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From KL to Beijing: MH370, the Media and the Meaning of a Disaster

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Abstract

News texts are the product of journalistic practices and organizational routines, buttressed by socio-cultural norms of a particular society. The tragedy of flight MH370 is a way to understand how Malaysian media construct a crisis that last happened in 1977. To understand how Malaysian newspapers understood the event, a critical discourse analysis approach is applied to two newspapers. News organizations in Malaysia – as baffled by the event as the officials and starved of information – construct their own meaning of the air disaster. This study concludes that newspapers construction of the tragedy reveal the socio-cultural make-up of news production practices.

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1. Introduction

On Saturday, March 8th, around 12:41am, Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 (Boeing 777-200ER) departed from Kuala Lumpur International Airport en route to Beijing. It was expected to arrive in Beijing at 6:30 am. The plane carried 239 people; 227 passengers and 12 crew members and was piloted by Capt. Zaharie Ahmad Shah, and first officer Fariq Ab. Hamid. Around 1:30 am, Malaysian air traffic controllers lost contact with the plane over the sea between Malaysia and Vietnam. It was later confirmed that this is when the aircraft's transponder was either turned off or stopped working. At the time the aircraft transponder stopped working, the plane still has about 7½ hours of

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fuel (Colwell, 2014). At around 2:40 am, when civilian and military radar lost all contact with the aircraft, the aircraft was flying in the opposite direction from its scheduled destination and on the opposite side of the Malay Peninsula from its scheduled route (Colwell, 2014). That is pretty much all that was known of Flight MH370 fate until now. Since its disappearance, more than 24 countries have joined in the search for the plane (Wiener-Bronner, 2014). On April 30th, CNN reports that after seven weeks of intense search and rescue missions, the effort has been scaled down (Marquez, Molko & Yan, 2014).

2. Background of the study

Clarke (as cited in Perrow, 2007, p. 3) posits that “disasters expose our social structure and culture more sharply than other important events” because they reveal our shared vulnerabilities and the failure of organizations, regulations, and the political system (Perrow, 2007). Disasters that incur considerable number of human lives such as MH370 can be classified as a tragedy. Doka (2003) considers the news media’s role as central to the definition of an event as a public tragedy, because “[t]hey report what happened, describe its significance and suggest social action”.

The news reports of the plane mysterious end are a socially constructed meaning of crisis/disaster/tragedy. The amount of coverage testifies to the importance of the event (Doka, 2003). In his discussion of the sociological features of disasters, Quarantelli (1989) conceptualizes that disasters are creations rather than realities, that is, when we describe an event as a disaster, the texts created are an act of labelling and news stories on disasters can also be seen as an act of labelling. This view is supported by Soucy (2008) who postulates that the linguistic nature of the media help shape the reality of a news event. We, as language beings, use language to make sense of an event and when we make certain linguistic choices, we are constructing a specific version or reality of an event.

It is understood that any kind of crisis is succeeded by the need for information (Brashers et al. as cited in Spence, Lachlan & Griffin, 2007). The media in this scenario is placed as the mediating source of information (Morgner, 2011). Scholars on the use of media during times of crisis (Spence et al., 2007) see the social role of the media as making sense of a crisis by reporting on the actions of others (such as government officials or the use of knowledgeable sources), thus guiding the responses of the larger public in dealing with the crisis. Since critical discourse analysis pay attention not only to the minutiae of micro linguistic elements, but also to the larger textual and discourse elements, the particulars of media texts coverage on MH370 as a sociocultural text can be unpacked to understand how media makes sense of a crisis/disaster/tragedy event.

3. Critical discourse analysis

Language is considered the most important element of a text. It is the site where meanings are exchanged. But the study of discourse acknowledges that texts have to embody a culturally coherent and meaningful system of ideas about the world. Text is then, a primarily semantic concept. Texts operate within a field of meaning potentials negotiated by the producers and the receivers within a particular moment in time. When the environment and the situation change, so will a text’s meaning(s). Thus, textual meaning hinges on the choices made by the producer and the consumer of texts. By attending to the practices of production and consumption, critical discourse analysts pay due attention to the “higher orders of meaning” (Halliday, 2002, p. 48).

In critical discourse analysis, language is the object of study, but the study does not stop at the level of syntax. The study of discourse is also the analysis of the generic and textual structures. Generic is an adjective of the noun genre. Genre is a relevant term in CDA and discourse studies. Genre is understood as the mode of texts, the generic structure that give text its particular character (Halliday, 2002). The different internal structure in their composition enables texts to be grouped into types. By recognizing the differences between these “text types”, we make it easier to communicate when we choose the ‘correct’ way to produce texts. Genre also influences text reception; what is referred to as the orders of discourse (Fairclough, 1995a). Genre creates a semantic configuration that is located at the intersection of semiotic structures and semantic system; “a grouping of favoured and foregrounded options from the total meaning potential” (Halliday, 2002, p. 58). To study texts, then, is to understand that it is a product of communicative activities where the text production and consumption practices are to be considered as part of the meaning-making processes.

News media as a genre as a term is a problematic one (see discussions in Berkowitz, 1997; Tuchman, 1978; 1997; van Dijk, 1985; Zelizer, 2009). What is vital to consider when discussing media as a specific genre, are issues of production and reception. The media by its very nature contains a myriad of different genres. Newspapers publish news gained at press conferences, political speeches and religious sermons. There are articles on medical issues, business and commerce topics, and reports on scientific findings. But a political speech given at a political event differs when it appears in a newspaper – aside from its oral vs. written forms – simply because it is more mediated. The production processes makes it different; the page that the speech appears in, the images and other visual cues that the newspaper might select to accompany the speech, the chosen headline, and also the possible commentary that could be written to accompany the speech and a host of other news production practices will contribute to its meanings. All the edits will potentially imbue the speech with the kinds of ideological trappings that have little to do with the politician's intention with the speech.

Discourse study is interested in how news texts function, that is, make sense to the public. It attempts to unravel not just the individual textual structure – linguistic, stylistic and rhetoric, genre – but also the more abstract mental structure and/or the cognitive processes of textual production and understanding (van Dijk, 1997). Research project on media discourse then would be to look at the media report on events to understand how journalistic and organizational practices and other influences such as national and political interest and elite opinions determine how events are understood. Researchers have to take into account the centrality of the media in the (re)production of meaning and their clear presence at the core of collective reflexivity and coordinated action (Jensen, 2002).

The media is at once financial interests, socio-cultural resources and creative forms; features that strongly influenced their production of meaning (Carey as cited in Jensen, 2002, p. 9). Jensen (2002) maintains that it is this very complexity that demands a range of theories and disciplines to account for the myriad of explanatory factors that converge on the media. As a field of study, CDA focuses on the dynamism of meaning and of language in context; on language as the property of the society or community that uses it. It stresses that texts are ideological because they are the result of choice that signifies a particular understanding of the society it is operating under. Thus, the primary aim is the explication of language use and the unravelling of ideological (re)production in texts.

CDA does not have a single theoretical framework; instead it offers a range of approaches that placed textual analysis at the forefront of the analysis, from Fairclough (1995a and 1995b), to van Dijk (2006) and to Wodak (2001). The approaches have more similarities than differences, especially the objective of the analysis. They agree that discourse analysis should relate language to the wider discursive and social practices. The analytical activity suggested by these approaches is the focus on the text by doing microanalysis of linguistic properties such as vocabulary, including but not limited to value-laden lexical items, metaphors and its discursive roles; grammar and textual properties such as local coherence, the relationships between clauses and sentences, the sequencing of clauses and propositions, and global text structure in terms of intertextuality, the use of topics and presuppositions and issues of representation.

4. Method and data collection

Research on newspaper texts shows widely varied method of data selection as far as editions are concerned. Depending on the research objectives, researchers can choose not to make any difference between editions or they can also choose to concentrate on weekday editions or weekend editions, that is, newspapers that are published on Saturdays and Sundays. Sunday editions can be considered a different edition than the daily newspapers (Moreira, 2007). They even carry slightly different names; such as *Sunday Star* as opposed to *The Star*, or *Mingguan Malaysia* as opposed to *Utusan Malaysia*. Sunday editions are also understood to being run separately – different staff and editorial boards – from the daily editions that could possibly contribute to their success (Godoy-Pressland, 2014). Sunday editions of a newspaper have more content – a mix of event and issue oriented content, or popular and serious content – and are relatively thicker than daily editions because of the increase of more “magazine-style ‘soft news’” (Clark, 2013, 278). News stories in Sunday newspapers can be potentially useful in understanding how a particular news events spill over into other columns of the newspaper. Sundays are when newspapers can be read in a more leisurely manner since readers are in a much more receptive mood (Bronner, Bronner & Faase, 2007).

In readership and newspaper publication terms, Sunday is “a time for newspapers to interpret facts” (Godoy-Pressland, 2014, 152) and for readers to make sense of the news (Preston, 2008). To offset the higher-than-usual advertising content, the newspaper would have to match that with a relative number of quality news content to appease its regular readers. Furthermore, Sunday editions have a higher readership figures and it is highly unlikely that these readers bought the newspaper just to read the advertisement. Consider also that for Malaysian media, the March 16th edition was published during the height of MH370 disappearance. It is with these considerations that the Sunday editions of *Sunday Star* (or *Star*) and *Mingguan Malaysia* (or *Mingguan*), published on 16 March, 2014 are chosen as the data.

5. Findings and analysis

On the chosen date, *Sunday Star* published a total amount of 19 pages of news with 30 news articles (=headlines/columns). MH370 coverage in *Star* is found in national news, world news and op-ed columns; with several news articles from international news agencies. The coverage is grouped under “Mystery of MH370: Day 9”. All of the articles in *Sunday Star* focuses on MH370 with the exception of two columns that only touch on MH370 just in the first few paragraphs. The broadsheet *Mingguan Malaysia* has 26 pages with 47 news articles. Most of the coverage are put under the theme; *Misteri Kehilangan MH370, Hari Ke-8* (The mysterious disappearance of MH370, Day 8). The massive coverage also includes articles in the two tabloid-sized supplements: *Pancaindera*, which focuses on celebrity and lifestyle news; and *Pancawarna*, that focuses on health and leisure news. The stark difference in *Star* and *Mingguan*’s is how the coverage in *Mingguan* spills over into its celebrity and health and leisure supplementary editions. The different timelines in the newspapers are also evident of how the newspapers construct the event. For *Star*, the event started from Saturday (8th March) while *Mingguan*, counts the days from when it started to cover of the event, which is Sunday (9th March).

Out of the 30 news article in *Star*, half (15) of the news stories are soft news, that is, editorials and stories that are considered as analysis of the previous week’s events including the infographics, that is, articles that aim to clarify the information through the use of graphics with short, accompanying texts. Generically and structurally speaking, these news stories do not follow the hard news format that started with the place where the event – being reported on – took place. For example, on page 5, there are four news stories: “Passengers’ kin relieved after PM’s announcement”; “Engineering specialist lodges report against Raja Bomoh” (lit: King Witch Doctor/Medicine Man/Shaman); “Families refuse M’sian media”; and “House gripped by grief over missing flight MH370”. The last news story is under a column “At the Dewan Rakyat Last Week”. While the first three news stories opened with the location of the news event: Ipoh, George Town and Beijing, but the news story about the ‘House’ (or Dewan Rakyat, lit: House of Representative) is a story on how last week, “...lawmakers in the Dewan Rakyat were gripped by grief and mixed emotions over the mystery of the Malaysia Airlines flight MH370.”

In *Mingguan*, 25 out of the 47 articles are feature articles or soft new type, and 11 of those are from the supplementary editions (three in *Pancaindera* and eight in *Pancawarna*). *Mingguan*’s page 1 also a question: *MH370 DIRAMPAS?* (lit. MH370 hijacked?) in capital letters. This is apparently a practice for the newspaper since all the news headlines on the Page 1 are in capital letters. *Mingguan* includes a lot of information on page 1 with three cross-heads, one table of information and a quote from Malaysian Prime Minister’s in the press conference. The inclusion of the Prime Minister’s direct quotation including an image of him is different from the image used by *Star*. The Prime Minister’s quote include words directed to the families and friends of those on board MH370 and the meaning is strengthen when *Mingguan* also includes an image of three (Chinese) family members underneath the larger image of Najib. The cross-heads on page 1 touch on three things: The new clue and the hope that it represents in finding the plane and its passengers; the change of the location of the search and rescue mission; and the inability to confirm on whether the flight is hijacked and the new focus on investigating the crew and passengers. The clues listed in the “*PETUNJUK BAHARU*” (lit. New clue) table correspond to the three cross-heads above it. The focus on the Prime Minister’s role in MH370 narrative in *Mingguan*’s coverage continues on page 2 with news story headlined with “*MH370 disahkan melencong laluan*” (MH370 confirmed deviated from path) with the cross-head “*Operasi di Laut China Selatan dihentikan – Perdana Menteri*” (lit. Operation at South China Sea ceased – Prime Minister). The text was a reproduction of the whole text read by the Prime Minister at the press conference on 15th March. The news story which occupies a whole page, included almost a half-page of the image taken of the press

conference. Another image that accompanies the text is a clipping of a news report published on 12th March with part of the headline: “*Sabotaj, rampasan?*” (lit. Sabotage, hijack?) clearly visible over a picture of the Malaysian Chief of Police. This practice of intertextuality is in line with the newspaper’s identification with the center of power in Malaysia and an exercise of legitimation of its meaning-making practices.

The tone of the reporting in *Star* is set with the headline asking “Whose hand was at the control?” It is accompanied with an image of a cockpit with the view of the sky and two individuals seen only with their hands resting on their thighs. The cross-head lay out the theme of the reporting:

It’s confirmed – someone deliberately turned off the communications systems of Malaysia Airlines MH370 before the plane veered off course. Amid rife speculation of a hijack, suspicion is falling on the crew and passengers with technical expertise.

While both newspapers’ headlines are questions and *Mingguan* allows the Prime Minister’s to communicate with its readers, *Star* tells its readers that the news stories on the event are produced by 20 journalists and three photographers (“PM: It was a deliberate act”). The inside pages contain news stories and feature articles on the confirmed information, the investigations into the lives of the pilot and lax security at Malaysia airport (“Authorities still baffled as to what could have happened”, “It’s so easy to cut links to an airplane”, “MH370 possible flight path”, “PAC wants authorities to review security procedures at KLIA”, “Crew and passengers under scrutiny”, “Schoolmates: Capt. Zaharie values his passengers’ safety”, “Talk of sabotage and hijack”).

Both newspapers also cover the victims/passengers and crew members on the flight, but *Mingguan*’s list of 20 names (with images) is not accompanied with any text except their names. This is in comparison to the nine individuals – including two couples (with images) – in *Star* which also provides short information culled from their open *Facebook* accounts. *Star* on 16th March also include feature article on Malaysia Airlines cabin crew members and also interviewed former employees and their families. Under the headline “It’s just another job”, the newspaper stresses that “...has its risks but it is worth it” and “working in the air is safe”. *Mingguan* does not have similar news story that focuses on the perspectives of Malaysia Airlines personnel. The coverage given to the investigation of MH370 pilot is also far more in-depth in *Star* as opposed to *Mingguan*. *Star* provides quotes from sources it considers as close to Capt. Zaharie, while *Mingguan* does not quote specific source although the single news story on page 4 contains personal information in the last two paragraphs.

Star also publishes two *Raja Bomoh* story. Two long stories – “Engineering specialist lodges report against Raja Bomoh” and the feature article “Supernatural help” – and two short quotes in the column “The QUOTES” negativizes the issue. This column features succeeding comments from Malaysia’s Youth and Sports Minister and the bomoh in question. The practice of putting official/governmental sources first and non-official second is a normal practice in news production practices. *Mingguan* does not cover the bomoh story in its March 16th edition. This move could be ideologically significant on two grounds. The Malay-language newspaper’s readership is largely Malays and the practice of medicine men and witch doctors remains an integral part of Malay life especially in the rural areas. Secondly, social media websites and an online news portal (I’ll slap you..., 2014) linked the bomoh with several reportedly-prominent politicians in government—which were later denied—and produce memes—crocodile slap—that ridicule the situations. The fact that the bomoh can perform his ritual is a major security breach and the newspaper’s refusal to discuss the issue can be linked to *Mingguan*’s ideology. Meanwhile, *Star*’s feature article “Supernatural help” on page 28, provides an in-depth analysis of the issue and quotes a number of sources. The first source is an academician with Monash University Sunway Campus who is indirectly quoted as saying, “...the various public holidays for the different faiths...and...religious-cultural festivals support the impression that a lot of Malaysians are very familiar and comfortable with the prevalence of religious-cultural beliefs and practices.” (28). The use of university lecturers and psychologist in the article can be seen as an attempt to normalize the issue by making it a Malaysian practice, and the reports of “shamans”, “astrologers” and “mediums”, “Nigerian pastor” on YouTube and “Indonesians counterparts” of Malaysian bomohs is a global practice symptomatic of an extraordinary event such as MH370.

Newspapers exercise of meaning making in news coverage are also apparent when *Star* laments in the headline that “Families refuse M’sian media” and that “Only a select few allowed to cover Najib’s live telecast in China”, (page 5). *Mingguan* is silent on the issue in its local news section but reports that “*Malaysia nafi tidak prihatin terhadap keluarga penumpang di China*” (lit: Malaysia denies uncaring towards family members in China) (p. 3).

Instead, it publishes a news agency piece on page 20 in its international news section with the headline “*Teori rampasan beri kelegaan*” (Hijack theory provides relief) and that “*Keluarga penumpang pesawat MH370 di Beijing harap mangsa ditemui selamat*” (Families of MH370 passengers in Beijing hope victims will be found safe). This positive spin on the issue of Chinese families’ (well-reported) frustrations with could be understood as an ideologically salient move on the part of the government-supporting newspaper. The word ‘relieved’ in *Star* is used when reporting on Malaysian family members of MH370 (“Passengers’ kin relieved after PM’s announcement”). The meaning conveyed in its headline is the same with *Mingguan*’s headline on page 3, “*Pengumuman PM legakan keluarga*” (PM’s announcement relieves families). But closer look at the nine-paragraph news story in *Mingguan* reveals that it quoted only one source; Selamat Omar, the father of the 29 year-old aviation engineer Mohd Khairul Amri . In turn, *Star* provides a number of sources. Its news story starts in the town of Ipoh (eight paragraphs) – with quotes from the family members of Tan Ah Meng (a passenger together with his Taiwanese wife and 19 year-old son), and Goh Sok Lay, the chief stewardess on the flight – and continues (four paragraphs) to the administrative capital Putrajaya with quotes from the media-friendly Selamat Omar. Both newspapers put his image in their news stories. The use of sources in *Star* is consistent with its news production practices and its focus on the Chinese community.

6. Conclusion

On March 16th, *Mingguan Malaysia* and *Sunday Star* cover the events connected to the disappearance of MH370 in their own way. These differences in how some issues related to the event are presented in the news stories. These textual differences are accounted for in the ways of how they show their relationship to the political forces and the socio-cultural forces connected to the meaning-making activities ringed around their news production practices. As shown in the news articles, the Malay-language *Mingguan* steers clear of the bomoh story, but *Star* invests a considerable effort to contextualize the event. Forced to depend on official sources for the latest information, *Mingguan* approach the event as a newspaper closely connected to the government with positive portrayal of government sources and an equally positive spin on the Chinese reactions and Malaysian officials’ responses to the crisis. Meanwhile, *Sunday Star* is seen as being mindful of its close ties to the Chinese community through its focus on the Chinese-Malaysian victims. The coverage in *Mingguan* is also influenced by its broadsheet format as opposed to the tabloid-sized *Star*. *Star* also conveys a sense of independent and in-depth reporting in its coverage compared to *Mingguan*. But *Mingguan* does not confine its meaning-making activity on the national and international news pages, but relates the event to the mundane by allowing the coverage to spill over onto celebrity and leisure news. The English-language *Star* with its more international approach to celebrity news would not naturally cover local entertainment scene to the degree that the Malay-language newspaper habitually does. The findings show that Malaysian news media reproduce the socio-politico-cultural environment of the Malaysian society in its coverage of the MH370 as a news event.

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