

We Only Report What Really Happened! Journalists' Perspectives on Conflict Reporting in Newspapers

Norhayati Rafida Abdul Rahim
Safiyah Ahmad Sabri
Suria Hani A. Rahman
Noor Adzrah Ramle

Abstract

Conflict receives considerably greater coverage by the newspapers. Conflict in itself gives birth to violence, argument and repetitive abuse that humans may fall into dilemma especially when they are in the bystander position. This predisposition thus raises some issues concerning journalist perspectives towards accuracy and fairness in reporting conflict in the news. News that is considered as newsworthy in this instance may or may not be featured for its sensibility or readability. This paper attempts to understand the extent to which journalists see their roles in reporting conflicts in Malaysia. A qualitative research was conducted where seven journalists from mainstream newspapers namely Berita Harian, Utusan Malaysia, The Star and the New Straits Times, were interviewed. The findings reveal eleven significant perspectives. These perspectives include elements that are major concerns and yet play a significant influence in generating reports on conflicts.

Keywords: News reporting, Media and Conflict, Conflict News Reporting

Introduction

In Malaysia, newspapers have existed for much longer as a medium of communication than television and radio (Zaharom, 2000). The publication and distribution of newspapers began with the publication of Prince of Wales Island Gazette for the colonial administrators and traders (Zaharom, 2000), which was then followed by the 'missionary' newspapers.

The first English newspaper, the New Straits Times, was published in July 15, 1845 and Utusan Malaysia, as the first Bahasa newspaper, was established in 1938. In 1971, the Malaysian government implemented the New Economic Policy (NEP)² which allows privatisation of media institutions.

There were, nonetheless, claims that the privatisation was merely a hypocritical movement as there was still a clear monopoly on the ownership by political parties or individuals who were closely connected to the government (Zaharom, 2000).

As suggested by McNair (1995), the media play an important role to inform, to educate, to provide a platform for political discussions, to publicise the government and political institutions and to support political viewpoints. It can be concluded that there is a clear association between the media and political institutions.

According to Curran (2002) and McQuail (2000), the media play a role as an agency of social integration that links together different groups and allows experience sharing to promote social unity. Importantly, McQuail (2000) asserted that the media should help society to resolve social conflicts (Barry and Oliver, 1996: 140; Curhan et al., 2004: 151). Based on these findings, the media were found to be capable in approaching the audience in various ways (McQuail, 2000: 69).

The media have traditionally played the role of the purveyor of information to the public with the assumption that the public has the right to know about the political dealings of elected officials, both domestically and internationally. Since providing information about events and issues that affect the public life, directly or indirectly, is construed as a duty (to inform), freedom of the press is declared as a fundamental principle in a liberal democratic system of government. In addition, the public continues to assert their right and privilege to be informed (to know) with more news and information.

The findings from the interviews showed that journalists in Malaysia profess to be socially responsible and practice a non-bias attitude in their news reporting. This study seeks to understand the factors that influence journalists when reporting on conflict news. How do they maintain their impartiality as journalists in reporting conflict news in Malaysia? This study concludes that the journalists in Malaysia are dedicated to a nonaligned disposition demanded of their position and trustworthy in terms of reporting news. Aside from ensuring the value of the news, the journalists must also consider the other factors that contribute toward their professionalism and responsibilities.

Objectives of the study

This paper studies the factors that Malaysia journalists deemed as important perspectives on conflict news reporting as shown by the journalists who work in the mainstream newspapers in Malaysia. The two (2) objectives of the study are as follow:

1 In 1929, the KL Amateur Wireless Society started experimental work and officially opened its regular broadcast service at 6.30 with tea dance Music from the Selangor Club. Radio was organised by local residents rather than colonial authorities. Asian music and entertainment were the line-up in the evening transmission.

2 The NEP was a five year plan which aimed to ensure equal economic growth among the multi ethnic groups in Malaysia. Consequently, it promotes privatisations and investments which affect the media system in terms of press control. However, the media ownership was under the political parties which to this end, the government has been a majority shareholder in the media institutions, and to an extent, controls freedom of press in the country.

1. To examine the journalists perspectives on the practice of freedom of speech among journalists in Malaysia; and
2. To study factors deemed important by journalists in conflict news reporting

Methodology

This study is based on qualitative approach that aims to understand the journalists' perspectives of important factors that influence conflict news reporting in Malaysia. In order to investigate the ways in which conflict news reporting is perceived by the journalists, this research employed semi-structured interviews in order to acquire the desired answers. The respondents include seven journalists from the mainstream media namely Utusan Malaysia, Berita Harian, New Straits Times and The Star. The respondents consist of one female and six male journalists who are working in Klang Valley area with 10 to 25 years experience (refer to Table 1).

Table 1: List of Journalists According to Agencies and Codes

Newspapers Agencies	Codes
Utusan Malaysia	J1, J2
Berita Harian	J3, J4
New Straits Times	J5, J6
The Star	J7

The analysis is content-based in which the information was collected, labeled and quantified for its concurrences. In preparing the analysis, this study highlighted the main themes which emerged from the responses of the interviewees. The answers may differ according to different type of involvement and experience of each journalist. The significance of certain elements are indicated by their frequencies and then followed by sub-elements that explained the details of each perspective. Since a semi-structured interview is employed, it can be concluded that a significant percentage of what had been quoted should be considered and highlighted in this study. Emphases are given to the elements of roles, news gathering, function of newspapers, rules and regulations, responsibility, freedom of press, dilemma and freedom of speech, news sources, biasness and challenges in getting news.

News Reporting Process

1. Journalists

Journalists are individuals who are engaged in a broad range of activities associated with news-making including in Stuart Adam's (1993) view, "reporting, criticism,

editorializing, and the conferral of judgment on the shape of things". The importance of journalism and its role is undeniable, and while it has been the target of ongoing discourse, both in support and in critique of its performance, no existing conversation about it has suggested its irrelevance to the society. Rather, contemporary conditions have insisted on journalism's centrality and the crucial role it plays in helping people make sense of their daily lives and of the ways in which they connect to the world.

2. Journalists and their sources

The study about journalists and their news sources draws its roots from questions about partiality, power and influence. The key question here is whether the journalists or their sources who apply greater influence in shaping the news. Some would ask how the journalists' use of news sources leads towards a particular news agenda that either favor or excludes some issues over the others. Others question whether the influence of the source provides the ability to cut the time and effort required for reporting.

In essence, the relationship between reporters and their sources has long been depicted as a battle for power over public opinion and public consent (Berkowitz, 2009). Journalists end up in a role of protecting society from corruption, while officials in government and businesses take on the task of protecting their own interest at all costs. But these kinds of power represent something ephemeral, that is, the ability to shape the outcome of specific issues and policies. Once the outcome is resolved, the power battle begins anew.

The shape of the reporter-source relationship grows from core tenets of journalism professional ideology (Deuze, 2005). The ideology of profession represents a paradigm, a method for accomplishing a task in a prescribed way. If journalists adhere to this paradigm, they follow a science-like model, where reporters gather authoritative data and then present it without explicitly taking a side in the discourse. Experts and officials - as sources - become the providers of this data, so that reporters become beholden to them for the raw materials of news (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). On their own, reporters are not allowed to provide an opinion - even when reporting on an event - so that interpretation is limited to such things as crowd-size estimates, description of settings, depiction of how people appeared, and what those people said.

This paradigm would seem to work effectively, but that ignores the fact that news sources usually have a vested interest in journalists' reports, linking news content to public opinion, and ultimately, their own success (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). On the other hand, for authority figures, keeping public opinion in their favour enhances the ability to remain in that position of authority.

In fact, both reporters and sources have a lot at stake. Reporters put their credibility and believability on the line with each news item they write. Likewise, sources regularly risk their career success. Putting both parts of this equation together suggests that

interaction between reporters and their sources is a delicately negotiated relationship, with each party hoping to achieve their goals and maintain their organisational and societal status.

In practical terms, reporters handle their organisational limitations by routinely managing their tasks (Berkowitz, 2009). Although they need to contact multiple sources for writing stories, their working process needs boundaries. Sources are not always available, so that scheduling interviews becomes a task that demands time to accomplish and cuts into total working time until deadline.

Media and Conflict

A conflict can be due to highly different needs of two or more parties (Lewicki et al. 2003; Taylor, 1999) or they can be misunderstandings that occur between various types of relationships of organisations, individuals and governments (Pruitt & Carnavale, 1993). Conflict arises when the differences cannot be satisfactorily dealt with (Taylor, 1999). Solutions may vary such as joint decision making, separate action or third party decision making (Pruitt & Carnavale, 1993). Each approach encompasses different actions so the disputants are able to choose the one that is appropriate to solve respective conflicts which arise.

The media, which do the reporting, are found to be biased by giving spaces to certain conflicts but not the others (Deacon, 2003). Referring to Semetko (2000), most of the common frames that the media drew from the United States were conflicts. He claimed that conflicts have become an interesting issue to be highlighted in media such as television and newspapers. Tehranian (1996), thus, refers this situation to pluralism where the media become a center of public discourse on democracy and coverage of conflict. Given the rise of some challenges such as media ownership, news sources, press laws, news format and new media technologies, resolution-oriented journalism turns to be tough (Neslihan & Georgios, 2000).

Since conflict has become a central issue for news (Tumber, 2002), it was said that the media plays an important role in media conflict resolution which ranged from other approaches for international communication organisations and the news media. As found by Cottle (2003), the interest group needs a space in the media to gain public recognition that will enable them to solve their disputes with the government and other institutions.

As far as the literature is concerned, the media is found to be significantly powerful in handling conflict (Putnam, 2002; Tiffen, 2000). According to a study by Putnam (2002), the media were merely a third party that served as a watchdog to relay feedback and local problems to the public. Despite the fact that the media may filter the news, it was capable of forming an agreement and controlling the pressure of the community.

Conflict News Reporting - Malaysian Experience

The traditional method of conflictual news coverage is to seek a reflection of disagreement, usually between two parties (Richards & King, 2000). Berkowitz & Beach (1993, cited in Richards & King) also suggested that when an issue is controversial, journalists are especially aware of the need for objectivity, therefore they "try to provide information from each side of an issue". This was also shared by Folger, Poole & Stutman (1999, cited in Richards & King), who suggest that communication problems are sometimes the cause of conflicts and it is possible that the journalists' exercise of storytelling may worsen the disagreement.

In the Malaysian experience, religious and ethnic issues are among the sensitive issues that continued to be widely discussed. Where religion stories are routinely judged and framed by the media, albeit inadvertently, misrepresentation and disrespectful of the essence of what adherents of different faiths believe in, religion stories do provide the fuel to prolonged conflicts (Yong Lai Fong & Md. Sidin, 2010).

As a change agent of the society, the media can help to educate people on the importance of integration in multicultural groups. Therefore, the structure of the local newspaper is strongly influenced by the multi-lingual nature of the nation's population and therefore should portray a pluralistic nature. Muthalib and Wong (2002, cited in Yong Lai Fong & Md. Sidin) asserted that readers of the newspapers learn about issues of significance to their community, and how much importance to attach to the issues, based on the amount of coverage given to them. This scenario does indicate the imperative role of the media in shaping political and socio-economic reality of the public since editors and journalists can be considered as the source of information on a daily basis. The Malaysian media, in general, have acted with commendable decorum and have not exploited racial conflicts (Halimahton, Ngu Teck Hua & V.Raman, 2006). The former Information Minister, Zainuddin Maidin, said that the Malaysian media have, by agreement, decided to stay away from contentious issues of racial and religious sensitivities in order not to create unnecessary tensions and even hatred among the people. "The media played an important role in toning down issues that could incite certain sections of a community...it is better to have peace with compromise rather than freedom without peace" (The Star, 31 May 2006: 15).

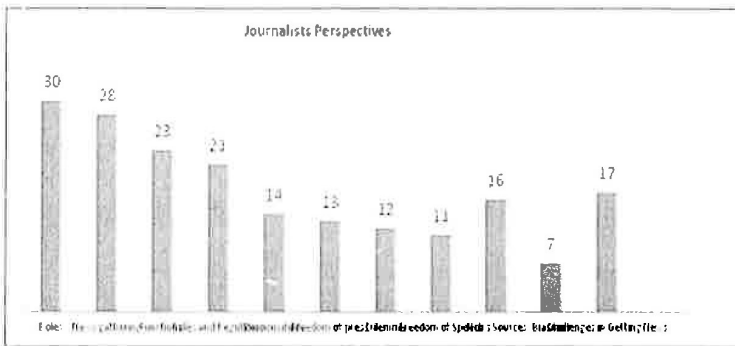
Data analysis and findings

Malaysia practices parliamentary democracy with a constitutional monarchy system. Therefore, it merits the need to view the journalists' perspectives on the freedom of speech by the media in the country. The interviews with the seven (7) journalists from the mainstream media in Malaysia (Utusan Malaysia, Berita Harian, New Straits Times and The Star) have given insights into the factors and perspectives that journalists perceive as important in their news reporting responsibilities. They are indicated by the

frequencies and concurrences of certain words and phrases used by the respondents. This study attempts to understand the journalists' views on conflict news reporting. It discusses and focuses specifically on the primary perspectives that describe how the journalists view their roles and functions in reporting conflict news in Malaysia.

This paper begins with the identification of the 11 elements that explicate the Journalists' perspectives (please refer to Graph 1). These perspectives refer to the elements that were mostly quoted by the journalists in news reporting and are deemed to be significant. According to the figures shown in Graph 1, it is noteworthy that the journalists give their greatest emphasis on their roles which is 30. The next perspective presents the element of news gathering (28), functions of journalists (23), rules and regulations (21) and challenges in getting news (17). These are amongst the highest frequencies while the other five are moderately frequent (news sources, 16; responsibility, 14; freedom of press, 13; dilemma, 12; and freedom of speech, 11) and one element indicates the lowest score of seven (biasness). The findings suggest that the journalists will do their best to avoid biasness in reporting conflict in the news. It also highlights a considerably high awareness and emphasis towards the trustworthiness and credibility in their news to the readers.

Graph 1: Frequencies of Journalist Perspectives Elements



Roles of Journalists

As shown in Table 2 (please refer to Appendix 1), a major concern of the journalists is mostly in reference to the roles of the journalists. The factors that contribute to the element of roles were mentioned 30 times. Helping marginal groups, for instance, were mentioned four times out of the 30, making it one of the highest factors mentioned by the respondents. This shows that besides disseminating information as their main role and responsibility, the press also considers the interests of certain parties (marginal groups).

According to Xiaoge (2005), Malaysia advocates the social responsibility model of the press where a socially responsible press works for the economy but at the same time is in agreement to the promotion of the society's interests. Xiaoge said, as cited in Mahathir (1989)

"By and large, the role of the press in ensuring good democratic practices, and hence sustaining democracy itself, is not only right but also truly indispensable. It is indeed a means of communication between a democratic government and the people. Through it, not only will the people be kept informed of all that the government and its leaders are doing, but the leaders too will learn of the attitudes, needs and problems of the people. A responsible democratic government must accordingly regard a free press as an asset which facilitates good government."

Two important elements - obtaining evidences and seeking attention - were emphasised by the journalists. Out of 30, both factors were mentioned three times which make them the second highest factor highlighted in the interviews. According to J2 *"...if it involves issues that affect our societies, newspapers should highlight the problems to seek attention"*. A conclusion can be drawn here that the journalists have to execute their social responsibility by highlighting issues that will attract attention especially by the authorities to consider and look for immediate solutions.

It is also the role of the journalists to avoid favouritism, recognise the importance of news, be sensitive to censorship and be versatile in any kind of reporting. It is clear that censorship has helped the editorial processes which are mainly selective and sensitive towards certain issues in Malaysia. As J4 said, *"newspapers do not control much since we have censorship. We do not want to affect our news writing."*

Among other factors that are moderately referred to as part of a journalist's role, include reporting substantiated claims, understanding the background of situations, identifying interesting news, creating awareness, educating societies, being precise, mediating among conflicting groups and being responsible. These factors reinforced the sentiment that the role element is very crucial from the journalists' perspective which later shaped the news reporting. Thus, it can be concluded that the journalists' role determines what need to be disseminated in conflict news reporting.

News Gathering

Another important journalist perspective is news gathering which was mentioned six times by the respondents. News gathering is seen as a tough job that every journalist has to manage efficiently and effectively.

Ten factors were identified that contribute to this important task of a journalist: public reporting, reliable and verified sources and editorial, liability concerns and Seditious Act, investigation, creating multiple news, news value, inaccessibility to full information, clearances or permission and evidence.

The factors mentioned above show that journalists face several challenges every time they gather news. For example, J7 said: *"...our emphasis will always be public interest...the interest of the broader group of people."* The purpose of news writing is to attract the public's interest. On the other hand, journalists also face the dilemma of balancing the news that would serve both the interest of the government and the public. J4 gave an example of the Broga conflict³. *"If you ask the Broga people, they will say that we're bias towards the Government because we're not acting in their favour."*

Function of newspapers

The third element according to the journalists' perspectives is the function of the newspapers that was mentioned six times during the interview sessions. Among the functions mentioned, the journalists generally perceive themselves to be in the role of informing (mentioned nine times), followed by mediating and educating the readers (three times each). A watchdog role, helping

towards nation building and explaining issues to the public were mentioned two times each. Journalists also see their function as preventing conflicts and to earn profit for the organization.

As a source of information, the press continues to fulfill the needs of the audience. J4 said that; *"when we talk about the flow of information, it worked both ways, from the authorities to the society and vice versa."* However, certain information cannot be communicated to the public in the course of performing their functions so as to maintain peace and harmony in the society.

According to J4; *"the newspaper does not only give the government's side, but we also cover the society's concerns."* When reporting issues between two parties which are in conflict, the press will play their role which is to educate and provide facts on the issue for better understanding.

Rules and Regulations

Rules and regulations is another element perceived by journalists to be important. Out of 21 times, the most frequently mentioned factor is sensitivity. Sensitivity refers to the act of selecting news that is commonly controversial to the society such as politics, religions, language of Bahasa and the power of the Sultan. Accuracy and truthful information, licenses, restrictions and racial issues were all mentioned three times.

This is an incinerator project proposed by the Selangor State Executive Council (SSEC) to be

Especially when it comes to conflict reporting, issues of accurate information is always being questioned. Accuracy of information could sometimes be manipulated by certain parties and thus need to be carefully phrased in the news reporting. Meanwhile, cultural sensitivity, defamation and slander, leniency (Government) and authority were only mentioned once under this element.

Even though the existence of rules and regulations for the press has been criticised by many vested parties and the public, restrictions were made to control certain type of contents especially when it comes to reporting the truth. According to J6, rules and regulations are also enforced to protect an individual or organisation's name from being misused in the news, particularly in conflict news reporting. It usually involves a number of conflicting parties which attempt to win the readers by any means in which, without the control, could turn chaotic.

J5, however, said that publishing is still a very unique business in Malaysia. J1 asserted that there is a need to put in place a set of limits and rules and regulations especially when it comes to the unique demography of the Malaysian citizens in terms of the ethnic groups such as Malays, Indians, Chinese and indigenous groups. In other words, the journalists are directly and indirectly responsible to maintain national peace.

Responsibility

Another perspective deemed important by the journalists is responsibility which has seven factors including completing the job (mentioned four times), being answerable (three mentions), implications and 'play down' the issues with two each and one mention each for support for the government, the people and verification of information.

Individually, a journalist has the option to choose what to report. However, according to J2: *"we have the responsibility to report the best way ... to consider the impacts of the stories on other people or parties."* J3 said that despite their best effort to provide a balanced story, issues still crop up, thus it is their responsibility to defuse or take control of the issues.

A journalist is the owner of the stories he or she carries. In a normal situation, journalists have the responsibility to finish their task from beginning to the end when the news is printed in their respective publications (J1).

Freedom of Press

Freedom of press, mentioned by six respondents, is another significant element in the journalists' perspectives. Factors relating to freedom of the press include limitations, not

located at Broga, Semenyih which is then relocated to Bukit Tagar, Selangor in year 2008. The project was the country's first "state-of-the-art" waste treatment plant, using gasification and ash-melting technology. This would cost the government Ringgit Malaysia 1.5 billion (about US\$395 million) and a further Ringgit Malaysia 200 million (about US\$53 million) to cover the annual op-erating cost. The waste treatment plant is the Selangor State Executive Council's answer to solving the waste crisis in the Klang Valley

telling lies, political and religious issues, proper expression, news and public debates. There are many definitions for freedom. Some might interpret it as 'total freedom' but some would define it as 'freedom with certain limits'. According to J6; "freedom is not as free as in some other places; every country has a different level of limitation." This shows that freedom is crucial especially in the context of countries with diversity in cultures and religions. If there is no limitation on freedom, there is a higher possibility of reporting untrue stories or lies (J4).

In Malaysia, with its multi-ethnic society, the freedom of the press should come with limitations and strict regulations. Admitting that newspapers do make mistakes, J3 said that in most cases, they are unintentional. He continued; "We don't want to be fanning racism in this country, we don't want to be fanning hatred between one race towards another." The press does understand the consequences of having total freedom in news reporting and that this may lead to conflict between different races, religions and even individuals.

Dilemma

The seventh element of the journalists' perspectives is dilemma which was mentioned by five respondents. Concerns relating to dilemma include protecting news sources, commercial interest and conflict of interest, fair and balance and moral questions.

Facing a dilemma has always been part and parcel of a working journalist where decisions she or he has to make before publishing a story. For instance, media organisations face a dilemma when dealing with advertisers (J2). As J6 said; "... to get advertisers for your newspaper or in television, you probably won't say anything bad about them at all." A dilemma also prevails when it comes to writing a story that has reference to a public figure. Despite the fact that no actual name is mentioned in the story, often times the public makes their conclusion as to who the person referred to in the news is.

Dilemma is definitely a significant element when it comes to issues that need responses or verification from other parties. J3 said, "*When people go up against the government, then the authorities will take a slower time to respond. Not all is immediate, so in the process, the issue will die down for a while until the government responds. And then when the government decides to respond, normally there will be other opinions from the society, that's how the conflict goes on and on until it comes to a finality.*" As a result, the press is to be blamed due to its old story. Therefore, it depends on the journalists themselves when facing a dilemma in order to make the right decision.

Freedom of Speech

Freedom of speech is a journalist perspective mentioned by five respondents, with important elements which include sensitivity and respect for others, limitations, opinion or letters to editor, putting news into perspectives and educational differences.

All the respondents agreed that there is freedom of speech in Malaysia. J7, however, believes that; *"this freedom, however, I've found that we're freer to express ideas and opinions than we were when I started working 22 years ago."* He said that the problem exists when there are distinctions among people who are prepared for changes in freedom of speech. He believes that the society is still split into two types, the rural and urban societies and these groups differ in their acceptance of freedom of speech.

The public has also been afforded freedom of speech as they are able to view their opinions through the media. J4 said: "in the opinion pages or our letters to the editor pages, we're willing to push the boundary. We're willing to push the limit, under the justification that there is freedom of speech." However, all respondents agreed that even with total freedom, the society should have respect for others and be sensitive to the differences that exist among them.

News sources

News sources were rated as one of the most significant elements by the respondents. This clearly indicates that sources are considered to be primarily important to the media in the journalist perspectives. Elements related to sources include protection of sources, personal rapport with sources, reliability and other methods to obtain more information and newsworthiness.

In order to produce good news, journalists need many sources. J6 said; "at times you may also not be able to use the information given by sources or sometimes, the information may be important to the stories, but you need to make sacrifices and not use the information." J6 continued that to a certain extent, it depends on the intensity of certain conflicts whether or not it is appropriate to be reported in the news. As for the trustworthiness of the sources, it is important for the media to get sources with authority or in positions of authority.

Bias

This concern was mentioned eight times by reporters. Bias is another important element journalists have to consider when reporting a story. Having bias in the reporting may lead the readers to make assumptions and conclusions which are based on the reports they read. Biasness normally occurs due to the diverse interests. J2 said that; "some people said that certain issues were raised to fulfill the interests of certain parties. But when it comes to completing the assignments, we are free... we only report on what had really happened."

Stories that feature public debates have a higher tendency to trigger bias toward certain issues especially when they relate to groups in society. The reporting could exert influence and help shape society's opinions and perceptions on certain issues. J6 said that; "I think in the case of Broga, it was obvious all the newspapers felt sympathetic towards the people. They didn't feel sympathetic towards the Government at all."

Several journalists strongly feel that at times, bias cannot be avoided. J7 said that bias is inevitable; there is a greater demand now to know for which parties the media actually stand in their reports. J7 continued by saying, *"All newspapers are biased, regardless of where it operates. Whether it's a Western newspaper or Malaysian newspaper, being biased is a fact. We're not any different from any other newspaper in the world. We're also now beginning to realise people want to know where you stand and for you to admit to your biases."*

Challenges in Getting News

The final element in the journalist perspective is challenges in getting news. Challenges mainly refer to the act of getting facts or data which makes it the leading factor for this element (five times). The selection of a qualified and experienced reporter was mentioned three times as well as legal points. This element also includes the process of planning and making follow up news towards the conflict which was only mentioned once.

There is a distinct lack of study or research on many issues in Malaysia which poses a challenge to the journalist community. Journalists find it very difficult to get relevant data to support their report. According to J5; "Malaysia is not a country that keeps data, documents, (...) they don't collect anything, and we don't study anything, so that is really the biggest problem." J1 said that journalists are duty bound to make an extra effort to get facts or data for their reports. This is to ensure that they get the correct information as it is their job to report the truth substantiated by facts and data.

Newspapers find it difficult to recruit journalists capable of producing reliable news. It is quite the norm where an assignment is simply given to any journalist and not one who is specialised so that a good story can be produced. A good story depends on the effort of the journalists to get the news; there were cases where some journalists would just abandon their assignments as they could not get the information they need to support their stories. J1 also added that journalists need to take heed of existing rules and regulations in the course of getting and reporting the news. As news reporting can sometimes be perceived as biased, the possibility of being sued is always there.

Conclusion and recommendations

In summary, this paper studies the elements which journalists feel are important perspectives to be taken into account in conflict news reporting in Malaysia. Journalists have to be precise about what needs to be reported. Apart from playing their main role as an informer, journalists should also stay committed to helping marginal groups in the country. They believe that the perspectives given by the journalists in their news reporting may lead to certain interpretations by both the government and readers. At the same time, they also play a crucial role in balancing the voice of both the government and the people whose needs and problems continue to create controversies.

The journalists interviewed said news gathering is one of the most challenging responsibility of a journalist. They need to ensure that the news is reliable, has been verified and trustworthy. Many of the journalists share similar perspectives about their responsibilities as reporters, that are to inform, mediate, educate, monitor, help towards nation building, explain, and prevent conflicts as well as to contribute to the profit earning capacity of the media. Other important perspectives include working within the parameter of rules and regulations, being responsible, practicing freedom of press, facing dilemmas, particularly about freedom of speech, maintaining rapport with news sources, bias and facing challenges in getting news.

Reporting news on conflicts is inevitable. The media may be perceived as being biased by giving centrality to certain conflicts but not others, and also by defending or opposing the status quo. Based on the findings, it is recommended that the study on the journalist perspectives be further expanded to give the elements a more in-depth analysis. This study has indicated significant views by journalists on conflict news reporting in Malaysia. It also provides insights into the primary concerns experienced by the journalists in news reporting.

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Appendix

Table 2: Significant Elements and Factors of Journalist Perspectives in Conflict News Reporting

No.	Items	Sources	Frequencies
1	Roles	7	30
	a. Avoid favoritisms		1
	b. Helping marginal groups		4
	c. Reporting substantiated claims		2
	d. Understanding the background of situations		1
	e. Recognizing the importance of news		2
	f. Identifying interesting news		3
	g. Obtaining evidences		3
	h. Seeking attentions		2
	i. Creating awareness		1
	j. Being sensitive to censorship		2
	k. Educating societies		1
	l. Versatility in any kind of reporting		2
	m. Being precise		2
	n. Mediating among conflicting groups		
	o. Being responsible		2
2	News gathering	6	28
	a. Public reporting		5
	b. Reliable and verified sources		4
	c. Editorial		4
	d. Mindful of liability and seditions act		3
	e. Investigation		3
	f. Creating multiple news		3
	g. News value		2
	h. Inaccessibility to full info		2
	i. Clearances or permissions		1
	j. Evidences		1
3	Function of newspapers	6	23
	a. To inform		9
	b. To mediate		3
	c. To educate		3
	d. Watchdog		2
	e. Nation building		2
	f. To explain		2
	g. To prevent problems		1
	h. To earn profit		1

4	Rules and regulations a. Accuracy and truth information b. Sensitivity c. Cultural sensitivity d. Licenses e. Restrictions f. Defamation and slander g. Leniency (Government) h. Racial issues i. Authority	6	21 3 5 1 3 3 1 1 3 1
5	Responsibility a. Completing the job b. Answerable c. Implications d. 'Play down' the issues e. Support for the government f. Support for the people g. Verification	6	14 4 3 2 2 1 1 1
6	Freedom of Press h. Must not tell lies i. Limitations j. Religious issues a. Proper expression b. Political issue c. News d. Public debates e. Inconclusive freedom f. Contextual	6	13 2 4 1 1 1 1 1 1 1
7	Dilemma a. Protecting news sources b. Commercial interest c. Conflict of interest d. Government decision e. Fair and balances f. Moral question	5	12 3 3 3 1 1 1
8	Dilemma a. Protecting news sources b. Commercial interest c. Conflict of interest	5	11 2 1 6

	d. Government decision		1
	e. Fair and balances		1
	f. Moral question		1
9	News sources	4	16
	a. Protection		5
	b. Personal rapport		3
	c. Reliability		3
	d. Newsworthiness		1
	e. Authority		1
	f. Other methods to obtain more information		3
10	Biasness	2	7
	a. Public debates		3
	b. Truth		3
	c. Cannot be avoided		1
11	Challenges in Getting News	2	5
	a. Facts or data		1
	b. Planning		3
	c. Appointment of an adequate reporter		1
	d. Follow up news		3
	e. Legal points		