsite	NST/ 6 January 2006	Neutral

27	Stop this illegal dumping	NST/ 16 January 2006	Negative
28	Landfill method not the best way	NST/ 26 January 2006	Neutral
29	Leftovers to power cars? Singapore says yes	TS/ 10 February 2006	Positive
30	DOE probe landfill to find source of smelly water	NST/ 6 March 2006	Positive
31	Stop soft-peddalling on waste	TS/ 13 March 2006	Negative
32	'Make best use of Bukit Tagar landfill'	TS/ 13 March 2006	Positive
33	MB: Landfill a costly option	NST/ 16 March 2006	Neutral
34	Educating the young will help	NST/ 21 April 2006	Positive
35	Get a zero waste strategy going now	TS/ 2 May 2006	Negative
36	60 tonnes of rubbish dumped into Sungai Klang daily	NST/ 8 June 2006	Negative
37	Reversing our Earth debt	TS/ 27 June 2006	Positive
38	Gurney Drive 'now ugly and smelly'	NST/ 26 February 2007	Negative
39	'Don't use incinerators till you are ready'	TS/ 9 March 2007	Positive
40	Hello, Malaysia is not one giant rubbish bin	NST/ 8 June 2007	Positive
41	Stench drives patrons away	NST/ 14 June 2007	Negative
42	Paying for waste	NST/ 18 June 2007	Negative
43	Natural gas, fish ponds the answer?	NST/ 18 June 2007	Positive
44	Get solid waste management right	TS/ 28 June 2007	Negative
45	Raise awareness to save environment	NST/ 13 August 2007	Positive
46	Centralised PFAs the answer	TS/ 17 September 2007	Positive
47	Free but they cost us dearly	NST/ 19 September 2007	Negative

3.1 Illustrations of Framing Functions

While headlines provided readers with brief summary of news articles, opening paragraphs or leads enticed readers to read further. What kind of information did readers get in the body of news articles? Next, we illustrate how selected articles from TS and NST presented the various framing functions in the applicable paragraphs. Below are some examples of framing functions and types (tones) of frames used in the applicable paragraphs:

3.1.1 To define problem

- "Ensuring a healthy, sustainable environment". *Industrial development and environment management must go together to ensure a healthy and sustainable environment, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) vice-chancellor Professor Datuk Dzulkifli Abdul Razak said* (Positive frame; *New Straits Times*, 19 February 2003).
- "Stop soft-peddalling on waste". *The setting up of a cabinet committee to address environmental problems has come not a day too soon. In the wake to the stomach-churning encounter that people in the Klang Valley had with contaminated water supply last month, the question hanging in the air is whether the current state of environmental management inspires confidence* (Negative frame; *The Sun*, 13 March 2006).

- “Get a zero waste strategy going now”. **It is heartening that open dumpsites method of solid waste disposal will be fetched to the past in a matter of time. What is mortifying is why it took so long before the National Resources and Environment Ministry announced that such an environmental disastrous system has to be stopped urgently** (Neutral/Mixed; *The Sun*, 2 May 2006).
- “Paying for waste”. **The sheer quantity of garbage Malaysians put out is frightening enough to force the current re-look at how to deal with our waste. The way things now stand – or rather how our trash stacks up – means it would take just nine days for our rubbish to fill up both 88-storey columns of the Petronas Twin Towers** (Negative frame; *New Straits Times*, 18 June 2007).

In this study, equal number of frames (positive, negative, and neutral) were used in the paragraphs of problem definition. Paragraphs of problem definition were regarded as positive when they were in suggestive and advisory form. For instance, the ‘sustainable development’ was seen as a bright concept and idea of reaching stages of development in an efficient way which does no harm to the environment. Negative problem definition was presented in a way that raises urgency and negative image when the situation was pictured negatively. For instance, the image-setting of the phrase ‘...nine days for our rubbish to fill up both 88-storey columns of Petronas Twin Towers’ was appalling. Neutral problem definition mainly presents in the form of statement that explained the situation or condition of the issue and may sometimes contain mixed tone. For instance, ‘heartening... will be fetched to the past’ was basically a positive tone, but later the sentence contained words and phrases of ‘mortifying... why it took so long... environmentally disastrous system’ which triggers the alarming tone.

3.1.2 To show causes

- “Poor work ethic fatal to incinerator safety”. *Looking at our track record in managing and operating the various public utility services, the poor work attitudes and weak enforcement is often the cause of breakdowns in service* (Negative frame; *The Sun*, 23 January 2003).
- “Dumping organic waste a costly habit”. *Indeed, it could be legitimately asked: if composting of organic waste has so many benefits, why is it not being implemented all over the country? Part of the reason is the lack of urgency. Most Malaysians are oblivious*

to or could not be bothered about the environmental costs of discarding organic waste in landfills. *It is fair to believe that they do not know that landfills exist unless one is located near them* (Negative frame; *The Sun*, 15 June 2004).

- “Illegal dumpers giving them bad name”. *It is something set to happen more often – solid waste contractors say more illegal dumps are likely to pop up in the Klang Valley in the future as lax enforcement and the relocation of landfills to more remote areas are setting a vicious cycle in motion* (Neutral frame; *New Straits Times*, 26 July 2004).
- “Centralised PFAs the answer”. *Pig farmers should abandon the traditional way of managing the waste produced by the farms and start practicing modern waste management, which has been implemented in many developed countries where effluents from the farms are not allowed to flow into the rivers and pollute the waterways* (Positive frame; *The Sun*, 17 September 2007).

Equal number of frames (positive, negative, and neutral) were used in the attribution of causes paragraphs. Positive attribution of causes consisted of positive consequences that could lead towards a better outcome and action. Positive attribution of causes also appeared in the form of advice and suggestion to outcome the problem. For instance, ‘... traditional way of managing the waste... start practicing modern waste management...’ are phrases of advice and suggestion. On the contrary, negative attribution of causes emphasizes on the tone of ignorance, refusal, denial, and blaming. For instance, ‘oblivious to or could not be bothered’ is a phrase of ignorance. Meanwhile, neutral attribution of causes appeared in the form of mere explanation, statement and prediction. For instance, ‘set to happen more often’ is a phrase of making assumption and prediction. A combination of balanced frame where both positive and negative frame applied also existed in the neutral attribution of causes.

3.1.3 To make moral evaluations or judgments

- “Ensuring a healthy, sustainable environment”. *“The environmental management problem should be looked upon as a part of the process and in terms of total investment rather than liability. It should be part of the total process instead of an extra investment.”* (Positive frame; *New Straits Times*, 19 February 2003).

- “Tanjung Tuan threatened by pollution”. *He (Mohd Basir Abdullah) said there was **bound to be a long-term chain effect on the area’s habitat, wildlife and bio-diversity if no one checked the problem immediately*** (Neutral frame; *New Straits Times*, 9 May 2005).
- “Don’t use incinerators till you are ready”. *The public can diligently separate the waste, **but if the collection system lumps them all together in the garbage truck again, their efforts would come to naught*** (Negative frame; *The Sun*, 9 March 2007).
- “Get solid waste management right”. *Whether it is privatization, corporatisation or federalization – call it by any fancy name – the crux of the matter is, **any plan for all its good intentions will be a failure if the people tasked with the responsibilities are not up to the mark**. So, can we ensure that we have the right people for the job on their own merit?* (Negative frame; *The Sun*, 28 June 2007).

Basically, positive moral judgments were presented in the form of opinion and in a hopeful tone. For instance, the phrase ‘... should be looked upon as part of the process...’ is an opinion. Negative moral judgments sounded threatening, blaming, disappointing, and hopeless where statements of the possibility of side-effects, consequences, and slow action existed. For instance, the phrases ‘come to naught’ and ‘will be a failure’ are tones emphasizing on hopelessness. Neutral moral judgments appeared in mere statements that sounded like making prediction or assumption. For instance, the phrase ‘bound to be a long-term chain effect’ is a prediction.

3.1.4 To suggest solutions

- “Give the facts on managing waste”. ***Statistics and information, including nasty truths about solid waste management problems and reports of commissioned studies, should also be posted on the ministry’s website to promote informed discussions*** (Positive frame; *The Sun*, 27 September 2004).
- “Cleaning the tarnished pearl”. *Abdullah’s wish for a cleaner Penang **can be realized by letting them know that their jobs are on the line if it remains as dirty the next time he visit so that the accountability chain take its effect*** (Positive frame; *The Sun*, 22 February 2005).

- “Raise awareness to save environment”. **The media and politicians must help to educate the people in order to save the environment. There must be effective enforcement. Impose fines on residents who do not have dustbins to hold their rubbish. Contractors must clear the rubbish after finishing their projects and they should be punished for leaving heaps of stones and bricks around** (Positive frame; *New Straits Times*, 13 August 2007).
- “Everyone has a role to play”. **Manufacturers and retailers can also play a big part in saving the environment. Reducing the packaging of their products or making use of environment-friendly packaging** would be one of the ways (Positive frame; *New Straits Times*, 19 September 2007).

In this framing function of suggesting solutions, positive frame was a dominant number. Positive frame contain particulars such as suggestion, opinion, and explanation to the issue. Positive frame here may also contain the tone of reminding, hope, and success when action was taken to overcome the problem or when the implementation of a measure was found to be effective.

3.1.5 To show consequences

- “Poor work ethic fatal to incinerator safety”. *Despite all the safety standards that come with the technology, workers who lack a sense of responsibility and have poor attitudes to work can turn the incinerators into unnoticed killers* (Negative frame; *The Sun*, 23 January 2003).
- “Hello, Malaysia is not one giant rubbish bin”. *The piles of rubbish along the roads and highways and under bridges are not only an eyesore but also a health hazard* (Negative frame; *New Straits Times*, 8 June 2005).
- “Natural gas, fish ponds the answer?” *Any untreated or inadequately treated waste water passing through the pond would adversely affect the health of the fish, causing mortality* (Negative frame; *New Straits Times*, 18 June 2007).
- “Reversing our Earth debt”. *With more mouths to feed, we have to produce more, which means using more resources. We also have to deal with the residue of these resources a.k.a. waste, by using, guess what? Even more resources!* (Neutral frame; *The Sun*, 27 June 2006).

A majority of stating consequences paragraphs contained negative frame. Negative frame contained particulars on the effects of wastes in terms of the environment, health, and economy. Negative frame might sound blaming and terrifying. Meanwhile, neutral frame was merely explanation or statement on the process of waste management.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis, Malaysian English newspapers primarily framed waste issues using at least one framing functions (79.06%). The frame of suggesting remedies was dominant in waste stories. It somehow indicates that Malaysia is still looking for effective measures to treat wastes and that the waste management system in Malaysia is still considered limited and poor. This observation echoed the findings of a study by Abdul Ghani *et.al.* (2006: 6) that the solid waste management in Malaysia has a long way to go.

There was also an increasing emphasis on another framing function such as stating consequences. This framing function of consequences was largely used in the coverage of waste stories that involved risk issues. For journalists, the degree of risk is just one element used in determining the importance or consequence of a story, and consequence is just one of many factors used in deciding whether a story is newsworthy or not (Sachsman *et.al.*, 2004: 412).

The application of positive frame was strikingly obvious in the framing function of remedies or solution. This indicates that there is still hope in overcoming problems concerning wastes. When waste stories were framed negatively, these were often associated with environmental and public health problems, inequitable siting of landfills, high costs for incineration and, finally, it was perceived as a landfill capacity crisis. These perceptions produced a collective frame of over-reliance on disposal (Wagner, 2007: 471). The neutral frame was less applied in the waste stories and when it was applied, it normally appeared in mere statements and brief information about the waste issue which neither sounded alarming or calming. Only a small number of mixed-frame which contained both positive and negative tone was applied in waste stories.

In conclusion, the study of selected Malaysian English newspapers indicated that the media played informative and educating roles by framing problem definitions, causes diagnoses, solutions suggestions and consequences statements with regards to waste issues. The media

need to continuously play these roles because the problems associated with waste issues are not going to be resolved immediately as long as development continues, members of society still maintain unsustainable lifestyles and inefficient waste management systems are still in place.

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