

# A Content Analysis of Islam-related News Coverage in Selected Malaysian Online Newspapers

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## ABSTRACT

The media-generated misconception of Islam is not a new phenomenon. However, a huge amount of media coverage of Islam and Muslims, especially after the 9/11 attacks, resulted in a widespread awareness of the religion and its adherents. Several studies have explored how Islam is reported in western media. Therefore, this study focuses on how non-western media cover Islam-related news. The study aims to identify the most common type of news used in covering Islam and determine the extent of Islam-related news coverage in selected Malaysian online newspapers. The Star and New Straits Times were chosen based on readership and online popularity. News articles related to Islam were gathered from the digital archives of the selected newspapers from November 2015 to September 2016 using “Islam” and “Muslims” as keywords. A total of 352 news articles were gathered and subjected to content analysis. The findings showed that a large majority (90.9%) of the Islam-related articles published in the selected newspapers contained straight news stories while only 9.1% contained feature stories. Additionally, more than half (57.7%) of the Islam-related news articles covered global news, and more than one-third (37.2%) of the articles covered national news, while only 5.1% covered local news. These findings imply that the selected newspapers tend to create the image of Islam globally. Further analysis of the findings revealed that the selected newspapers covered Islam in the context of conflict. It was envisaged that this study would be beneficial, especially to journalists, by providing information that could be used to improve news coverage of Islam.

**Keywords:** Agenda-setting, feature story, news coverage, Islam, non-western media, newspapers, straight news

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## INTRODUCTION

The media play a critical role in shaping people’s opinions (Happer & Philo, 2013; Li, Pearce, & Low, 2018). Research into the relationship between media and religion has become crucial as researchers explore how the media frame religion and how religious people use the media (Allen, 2014; Mitchell, & Gower, 2012; Powell, 2018; Rugar, 2012; Thompson, 2013). Edward Said’s *Orientalism* is regarded by many researchers as the landmark in the relationship between Islam and the press (Bullock & Jafri, 2000; Martin & Phelan, 2002; Saeed, 2007) which has informed many subsequent studies on the portrayal of Islam and Muslims in the media. Religion is often portrayed negatively, but journalists, on the other hand, feel that this claim is merely a criticism by religionists (Dart & Allen, 2000).

According to Dart and Allen (2000), many news producers maintain that they are open to good coverage of religion, but very few of them demonstrate a quality standard of news reporting. This situation does not help to promote the readers’ knowledge about religious co-existence but rather highlights the problem instead of solutions (Allen, 2014). Objectivity in news coverage of regions matters greatly. For instance, the Danish Cartoon Controversy that occurred in 2005 was due to a blasphemous newspaper report (Asmal, 2008). Subsequently, the newspaper faced global challenges beyond what the journalists expected (Hoover, 2012).

Improvements in the production, dissemination and reception of media messages have led to an explosion in channels and media sources (Hassan & Azmi, 2018; Van der Wurff, 2008). After the 9/11 attacks, the huge amount of media coverage of Islam and Muslims resulted in a widespread awareness of the religion and its adherents. As a result, a media version of Islam became widely known (Rane, Ewart, & Martinkus, 2014). The amount of news coverage devoted to Islam has increased (Powell, 2018). However, meeting the quality of standards in news coverage is of great concern (Dart & Allen, 2000) because, at times, Islam is depicted in a bad light (Baker, Gabrielatos, & McEnery, 2013; Jacobsen, Jensen, Vitus, & Weibel, 2012).

Previous studies found that news coverage of Islam and Muslims has increased significantly in the western media (Moore, Mason, & Lewis, 2008; Powell, 2018; Yusof, Hassan, Hassan, & Osman, 2013). However, research into the news coverage of Islam in non-western media is either lacking or inadequate (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017). Therefore, using content analysis, this study aims to determine the extent of Islam-related news coverage and explore the context in which Islam is reported in selected Malaysian online newspapers. In this study, interpretations are made from the perspective of agenda-setting theory. The study could provide valuable information that can help journalists, particularly in Malaysia, to improve news coverage of Islam.

### **Islam-related News Coverage**

Several studies were conducted to explore news coverage of Islam (Abbas, 2015; Akbarzadeh & Smith, 2005; Cottle, 2006; Dahinden, Koch, Wyss, & Keel, 2011; Hassan & Azmi, 2021; Jacobsen et al., 2012; Lindemann & Stolz, 2014; Moore et al., Nanabawa, 2013; Poole, 2011; Powell, 2018; Terman, 2017; Thompson, 2013; Von Sikorski, Schmuck, Matthes, & Binder, 2017). Most of these studies indicated a massive increase in the dimensions of media coverage of Islam and Muslims, especially after the 9/11 attacks (Jacobsen et al., 2012; Moore et al., 2008; Thompson, 2013; Yusof et al., 2013). For example, Thompson (2013) found that media coverage of Islam and Muslims rose dramatically during the 9/11 attacks. The 9/11 incident resulted in a massive increase in media coverage of Islam. According to Thompson, news discourse during the period was mainly negative and centered on violence or fanaticism. Similarly, Poole (2011) found that the major change in news coverage of Muslims after 9/11 was the association of Islam with terrorism. This change happened immediately following the 9/11 attacks when the media focused dramatically on three main issues: terrorism, counter-terrorism measures, and discrimination against Muslims.

Additionally, Moore et al. (2008) conducted a content analysis of newspaper articles about Muslims in the British press from 2000 to 2008. The study found that after 9/11, news coverage of Muslims increased significantly, peaking in 2006 and remaining at a high level in 2007 and 2008. A study shows that media coverage of Islam increased despite the killing of Osama Bin Laden (Yusof et al., 2013). The bulk of coverage of Muslims focuses on Muslims as a threat. Rane et al. (2014) argued that substantial media coverage of Islam can be influential in shaping the audience's attitudes and opinions about Islam and Muslims. The more reliant audiences are on the media, the more potentially vulnerable they are to media influence. This argument concurs with Said's (1979) assertion that when attention was given to the religious revolution in Iran, Islam was characterized limitlessly through a handful of irresponsible and organized media stereotypes. Also, research shows that increased news coverage of Islam is often associated with misinformation that can trigger human emotions (Yusof, Hassan, Hassan, & Osman, 2013).

Moreover, controversies about Islam dominate the press coverage of religion, mostly containing accusations about extremism or intolerance (Thompson, 2013). For instance, among the prominent stories of 2011 in the US was the so-called threat of homegrown "Islamic terrorism" (Mitchell & Gower, 2012). A study conducted by Poole (2011) found news coverage of fundamentalism mostly focused on Muslims. The media tend to use "fundamentalism" to describe Muslim extremists alone. According to Baker et al. (2013), Muslims are constructed as extremists and fundamentalists. It should be noted that stereotyped media depiction of Islam is not a new phenomenon. As pointed out by Thompson (2013), Islam has been depicted negatively since the development of news media.

Also, Jacobsen et al. (2012) posited that negative portrayal dominates the media coverage of Islam and Muslims. Lindemann and Stolz (2014) conducted a media content analysis of how Muslim foreigners are constructed in media discourse compared to other immigrants in Switzerland. The study showed that religion was a new instrument in the newspaper's description of foreign otherness and that topics about religion were infrequent in the 1970s. Unfortunately, Swiss media focused on Islam in the discourse of immigrants, which indicates their construction of "Muslim foreigners". Similarly, Rupar (2012) noted that by using Muslims and immigrants interchangeably, the media tend to reproduce prejudice and bigotry. According to Kumar (2011), Muslims are

under-represented in media coverage. This representation is likely to construct a distorted image of Islam. Abbas (2001) also noted that British Muslims feel that their media representation is distorted and stereotypical.

Specifically, studies show that most media coverage tends to focus on violent attacks committed by Muslims (Ewart, Cherney, & Murphy, 2017; Hassan & Azmi; Powell, 2018; Von Sikorski et al., 2017). Von Sikorski et al. (2017) argued that news coverage that links Islam with terrorism is likely to trigger fear, especially among non-Muslims audience. Additionally, Hassan and Azmi (2021) found that non-western media paid attention to global news about Islam. Also, research shows that Islam is depicted negatively even on social media. According to a systematic review conducted by Hashmi, Ab Rashid, and Ahmad (2020), most empirical studies showed that social media users represent Islam negatively. The findings also indicated that Islam is often portrayed as a religion of terrorism and gender.

The foregoing review suggests that news coverage of Islam and Muslims increased after 9/11. This increased coverage is often distorted and likely to construct Muslims negatively. However, previous studies focused on news coverage of Islam in western media. According to Ahmed and Matthes (2017), there is a lack of research into news coverage of Islam in non-western media. Therefore, the present study could provide valuable information that can be used to improve news coverage of Islam, particularly in Muslim-majority nations. The study focuses on determining the extent of how Malaysian newspapers cover Islam-related news and exploring the context in which Islam-related news is reported in Malaysian newspapers. Malaysia is a Muslim-majority nation and, to some extent, English speaking country (Ridgeon, 2013). The findings of this study will equip the public with information on newspaper coverage of Islam-related news and could help journalists to improve news coverage of Islam.

### **Theoretical Approach**

This study is guided by the Agenda-setting theory. McCombs and Shaw (1972) provided the first strong experimental support of the agenda-setting effect in their study of a presidential campaign. According to their research outcome, topics that were reported more prominently than others became the major campaign issues (Coleman, McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 2009; Potter, 2012). Agenda-setting theory presumes that news media create a particular image of reality whether, consciously or unconsciously, and then confront the audience daily with issues that are important according to the media agenda. Consequently, the media construct reality in the audience's mindsets by omitting certain issues and emphasizing others (Fourie, 2001). McCombs and Shaw (1972) showed a significant relationship between media and public agenda, but the study failed to determine which influences the other.

Agenda-setting consists of two levels. The first level refers to the salience transfer of issues while the second level is the process of various attributes competing for attention (McCombs & Shaw, 1993; McCombs, & Reynolds, 2002). These levels set the public agenda and influence the public perceptions of issues. To identify salience in media agenda-setting, studies have focused on the attention level of agenda-setting (Lim, 2010). According to Kiouisis (2004), there are two characteristics of media agenda salience: visibility and valence. Visibility consists of the attention or prominence accorded to particular issues. Attention is measured in terms of the number of news stories about an issue while prominence is measured in terms of length and placement of stories in print media, or the length and time allocated to stories in broadcast media. The second level of agenda-setting is very similar to framing. According to Weaver (2007), there is no consensus among researchers on whether the second-level agenda-setting is equivalent to framing. However, whether framing is more or less similar to second-level agenda setting depends to a great extent on how framing is defined.

Based on the second level of agenda-setting, we argue that the extent of media coverage of Islam determines the salience of media-generated Muslims' image. At this level of Agenda-setting, issues that are made salient in the media eventually become important in the audience's mindsets. Folarin (1998) enumerated four components that are related to agenda-setting: 1) extent of news coverage; 2) amount of conflict created in the news; 3) level of salience accorded to the subject being reported; 4) collective effect of media within a specific time. Newspapers might offer signals about the importance of certain issues. By repeating these signals day after day, the newspapers can effectively communicate the importance of such issues (Okwuchukwu, 2014). The media set the agenda of public discourse and determine people's perceptions of particular issues.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Design*

This study employed a qualitative approach in which content analysis was used to analyze news coverage of Islam-related in Malaysian newspapers. The advantages of using content analysis are numerous; it looks at communication via text and allows for qualitative analyses. According to Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007), “content analysis takes texts and analyses, reduces and interrogates them into a summary form through the use of both pre-existing categories and emergent themes” (p. 476). This study focuses on newspapers because readers can have a reasonable control level over their news consumption since they can attend to news stories at any time (Kuypers, 2002).

In this study, incorporating content analysis and agenda-setting theory could be useful in revealing what Islam-related issues are made salient through agenda-setting, measured in terms of coverage. This is because content analysis emphasizes an integrated view of speech/texts and their specific contexts (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). As a research technique, content analysis enables communication researchers to make inferences about specific media content (Cohen et al., 2007; Neuendorf, 2002). Thus, we incorporate agenda-setting theory and content analysis to explore the salience of Islam-related issues in the selected newspapers.

## DATA COLLECTION

*The Star* and *New Straits Times* were selected for analysis based on readership and online popularity. In 2018, the selected newspapers had 3.34m and 1.99m site visitors respectively (Alexa, 2018). All the selected newspapers are published in English. *The Star* newspaper is published by Star Media Group Berhad while *New Straits Times* is a publication of The News Straits Times Press owned by Media Prima Berhad (Weaver & Willnat, 2012). According to Sani (2005), the ownership of Malaysian newspapers is mainly dominated by the government and public officials who have strong connections with the government’s alliance parties.

Regarding the news articles, only straight news and feature stories were chosen for analysis. While straight news is meant to report breaking news and is usually written or delivered in a short and straightforward form, a feature story takes an in-depth look at a subject (Murray, 1991; Oyero, 2006). A sample of 320 straight news stories and 32 feature stories was collected from November 2015 until September 2016. This period represents a scenario of various related events around the globe. The two-year period (2015-2016) has experienced its share of significant world events (Reliefweb, 2017). Also, this time frame was chosen to make the data into a manageable size for analysis. An internet-based search was conducted to gather relevant data from the websites of the selected newspapers “Islam” and “Muslim” as keywords. Any article that focuses upon a report about Islam or Muslims fulfills the inclusion criteria. All news articles identified using this method were read for relevance. Articles that do not primarily focus on Islam were not included in the study.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The data were coded using the content analysis procedure proposed by Cohen et al. (2007): Breaking down texts into units of analysis; undertaking statistical analysis of the units, and; presenting the analysis in as economical form as possible. At the preliminary stage of coding, all the selected articles were summarized to determine the news coverage of Islam. News coverage refers to the extent to which a news story is reported in the newspaper. The coverage of Islam-related news was categorized into: i) local news, which refers to the coverage of Islam-related events in a local context that would not be of interest to another locality; ii) national news, which refers to the coverage of events in a national context; and iii) global news, which refers to news coverage in a global context. These categories are determined based on the issues covered and the audience for whom the news is reported. For example, consider the following reports.

- Ministers to look into court’s decision on Muslim conversion - *The Star*, January 10, 2016
- France dissolves Muslim groups linked to radical Paris mosque - *The Star*, January 13, 2016
- Hudud law will only apply to Muslims in Kelantan, says Zahid - *New Straits Times*, May 27, 2016

From the aforementioned instances, Report ‘A’ reports a national issue that might be of interest to citizens of Malaysia. The newspaper even categorized this report under ‘National’ news, perhaps to indicate that the issue being reported is national. However, Report ‘B’ covers a global issue that might attract a global audience. This report is also labeled as ‘World’ news. Whereas, Report ‘C’ touches upon a local issue that concerns a particular community within the country.

**FINDINGS**

The selected newspapers produced different amounts of Islam-related articles within the period of data collection. *The Star* produced 193 Islam-related news articles while *New Straits Times* produced 159 articles. The overall 352 Islam-related news articles were analyzed. The first objective of this study aims to determine the extent of Islam-related news coverage in the selected newspapers. This information is presented in table 1 as follows.

**Table 1:** Types of news and coverage

Variable	Categories	RF	PC	CP
Type of news	Straight News	0.91	320(90.9)	90.9
	Feature Stories	0.09	32(1.6)	100
	Total	1.00	352(100)	
Coverage	Local news	0.05	18(5.1)	5.1
	National news	0.37	131(37.2)	42.3
	Global news	0.58	203(57.7)	100
	Total	1.00	352(100)	

Note: RF = Relative Frequency; PC = Percent; CP = Cumulative Percent

As depicted in table 1, a large majority (90.9%) of the Islam-related articles published in the selected newspapers contained straight news stories while only 9.1% contained feature stories. These findings indicate that the selected newspapers have not performed an in-depth coverage of Islam-related news. Regarding the extent of Islam-related news coverage, more than half (57.7%) of the Islam-related news articles covered global news. Additionally, more than one-third (37.2%) of the articles covered national news, while only 5.1% covered local news. These findings imply that, in news coverage of Islam, the selected newspapers focused more on global news compared to local or national news.

Based on the assumptions of Agenda-setting theory, the extent of coverage determines the perceived importance of the issues being reported. In this study, the selected newspapers covered Islam-related news to a large extent. The newspapers tend to create the image of Islam globally by producing Islam-related news for global consumption. The second objective of this study aims to explore the context in which Islam is reported in the selected newspapers. This information is depicted in table 2 as follows.

**Table 2:** Context of Coverage

SN	Headline	Newspaper	News type	Date of Publication
1	Bangladesh Sufi Muslim killed in suspected Islamist attack	New Straits Times	Straight News	May 8, 2016
2	Canadian executed by Islamic militants in Philippines: Trudeau	New Straits Times	Straight News	April 26, 2016
3	France dissolves Muslim groups linked to radical Paris mosque	The Star	Straight News	January 13, 2016
4	Muslim Americans fear demonization of Islam after mass shooting	The Star	Feature Story	December 4, 2015
5	Muslim World League condemns terror attacks	New Straits Times	Straight News	November 16, 2015

6	Spain arrests four with suspected links to Islamic militants	The Star	Straight News	February 23, 2016
7	Somalia: 5 Islamic militants attack hotel in capital, kill 6	New Straits Times	Straight News	November 2, 2015
8	Top Sunni Muslim cleric condemns 'hateful' Paris attacks	New Straits Times	Straight News	November 14, 2015
9	14 killed in Muslim rebel attacks in southern Philippines	New Straits Times	Straight News	December 26, 2015

Table 2 shows examples of the context in which Islam is reported in the selected newspapers. The findings indicate that the selected newspapers covered Islam in the context of conflict, which may create a negative image of Islam. As claimed by Agenda-setting theory, people are likely to form their perceptions based on how the subject is reported. Some of the global issues covered by the newspapers include the Paris attacks, the Somali hotel attacks, the Bangladesh café attacks in 2016, and the San Bernardino California attacks. These incidents are some of the violent events that occurred within the period of data collection. Also, national issues covered by the selected newspapers include religious conversion, Sharia law, Muslim circumcision, Muslim unity, vaccination in Islam, and religious tolerance. Besides, local issues covered by the newspapers pertain to cases related to, Hudud, Aurat, and insult of Islam.

**DISCUSSION**

The extent of news coverage is one of the significant elements associated with agenda-setting (Folarin, 1998; Coleman, et al., 2009). The findings reported in this study showed that Malaysian newspapers covered Islam-related news globally. In this regard, it can be argued that the extent of coverage of Islam-related news determines the perceived importance of Islam-related issues in the audience’s mindsets. People’s attitudes toward Islam and Muslims can be shaped through world events. As claimed by Agenda-setting theory, the seriousness of coverage and frequency of news presentation are likely to shape people’s perceptions. The findings of this study concur with Dahinden et al. (2011) who found that media coverage of Islam in Switzerland focused more on Muslims abroad than local. Cottle (2006) also found that approximately 86% of the global news coverage focused on Islam. In contrast, Akbarzadeh and Smith (2005) found that most of the articles in Australian newspapers were about local issues.

Based on the assumption of agenda-setting theory, when an issue receives international coverage, such an issue is considered important. In this regard, many studies (Dahinden, et al., 2011; Rupa, 2012; Cottle, 2006) found that the contemporary media’s focus is more on Islam in the global context and that Islam is mostly a topic in the foreign news section of many media outlets. In line with the findings of this study, Dahinden et al (2011) found that coverage of Islam mostly consists of conflicts, terrorism, war, and other forms of violence. The everyday life of Muslims, such as cultural or historical aspects of their faith is hardly part of the coverage. Some studies (Akbarzadeh & Smith, 2005; Moore et al., 2008) found that there is a constant relationship between international events and domestic issues in terms of how Islam and Muslims are represented in the media. Akbarzadeh and Smith (2005) found that there is intertextuality between local and international discourses on Islam and Muslims. Advances in technology have created opportunities for newspapers to access, gather, and disseminate information globally. Dart and Allen (2000) noted that the personal perspectives of news reporters affect much religious coverage.

The findings of this study also showed that Malaysian newspapers used more straight news than feature stories in news coverage of Islam. It can be argued that readers are not likely to develop an in-depth understanding of Islam through straight news. This is because feature stories are intended to involve and educate the reader by providing information with real events, innovations, and trends, while straight news stories give factual accounts of events in a simple and straight manner (Murray, 1991). Oyero (2006) explained that the main function of feature stories is to educate and entertain.

Moreover, this study showed that the selected newspapers tend to report Islam-related events in the context of conflict. Similarly, previous studies found that the media tend to portray a negative image of Islam and Muslims (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017; Poole, 2011; Thompson, 2013). According to Thompson (2013), news coverage of Islam and Muslims tends to be negative and often involves violence or fanaticism. Similarly, Poole (2011) found that the media tend to associate Islam and Muslims with terrorism. In news coverage of religion, journalists must

endeavour to maintain journalistic ethics and professionalism. This is because reporting religion in the context of conflict is likely to generate tension instead of promoting peace and harmony (Powell, 2018).

## CONCLUSION

This study explored the coverage of Islam-related news in selected Malaysian online newspapers. According to the findings, a large majority of the Islam-related articles contained straight news stories and covered global news. The findings showed that the selected newspapers covered Islam-related news globally. Based on the assumption of agenda-setting theory, the extent of news coverage determines the perceived importance of Islam-related issues in people's mindsets. As newspapers have an online presence, they tend to accomplish cross-boundary dissemination of Islam-related news through globalized means of communication. These media messages can influence both local and international communities. Additionally, this study showed that the selected newspapers tend to cover Islam in the context of conflict. The news coverage of religion in the context of conflict does not help to promote harmony. Agenda-setting theory presumes that people tend to form their opinions based on how the topic is reported.

This study advances our understanding of how non-western newspapers cover Islam-related news. It was envisaged that this study would be beneficial, especially to journalists, by providing information that could be used to improve news coverage of Islam. This improvement can be achieved through objective, balanced and fair reporting as well as sticking to the ethics of journalism. Also, the findings of this study can be useful in newsgathering, production, and dissemination. However, the sample of this study was limited to two online newspapers. Therefore, further research may use a larger sample to produce more representative outcomes. Also, how other forms of non-western media, such as radio and television, cover Islam can be a potential area for further research.

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