Framing Media as Social Actors in the MH370 Aviation Crisis Reporting

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ABSTRACT

The media play a critical role in shaping how crises are perceived by the public, especially in the context of aviation disasters. This study explores how the media are framed as social actors in the construction of public narratives during the MH370 aviation crisis. The study was conducted using a corpus-linguistics approach on online news articles from 2014 to 2016 of a local news media outlet in Malaysia. The analysis employed a three-stage social actor identification process to categorise the semantic categories and discursive functions of media as social actors. The findings suggest that media as social actors are represented in the form of individuals in the media, local media, and international media. Malaysian media's framing of the crisis also emphasised themes of nationalism and tenacity, as well as empathy and international collaboration. These discursive patterns suggest that localised news media actively shaped national sentiments and public understanding of the aviation crisis. The study provides significant implications for crisis and emergency communication, highlighting the strategic role of local news media in influencing public opinion during aviation crises. Future studies could expand this inquiry by analysing the language of attitude across other media platforms and crisis events.

Keywords: social actors, news media, crisis news discourse, corpus linguistics

INTRODUCTION

On March 8, 2014, the world was stunned by the Malaysia Airlines MH370 aviation crisis, in which an aeroplane went missing en route from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing. A massive international search failed to locate the plane, and the cause of its loss remains unresolved. There were many unfounded rumours being circulated online, and this affected not only the airline but also the victims' families, the government, and many other social actors related to the crisis. The heightening of emotions and the thirst for news made media one of the most powerful tools in shaping public opinion, especially in the aftermath of a crisis like MH370. The way the crisis is framed, the information that is included or omitted, and the tone of the media coverage can all have significant impacts on the public's understanding of the situation (de Rycker & Mohd Don, 2015).

There were many existing literature conducted on media representation of crisis news (Bromhead, 2021; Mosurska, Clark-Ginsberg, Sallu, & Ford, 2022; Ong & McKenzie, 2019; Roy & Paul, 2022; Wan Md Adnan & Shamsudin, 2019). However, there is still limited understanding of how different social actors related to the lexical word 'media' in aviation crisis discourse are framed. Therefore, there is a need to investigate who are the different social actors related to 'media' in shaping public opinion during aviation

crises. While there have been many research conducted on the influence of media framing and language choices on public opinion of the MH370 crisis (Poh & James, 2015; Sonnevend, 2018), there is a gap in research that investigates the relationship between media representation of aviation crises and public opinion in local contexts, especially so in the news media of countries directly affected by such crises. Therefore, more research is needed to identify the strategies used by local news media from a country directly affected by an aviation crisis like MH370. This is especially crucial for the media to handle crises more responsibly and effectively.

The focus of this paper is to identify the social actors in the semantic category of news media in MH370 news discourse and how the media represented in the discourse influence the public opinion. This could lead to a more profound understanding of media influence during crises and help in developing better communication strategies during times of crisis. Therefore, this paper aims to answer these research questions:

1) How are media-related social actors represented in the local news media coverage of the MH370 aviation crisis?

2) What discursive strategies do the local news media use to shape public perception during the MH370 aviation crisis?

Framing Theories and Crisis Communication

Framing theories in crisis communication usually provides a central lens to understand how crises are represented in the media. Entman (1993) introduces framing theory, where he discusses framing as the process of selecting some aspects of perceived reality and making them more distinguished in texts, thus promoting specific interpretation, evaluation or even solution. Entman (1993) identifies four core functions in the framing theory: problem definition (deciding what issue and why it matters), causal interpretation (identifying the root of the problem), moral evaluation (judging the actors in positive or negative representation) and treatment recommendation (suggesting solutions or actions). Attribution theory by Weiner (1985) further complements this idea, as the theory emphasises the importance of responsible reporting, as any bias can affect public trust and legitimacy. Audiences are easy to form judgements towards any communication text based on media cues, regardless of whether the crisis actors are competent or blameworthy in their actions (Coombs, 2010; Weiner, 1985). To add to this, discourse-pragmatic approaches can utilise the role of language in constructing these frameworks, either using metaphors, attitudes, evaluative choices, or rhetorical strategies in how social actors represent themselves in a specific way (Fairclough, 2003; van Dijk, 1998; van Leeuwen, 1996; Wodak, 2001).

Collectively, these frameworks demonstrate that crisis reporting is certain to be not only a neutral reflection of events but also a means of ideological positioning, interpretation, and evaluation. Thus, this study aims to provide deeper insights into how media are represented as social actors by demonstrating how they navigate the restrictions of newsworthiness while expanding the scope of their reporting through language use.

Representation of social actors in aviation crisis news

The media extensively covered the MH370 crisis, establishing itself as a crucial source of public information. There were studies conducted on the representation of social actors and language use in news discourse, especially on media framing and public opinion of the MH370 crisis (Poh & James, 2015; Sonnevend, 2018). Sonnevend (2018), for example, conducted a study on the news coverage of MH370 and raised a concern over the US media employing alternative strategies to create news that is deemed newsworthy. The MH370 crisis has created constraints because there is limited information available on the issue. Poh and James (2015) also agreed with the idea and added that during the MH370 crisis, there were indications of positive positioning by Malaysia Airlines through their media statements.

It has also been proven that the representation of social actors in the media can have a significant impact on public opinion. Previous research also found that the media usually emphasise certain key social actors when it comes to crisis news, and the way these actors are being portrayed can highly impact public opinion (de Rycker & Mohd Don, 2015; Mosurska et al., 2022; Wang, Wu, & Li, 2022). When media portrays social actors in positive lights, the public is likely to view that actor in a positive light, whereas if the media portrays certain actors negatively, the public is likely to view the actors in a similar perspective. This phenomenon can lead to media bias and manipulation (Bidzilya, Solomin, Shvets, Heletei, & Hetsko, 2024; Nijkrake, Gosselt, & Gutteling, 2015). According to van Dijk (1998) the media representation of social actors influences the public opinion of self and others. This is also supported by Ong and McKenzie (2019), who analysed public attitudes towards the MH17 crisis in the news media of Malaysia and the UK. The study found that Malaysian newspapers portrayed the Malaysian elites as the important "us" and non-Malaysians as the non-important "others", while the British newspapers portrayed the West as the good "us" and Russia as the evil "others". This argues that the media not only categorises social actors as themselves or others but also portrays them in positive or negative evaluations (van Dijk, 1995). Hence, this demonstrated that there are still multiple levels of analysis that can be done to see how news media representation of social actors can affect public opinion and attitudes.

Additionally, previous research has also found that the media's representation of social actors can impact the public's understanding of the aftermath of a crisis (Bromhead, 2021; Uekusa, 2019; Wang et al., 2022). For example, if the media portrays the government as being responsible for the crisis and not taking adequate measures to address the aftermath, the public may view the government as being incompetent, whereas if the media portrays the government as taking appropriate measures, the public may view the government as being competent. Research also demonstrated that how social actors are portrayed in the media during a crisis affects the public's emotional state and well-being (Roy & Paul, 2022; Wang et al., 2022). Hence, this shows that local news media plays an important role in promoting nationalistic values and ideologies (Arslan, 2020; Setiawan, Nurmandi, Usman, & Qodir, 2024).

The strategies local news media use to shape public opinion

The media plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion since the media serves as the gatekeeper in determining what information reaches the public and how that information is presented. One of the roles played by the media was through the framing strategies of information, as the way information is selected and framed can significantly impact how the public perceives and understands an event. The language and tone used by the media were also found to be able to impact public opinion (Bednarek, 2008). The use of emotive language and language of attitude, for one, can evoke strong emotions, whereas more neutral language may have a more balanced effect (Bednarek, 2006; Guinda, 2015; Martin & White, 2005; Zhang & Lu, 2024). This also supports other research on the manifestation of attitudes in news discourse through various expressions of language, including lexical sequences and conceptual metaphors (Fairclough, 2003; van Dijk, 1998; van Leeuwen, 1996; Wodak, 2001). Some examples from previous research are the study by Choi (2002), who analysed the representations of a 2001 air collision between a US surveillance plane and China jet fighter, and coverage of the Whyalla Airlines Flight 904 crash in 2000 in South Australia (Delmo & Chaidaroon, 2019). It was found that the media framing of the social actors served as a representation of the governments' voices. This indicated that the media can set the agenda for public discourse by highlighting certain issues and framing them in a certain way (Buturoiu & Voloc, 2021). A similar idea was also highlighted by Bier, Park, and Palenchar (2018) when they emphasised that media coverage is partially determined by the country's media system.

In conclusion, the representation of social actors in the media can have a significant impact on public opinion, influencing the public's understanding of the event and the aftermath of the crisis, as well as the public's emotional state and well-being. Understanding how the local media represents social actors is crucial to better understand the impact of the media on public opinion.

METHODOLOGY

Since this study aims to fill the research gaps by exploring how news media influence public opinion in aviation crises, it uses a purely qualitative approach and employs corpus-based discourse analysis. To answer the research questions, the study first described the research design, the corpus development, and the collocation and semantic category analysis of the social actors used to analyse the corpora.

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative approach and analysed a mainstream English news website, The Star, from Malaysia. The selection was motivated by the fact that The Star tops the ranking of the most subscribed e-newspapers in Malaysia at 105,645 as of July to December 2015 (Shamsudin & Wan Md Adnan, 2019). The external criteria that influenced the selection of news articles are as follows:1) Only online news articles were selected; 2) Only news items on MH370 were selected; and 3) Selected online news articles were within the period of 2014 to 2016. The choice to concentrate only on one outlet (The Star) and on English-language coverage presents some limitations. The Star was chosen for its status as a prominent, urban-centric publication among Malaysia's leading English-language online newspapers. It has the potential to shape representations of the crisis distinctively compared to other vernacular or alternative media. Additionally, the use of English-language reporting influences how it is viewed by various Malaysian demographics. These limitations indicate that the findings primarily reflect English-language mainstream media discourse and may not fully represent the multilingual and multi-ethnic aspects of Malaysian public opinion.

Methodological Limitations

This study acknowledges certain methodological constraints associated with corpus-based discourse analysis. First, even though keyword frequency and log-likelihood measures are effective for identifying statistically significant patterns, they may overlook more nuanced discursive strategies that may not be apparent in high-frequency lexical items. To address this, the study complemented keyword analysis with concordance analysis and qualitative critical discourse analysis, ensuring that patterns were interpreted within wider textual and contextual frameworks.

Second, the coding of lexical items into semantic categories requires interpretive judgement. While categories were developed systematically and guided by established discourse-pragmatic frameworks (e.g., van Dijk, 1998; Martin & White, 2005), the assignment of words to categories may still reflect researcher bias. Despite the inherent subjectivity of semantic classification, this constraint was mitigated through transparent coding procedures and iterative checking.

Finally, the scope of the corpus using one news outlet restricts the generalisability of findings. The representation of the MH370 crisis in different multilingual outlets may reveal different discursive patterns. Thus, future research that incorporates multilingual corpora and triangulates coding across multiple researchers would help address these limitations.

Corpus-development stage

The methodology employed in this study followed Sinclair's (1991) stages of corpus development, including the design stage, the acquisition stage, and the processing stage. As used by Sinclair (1991), the three main stages in any corpus development include the design stage, the acquisition stage and the processing stage. The design stage is where the online news articles were identified and agreed upon. The articles must meet specific requirements, such as being easily accessible online, covering news within the 2-year timeframe of 2014-2016, and being provided only in English by the news portal. Most importantly, the selected news articles must be representative of the local news portal during the coverage of the MH370 crisis. Therefore, the selected online news articles were taken from The Star (thestar.com.my) with a total number of 3815 articles.

The second step after the design stage is the acquisition stage, in which the texts were collected, sorted, cleaned, organised into folders, and coded, respectively. An orderly set of data would be able to organise the corpus systematically and lead to stronger analysis (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2011). The study then used a representative code for each cleaned text. For example, the collected texts were coded with 370TS1, 370TS2, 370TS3 and so on. The first part of the representative code (370) represents the MH370 crisis event. The second part of the coding (TS) refers to the online news portal from which the articles were selected. The third part of the coding system (1, 2, 3) is the numbering to represent each collected article.

Lastly, the processing stage refers to the corpus analysis, in which this study uses Wordsmith 7.0 software to help with the analysis. The main types of analyses conducted using Wordsmith 7.0 include wordlist analysis, collocation analysis, concordance analysis, and critical discourse analysis.

Analysis of the Corpora

The identification of social actors for the lexical word 'media' in MH370 The Star online news was conducted based on a three-stage social actor analysis. This corpus-linguistics methodology helps to identify key social actors, investigate how they are perceived, and, finally, establish the representation of the 'media' in MH370 The Star online news discourse. This is based on KhosraviNik (2010) social actor analysis, with selected inclusion and exclusion criteria as referential strategies (van Leeuwen, 1996) to further construct the categories of social actors in the online news discourse of countries affected by the MH370.

Stage 1 involved the identification of the most frequent keywords for potential social actors. In this stage, keyness analysis was conducted on the developed corpus by comparing it to the British National Corpus (BNC). Keyness analysis refers to a statistical measure that is used to determine whether a particular word occurs more frequently in each corpus than it does in a reference corpus. The British National Corpus (BNC) was used as a reference corpus for the study. Keyness analysis uses log likelihood as the primary method to determine whether the keywords were statistically significant. Thus, the keywords with high log likelihood scores were more significant, and they were then further analysed to identify potential social actors. It was found that the total number of keywords identified for MH370 The Star corpus in comparison to the BNC was 496 (the default maximum number of keywords by Wordsmith for a large-sized corpus is 500).

Stage 2 involved the identification of potential social actors. Firstly, using the keyword tables from Stage 1 as the guideline, all the keywords with a log likelihood of over $p>0.05$ were identified for potential social actors in the MH370 online news discourse. It was found that a total of 314 keywords were identified, with the lowest log likelihood recorded at 187.91 for the MH370 The Star corpus. The other keywords were in the negative; hence, they were not included in the selection as they were insignificant. The keyword lists were then cleaned based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria by van Leeuwen (2008). The word 'media' was identified as having 3,938 frequencies with 17,214.54 log likelihood, which indicated a potential social actor. The entries were then right and left sorted to identify the words that collocated with 'media'. The first three inclusion and exclusion criteria used for the study are: Nomination, Individualisation and Collectivisation, and Impersonation and Abstraction. Nomination refers to the fact that potential social actors are represented by proper nouns, and keywords that do not possess meaning or are not represented using proper nouns or nouns are eliminated. Individualisation and Collectivisation refers to social actors that represent doers, beneficiaries or recipients of actions, or individuals or groups of people. Keywords that do not represent the criteria are eliminated. Impersonalisation and Abstraction requires social actors to have shared beliefs, knowledge, norms and values within the discourse community. Therefore, keywords that do not function as active participants in the text are excluded.

Stage 3 was then conducted for the identification of social actors and their semantic categories. In this stage, the social actors are derived based on collocation and semantic category analysis. The keywords of most frequent potential social actors represented in MH370 were selected, and each keyword was analysed based on its Log Likelihood. The analysis firstly involved identifying and grouping the premodifiers occurring with the most frequent keywords and then examining what semantic patterns can be drawn from the groupings.

This collocation pattern would present a general overview of the actors and the issues that surround the crisis as represented in Malaysian mainstream news media. Sinclair (1991) proposes a method where the concordance lines of the keywords were selected and each line was analysed for its meaning patterns. Each line would then be grouped into its classification. The procedure is then repeated until no new information is yielded from new sets of concordance lines. This also can ensure that only the most significant keywords were selected as social actors.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Two research questions guide the analysis of the news coverage of the MH370 aviation crisis. The results and discussion of the study were reported according to the three-stage social actor analysis as presented in Methodology section. To answer Research Question 1, the keyword 'media' is selected and analysed using Wordsmith 7. Then, it reported on the different social actors related to 'media' and how it influenced public opinion during the MH370 aviation crisis. To answer Research Question 2, the corpus is further analysed, and themes are formed to identify the strategies used by the local news media to shape public opinion during the MH370 aviation crisis.

How are media-related social actors represented in the news coverage of the MH370 aviation crisis?

The keyword 'media' was selected, and 798 concordance lines were rigorously analysed. After analysis was conducted based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria 1-3, the number of concordance lines retained for 'media' was 796. From 796 concordance lines, the lines were then sorted into semantic categories of social actors based on right sort and left sort. Criteria 4 was also conducted, and in the end, 720 concordance lines were retained. The inclusion and exclusion criteria used for concordance and semantic category analysis for the keyword 'media' were also conducted.

The keyword 'media' was also right- and left-sorted, and it was found that while 'media' has a high frequency of keywords, 'media' was referred to as either a part of http links or referred to as a column name in MH370 The Star online news.

Figure 1 Concordance on 'media' as part of http links and a column name in The Star Online news

Upon further left sorting and right sorting of the keyword 'media', it was found that 'media' without a pre-modifier or post-modifier was used to present a generic noun for 'media'. For example, Figure 2 shows the concordance on 'media' usage without the pre- or post-modifier in MH370 The Star.

Figure 2 Concordance on 'media' in MH370 The Star (centre)

'Media' was also used as a pre-modifier and post-modifier and collocated with other categories of social actors. The right sort of concordance lines, like 'Media Prima' and 'Media personnel' are as seen in the concordance sample in Figures 3 and 4 below.

N	Concordance
1	Media Prima to reduce headcount via MSS
2	CIMB Research downgrades Media Prima to Hold INVESTING Friday, 15 Aug
3	Media Prima Q3 earnings fall 33.6% to RM42.17mil
4	also fell, down 11.7% to RM1.12bil from RM1.27bil. Media Prima said advertisers were more cautious
5	, 6 Nov 2014 5:49 PM MYT KUALA LUMPUR: Media Prima Bhd image: https://cdn.thestar.com.my
6	and subsequently profit after tax declined by 11%. Media Prima said its digital media☐s advertising
7	more cautious and holding back their spending. "Media Prima's recent third quarter results were
8	: CIMB Equities Research has downgraded Media Prima from Add to Hold and lowered the
9	set of results is the country's biggest media group, Media Prima Bhd, whose third quarter net profit

Figure 3 Concordance on 'Media Prima' (right sort)

N	Concordance
1	Media personnel covering missing MH370
2	Malaysia Airlines MH370 Saturday afternoon. The media personnel, who were covering the venue
3	lobby. ☐Guests are already asking about all of you (media personnel) being here. We are running a
4	hotel via a chartered bus. A growing number of media personnel have, however, have arrived at the
5	were spotted outside the room designated for media personnel, while several auxiliary policemen
6	members of passengers aboard MAS flight MH370. Media personnel at the hotel have been asked to
7	interview other sources,☐ she said. The presence of media personnel from about 100 organisations at
8	,☐ a staff member told The Star as he directed all media personnel to a function room away from the
9	with regard to the flaperon found. Dozens of media personnel from foreign and local

Figure 4 Concordance on 'Media personnel' (right sort)

The left sort of the concordance lines indicates that 'media' was also used as a post-modifier for social actors like 'Chinese Media' and 'Malaysian media', as can be seen in the concordance example in Figure 5 and Figure 6.

N	Concordance
1	the airline of keeping them in dark, while the state media criticised them for their poor response.
2	tracking down Malaysia Airlines flight MH370, state media reported, as the search for the vanished
3	little if any signal,☐ he said. The Chinese news media have reported some instances of people
4	been seen from satellite imagery. - EPA Chinese media reports on an Australian Maritime Safety
5	a new life in Europe. Phones ringing Chinese media have reported that relatives have heard
6	has 18,365 hours of flight experience. Chinese state media said 24 Chinese artists and family members,
7	as many as 10 satellites to the search, state media reported. - AFP Read more at https://www.
8	(MAS) flight MH370 to terror or hijacking, state media said Tuesday, citing Beijing☐s envoy in Kuala
9	that the aircraft could have flown through, state media said earlier in the day. No trace of flight
10	19 bodies have been recovered, according to state media. Near the stretch of river in Jianli in Hubei

Figure 5 Concordance on 'Chinese media' (left sort)

N	Concordance
1	the environment and labour,☐ he told the Malaysian media after the closing of the Asem Summit. He said
2	visas in these two cities,☐ he told the Malaysian media here Friday night. On the concept of the 21st
3	.svg Even three Malaysian media organisations fell for it. One posted it on its
4	windows, and other DIY projects. Malaysian media reports have quoted colleagues as calling
5	him so I looked for the best articles in the Malaysian media, in the most important news outlets in English
6	visas in these two cities,☐ he told the Malaysian media on Friday. Another measure was the visa fee
7	to intense competition. AirAsia X, which Malaysian media said had some trouble paying staff salaries
8	no ransom demanded by the abductors, Malaysian media reported. The two women, a Chinese tourist
9	out loud and show that you are a patriot?" Malaysia media in September image: https://www.thestar.com

Figure 6 Concordance on 'Malaysian media' (left sort)

After both right sort and left sort were conducted, the semantic categories of social actors for 'media' in MH370 The Star Online News were formed and presented in Table 1.

Table 1: The semantic categories of social actors for 'media' in MH370 The Star Online News

No	Semantic Category	Sort	Social Actors	Total
1	Airline Staff	Left	MAS **Media** Relations	5
2	Media	Centre	**Media** (general)	392
		Right	**Media** agencies	5
		Right	**Media** organisation	14
		Right	**Media** owners	5
		Right	**Media** personnel	15
		Right	**Media** photographers	2
		Right	**Media** Prima	23
		Left	Australian **media**	5
		Left	British **media**	3
		Left	Chinese **media**	55
		Left	Communication, Coordination and **Media** Committees	8
		Left	**Foreign media**	50
		Left	International **media**	33
		Left	Indian news **media**	1
		Left	Malaysian **media**	25
		Left	Local **media**	25
		Left	New Zealand **Media** Group	4
		Left	Our **media**	3
		Left	Philippines **media**	6
		Left	Singapore **media**	2
		Left	The Star M**edia** Group	6
		Left	US **media**	9
		Left	Vietnamese **media**	6
		Left	Western **media**	9
		Left	World **media**	9
			TOTAL	720

The semantic map of 'media' is represented in Figure 7. The central node in the semantic map is 'media', and the surrounding nodes are the modifiers (e.g., Chinese media, Malaysian media, and Media Prima). The line thickness reflects the collocation frequency (stronger = more frequent).
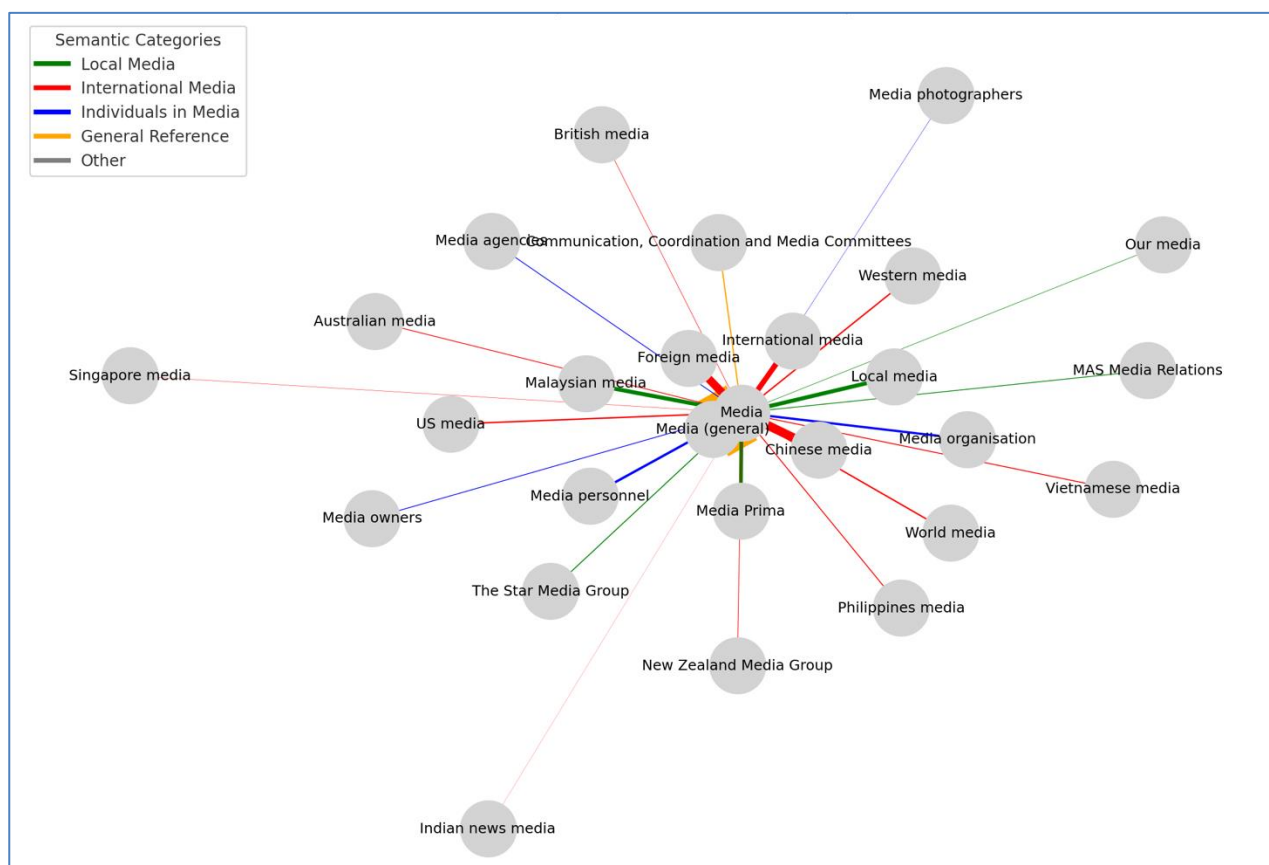
Figure 7 Semantic Map of 'Media' in MH370 Corpus

It was found that in MH370 The Star online news discourse, the media was addressed in the form of individuals in the media, the local media and the international media. For individuals in the media, the social actors were represented in the use of plural nouns and possessive nouns: *media agencies, media organisation, media owners, media personnel, and media photographers*. This represents the media industry's diversity and complexity. The media is not a single entity but rather a collection of social actors with varied roles and duties. The use of plural nouns emphasises the media's collective nature as a group of people and organisations that work together to generate news and information. The use of possessive nouns also emphasises the ownership and control of the media by different entities, such as 'agencies', 'organisation', 'owners', 'personnel' and 'photographers'. Finally, this depiction of the media implies that it is a dynamic and diverse organisation that plays an important role in shaping public opinion.

For local media, social actors mentioned include *Media Prima, local media, our media* and *Malaysian media, MAS Media Relations* and *The Star media group* were used to indicate the media or media representatives from Malaysia. For example:

"With reference to reports on the ante-mortem DNA sampling that was mentioned at the recent MH370 family briefing at MAS Academy in Kelana Jaya, this briefing was provided by the Royal Malaysian Police's Forensics team," according to **MAS media relations** on Friday. (370TS2799)

Malaysian media reports have quoted colleagues as calling Zaharie a "superb pilot", who also served as an examiner, authorised by the Malaysian Civil Aviation Department, to conduct simulator tests for pilots. (370TS419)

This indicates that Malaysian media plays a role in providing a positive representation of the MH370 crisis overall. The acknowledgement of the importance of international media was also mentioned with a long list of *international media, western media, world media, Australian media, China Press, British media, Chinese Media, Indian news media, New Zealand Media Group, Philippines media, Singapore media, US media* and

Vietnamese media. For example, Chinese media was reported as reporting negative news about the way Malaysia handled the crisis, and the news associated the Chinese media with being vocal towards Malaysian authorities. For example:

"Unlike us, the **Chinese media** have less access to information on the ill-fated flight." (370TS3035)

Chinese media reported on Friday that the father of an MH370 passenger died suddenly at his home just three hours after hearing the plane was missing. (370TS945)

The **Chinese media** had slammed Malaysian authorities and MAS for not responding fast enough in reporting the missing flight and notifying the families of passengers. With two-thirds of the passengers from China, the anger and anxiety are understandable. (370TS307)

Meanwhile, The Star reported that other international and foreign media portrayed Malaysia's handling of the MH370 crisis in an unfavourable light. For example, it was mentioned that:

Quite a lot has been written and said about Malaysia's handling of the MH370 tragedy, some favourable and some, especially from the **foreign media**, unfavourable. (370TS1142)

International media scrutiny and investigations by the police have failed to turn up red flags on either the captain, 53-year-old grandfather Zaharie Ahmad Shah, or the co-pilot, 27-year-old Fariq Abdul Hamid. (370TS798)

"But sometimes the speculation affected our emotions. They should not accuse the Malaysian Government without any proof," he said when asked to comment on several **foreign media** reports on the aircraft, which went missing on March 8. (370TS1299)

This indicated that international media in general were also very critical in the reporting of the MH370 crisis, and this fact was acknowledged by Malaysian local media news.

What discursive strategies does the local news media use to shape public perception during the MH370 aviation crisis?

Emphasising on nationalism and tenacity in positive self-representation

The study found that the local news media of The Star plays a role in fostering a sense of solidarity and community in the aftermath of a crisis. Collocation analysis found that local media as social actors (*Media Prima, local media, our media* and *Malaysian media, MAS Media Relations* and *The Star media group*) were generally portrayed as being protective towards any criticism about Malaysia. At the same time, The Star also reinforced nationalistic sentiments, in which it formed the idea that the local community is unique and special, and the community would understand the struggles they are facing during the aviation crisis. These dynamics foster a sense of 'us vs. them' that strengthens nationalism and enhances community identity. Meanwhile, tenacity refers to the extent to which the local news media can consistently represent Malaysia's positive image and reputation in the face of crisis or negative news coverage. The study clearly indicated that the Malaysian news media, The Star, frequently emphasised positive representations of the way Malaysia is handling the issue, despite contradictory reports by other foreign media.

Local news media can affect public opinion by showing themselves as trustworthy and responsible sources of information using positive self-representation. They can project a positive image of themselves and establish credibility with their audience (van Dijk, 1995). Local news media often plays a key role in shaping the public's opinion of nationalism by promoting nationalistic values and ideologies, either through direct promotion or through selective coverage of news events. The media's representation of different social actors during aviation crises can significantly impact the public's view of nationalism by reinforcing existing nationalistic attitudes or challenging them (Arslan, 2020; Setiawan et al., 2024).

For example, when the local news media predominantly reports positive news about a specific nation and its efforts during an aviation crisis, this can lead to increased nationalistic sentiments among the citizens of that nation. If the local media reports negative news about a specific nation, this can lead to decreased nationalistic sentiments. Hence, this agrees with previous literature that the media not only categorises social actors as self or others but also portrays them in positive or negative evaluations (Ong & McKenzie, 2019; Roy & Paul, 2022).

However, it might be argued that reporting positive self-representation with a sense of nationalism has both good and negative implications. On one hand, it may foster feelings of national togetherness, particularly during times of crisis (de Rycker & Mohd Don, 2015). This could improve support for government and media actions, as well as trust in local media outlets. On the other hand, this may result in a lack of critical analysis of local media reporting, resulting in skewed or biased coverage of events. As a result, it is critical that media outlets be aware of the potential implications of utilising nationalism for positive self-representation and that their reporting be fair, truthful, and balanced (Teschendorf, Kruß, Otto, & Rusch, 2024).

Establishing empathy in the news discourse of aviation crisis

Establishing empathy in the news discourse of aviation crises is critical in building a healthy relationship between the media and the public, particularly in the aftermath of a crisis like MH370. This can be achieved using language of attitude to convey a sense of shared experience and collective grief. As previously mentioned, empathy-focused communication can be particularly effective in reporting natural disasters or crises, as it can enhance public understanding and appropriate responses (Zhang & Lu, 2024). For instance, when The Star portrays individuals or organisations involved in the crisis response efforts as "proactive" and "compassionate," it helps establish empathy and build trust with the affected communities. The Star established phrases of empathy and collective suffering to create a sense of togetherness and unity in times of crisis, which can be particularly important in the aftermath of a crisis. The emphasis on the efforts of individuals and organisations involved in crisis recovery also demonstrated the ideology of fostering reliance to promote a sense of togetherness and unity during times of crisis (Arslan, 2020; de Rycker & Mohd Don, 2015; Setiawan et al., 2024).

Shared experiences during crises have proven to be a strong ideology to unite affected individuals or communities (Ong & McKenzie, 2019). This is especially true given the heightened emotions experienced by the local community due to shared grief. When the media humanised social actors and portrayed them as empathetic individuals, the public would respond with more compassion and understanding. If the media portrays social actors negatively and as unempathetic, the public may respond with increased anger and negative emotions. Thus, this proved the media's ability to evoke emotions through their framing of social actors (Bednarek, 2006; Bednarek & Caple, 2012).

Nonetheless, it can be argued that while establishing empathy through the language of attitude can be an effective approach for local news media to engage with affected communities, this should not be at the expense of critical analysis and balanced reporting practices. While empathy can help people feel more connected, it should not be exploited in place of comprehensive and fair reporting. Biased reporting, in some circumstances, can lead to a distorted portrayal of any crisis (Buturoiu & Voloc, 2021). This can undermine public understanding of the crisis.

Highlighting collaborative efforts made by social actors

The study found that MH370 The Star corpus also emphasised the collaborative efforts of various social actors. Local news media can foster a sense of community and encourage shared responsibility for addressing the issue by emphasising these collaborative efforts. This can help build confidence between impacted communities and the various social actors, especially those who are in crisis response situations.

This is especially crucial, as there is a need to understand ongoing emotions when dealing with crisis communication (Guinda, 2018). For example, The Star was found to report positively on the efforts of Malaysian government agencies to deal with the crisis response efforts; hence, it helps to neutralise negative narratives and representations from foreign media. The way the local media portrays the level of cooperation and coordination between different social actors in the wake of an aviation crisis can also emphasise the strength of the relationship between the affected actors.

Thus, again, this emphasised that the display of collaborative efforts by different actors, especially local governments and organisations, can be an effective strategy to build trust among the affected community (Choi, 2002), especially in the aftermath of the crisis. Nonetheless, there is a recurring concern about the positive self-representation of local organisations involved in the crisis response. While it is debatable that consistently portraying the social actors in positive lights can create a false sense of balanced reporting (Bidzilya et al., 2024; Nijkrake et al., 2015). This study would argue that when it comes to crisis discourse, it is crucial to establish national togetherness and solidarity in the aftermath of a crisis.

When placed in a broader context, the findings in The Star diverge slightly from reporting patterns seen in other aviation crises. For example, Choi (2002) found that reports on a 2001 air collision between a US surveillance plane and China jet fighter in the media served as the representation of the governments' voices, while coverage of the Whyalla Airlines Flight 904 crash in 2000 in South Australia (Delmo & Chaidaroon, 2019) emphasised the effects of sensationalism in media coverage of aviation crises. In contrast, Malaysian local media sought to project solidarity and protect national reputation.

However, as mentioned earlier, it is crucial that media representation not be used to manipulate or mislead the public and that the media remain critical and balanced in their reporting. Crisis discourse should emphasise factual and truthful reporting, as well as empathy and understanding for all the social actors involved in the tragedy (de Rycker & Mohd Don, 2015).

CONCLUSION

The roles of news media in shaping social actors' public opinion in news reporting, especially in aviation crises, can be multi-dimensional. The media's choice of words, tone, and framing can evoke emotions and shape attitudes towards the social actors involved. The study found that the keyword 'media' in MH370 The Star news outlet was addressed in form of individuals in the media, the local media and the international media. This indicates that the news outlet recognised the importance of the different roles played by the media in the reporting of the MH370 crisis. This finding would help to later identify effective strategies during crisis communication. Local news media can also influence public opinion using positive self-representation of the social actors, as well as highlighting their nationalistic tendencies, tenacity, empathy, and their collaboration with others. Overall, understanding the strategies news media use in shaping social actors' public opinion in news reporting of aviation crises can contribute to the development of more effective communication strategies for different actors involved. Therefore, future research in this field could expand the scope by developing a multilingual corpus that encompasses articles from different media ecosystems, as well as alternative and independent media outlets. This would then provide a more comprehensive understanding of how different media outlets framed the MH370 crisis, allowing for comparison across linguistic and cultural contexts. Research may also explore the use of the language of attitude in the aviation crisis corpus to have a more nuanced understanding of the language choices used and framed in news discourse.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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