



The International Conference on Communication and Media 2014 (i-COME'14), 18-20 October 2014, Langkawi, MALAYSIA

## News on Foreign War versus Local 'War': Perception of Malaysian Audience

Faridah Ibrahim<sup>a\*</sup>, Dil Froz Jan Sayed Halem Shah<sup>a</sup>, Norzita Yunus<sup>a</sup>, Chang Peng Kee<sup>b</sup>,  
Normah Mustaffa<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Faculty of Arts, Communication and Education, Infrastructure University Kuala Lumpur, 43000 Kajang, Selangor D.E, Malaysia

<sup>b</sup>School of Media and Communication Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor D.E, Malaysia

---

### Abstract

For the past decades, we have witnessed many wars through the mass media, both traditional and new media. We tend to view foreign wars with mixed feelings but what happens if the war is happening locally? The purpose of this research is to see what is the perception of Malaysians with regard to 'war' that happened locally. This research surveyed Malaysians respondents in the Klang Valley to study their perceptions regarding the Lahad Datu incident in Sabah. Findings from this research showed that Malaysians were saddened by foreign wars and sympathize with those experiencing 'war' or conflict.

© 2014 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license

(<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>).

Peer-review under responsibility of School of Multimedia Technology & Communication, Universiti Utara Malaysia.

*Keywords:* War; mass media; local war; foreign war; Lahad Datu

---

### 1. Introduction

Over the millennium, the world and its people witness all kinds of wars either from own experience or via the mass media. We learn and discuss about World War I and II, civil wars, ideological war, religious war, guerilla war, terrorism, insurgency, brutality, conspiracy and murderous expression, and others. The media, both local and international, had showed war in various countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Sudan, Rwanda, Angola, Bosnia,

---

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: Tel.: +603-89266993.

E-mail address: [faridah@iukl.edu.my](mailto:faridah@iukl.edu.my)

Guatemala, Liberia, Burundi, Algeria, border conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea, fighting in Colombia, the never-ending Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Chechnya, Sri Lanka, southeastern Turkey, Sierra Leone, Northern Ireland, Kosovo, and many others. We also witness numerous acts of terrorism for instance 9/11 in New York, 7/7 bomb blast in London and 17/7 terrorist attack in Jakarta-Indonesia.

According to Baylis et al. (2008) war has continued to exist, and has taken a number of different forms. For some countries, such as the United States, advanced technology is used to achieve dramatic victories against conventional armies. Other parts of the world, however, have been characterized by warfare in which non-state actors have been prominent, the military technology employed has been relatively unsophisticated and atrocities have been commonplace. Such new wars, it is argued by many, are a direct result of the process of globalization.

Mohd Rajib and Taylor (2006) suggested that proliferation of the mass media and digital communications technology has changed the faces of war. Any future war would largely be a war of the mind. Propaganda, persuasion, information operations, strategic communication and public diplomacy are now seen as much more useful tools to achieve a nation-state's objectives rather than using the conventional force, which merely generates further conflict. Today we see public diplomacy being used to propagate peace for instance the Panda Diplomacy between China and Malaysia and many countries in the world and the Food and Cultural Diplomacy through World Trade Fairs and Exhibitions.

### 1.1. Research context

Basically, why are nations at war? There are various answers to this question such as fighting for territorial rights, loss of cultural roots, fear to be controlled by other countries, vengeance, animosities, nationalism, class conflict and the like. But the basic underlying factor is that war is a conflict of human justification. Human survival instinct, pride and fear evoke war.

Because war is a fluid concept, it has generated a large number of sometimes contradictory definitions. According to Carl von Clausewitz (1989) war is an act of force to compel the enemy to do our will and it is a continuation of political intercourse with a mixture of other means.

Likewise Quincy Wright (cited in Baylis et al. 2008, p. 213) looks at war as "a conflict between political groups, especially sovereign states, carried on by armed forces of considerable magnitude or a considerable period of time". Yet Baylis et al. (2008) aptly state that war is a brutal form of politics.

News on war invokes feelings and human emotions. This kind of news may incite emotions and actions since most war news describes events vividly or manipulatively (Faridah Ibrahim et al. 2013). Emotions could be in the form of mixed emotions such as fear, sad, anger, hatred, sympathy and the like. While actions could lead to releasing of grievances and suppress feelings through letters to editors, Facebooks, Twitters, Blogs and even broadcast call-ins. And some may end up in street demonstrations. Actions taken by people may affect the social fabric of a democratic country such as multi-ethnic Malaysia or even may topple a government as manifested in the Arab Spring. In other words, people react to war and war news in multifarious ways. They may also react differently according to the kind of wars and which countries are involved. Distant or foreign wars may trigger different emotions to some people as compared to local wars due to the proximity principle (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Galtung, 2002; Josephi, 2008).

Hence, this research is aimed at understanding the extent of Malaysian audiences' perception towards the happenings of wars, both local and foreign, in terms of their emotions. Are they saddened, shocked or angered by the happening of wars and are their feelings similar when it comes to local versus foreign wars? The research also dwell on the audience perceptions towards the performance of the local media in covering 'war' or conflict in the country. A case in point is the Lahad Datu, Sabah incident.

Basically Malaysia, as a democratic country has not experience war ever since the Emergency in 1948, but the Lahad Datu incident which happened in March 2013 was likened to a 'war'. Some called it 'skirmishes' and others termed it as 'stand-off', 'conflict' or 'acts of terrorism'. The incident in Lahad Datu arose after 235 militants, some of whom were armed arrived by boats in Lahad Datu, Sabah, Malaysia on 11 February 2013. They were sent by Jamalul Kiram III, a claimant to the throne of the Sultanate of Sulu, to assert the unresolved territorial claim of the Philippines to eastern Sabah. In the incident, two Malaysian security officers were killed. The security operation labelled as *Operation Daulat* pace out by 29 June 2013.

This study covered two objectives as follows:

- To identify the perception of the respondents regarding the role of the media in prioritizing peace news instead of war news.
- To identify the types of emotions demonstrated by Malaysian when reading about war news (both local 'war' and foreign war) in the mass media.

## 2. Methods

This article is based on two surveys on war studies in 2008-2010 and 2013. In the first survey conducted on 348 respondents located in the Klang Valley, focused on the perceptions of respondents towards foreign wars such as those happening in Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel and Palestine. Foreign war is operationally defined as war involving arms, weaponry and armies, battling in foreign lands. Whilst the second survey was based on the perceptions of respondents, also in the Klang Valley, pertaining to the 'war' in Lahad Datu, Sabah, Malaysia. The incident of war in Lahad Datu is within inverted comma since it is not war in the real sense but more of a conflict or stand-off. The respondents in both studies were given different sets of questionnaires but two sections measuring media coverage of war and types of emotions, had utilised similar battery of items. The findings from these sections were extracted from both surveys to see a comparison of perceptions of Malaysian audience with regards to foreign wars and local 'war'.

## 3. Findings

In this paper, only findings pertaining to the comparison of respondents' perceptions towards media coverage on foreign wars and local 'war' and the types of emotions experienced towards both categories of happenings are extracted from the main findings. Details of the findings for both surveys are reported in other papers.

### 3.1. Socio-demographic profile

In the first survey, a total of 348 respondents gave responses to the survey questionnaire. In terms of demographic profiles, 50.9% were females and 49.1 percent males, the majority of which were within the age bracket of 20-25 years old. More than 58% reported attending college or holding a university degree, and about 43% reported a middle range income between RM2000-3000. A majority of the respondents (87.4%) stayed in urban areas. Where ethnic composition is concerned, the study reported a majority of the respondents were Malays, 76.7%, followed by 11.7% Chinese, 7.5% Indians and 2.0% of other ethnicity.

In the second survey, a total of 251 respondents comprising of Malaysians located in the Klang Valley were given survey questionnaires to gauge their perceptions regarding the incident of 'war' which happened in Lahad Datu, Sabah. In terms of socio-demography, 53.8% were males and 46.2% were females. Majority of the respondents were Diploma holders, followed by SPM school leavers, and 21.5% reported having a university's degree. Majority of the respondents, 20.7% earned a monthly salary of RM2000-3000. Ethnically, 82.9% were Malays, 10.0% Chinese, 5.2% Indians and 2.4% others. About 74.5% were urban dwellers.

### 3.2. Perceptions towards war and peace news coverage (Foreign and Local)

Table 1 showed findings pertaining to the perceptions of the respondents regarding the performance of the local media in terms of prioritizing peace news instead of war news. In this study, local media refers to mainstream newspapers such as *The New Straits Times*, *Utusan Malaysia*, *Berita Harian* and *The Star*. The first survey found that the local media pay less attention to peace news (mean=3.11) as compared to war news (mean=3.42). Most of the war oriented news came from international news agencies such as Reuters, AFP, and AP. The findings also showed that the orientation of news are slanted towards the superpowers (mean=3.91). The local media is also perceived to have more coverage on disaster (mean=3.42).

A similar trend is also detected in the Lahad Datu incident, Findings from the second survey showed that most of the news having war and conflict content are favorable towards the superpowers. In this incident, the local media covered more content which was war-oriented (Mean=3.57) compared to peace oriented news (Mean=3.39). The findings also show similarity with the first survey whereby the local media tend to focus more on disaster oriented content (Mean= 3.42). In the local ‘war’ incident the media play a bigger role as ‘educators’ (Mean=3.53) whereby the news are also focused on the beginning of the ‘conflict’ between the Sulu militants and the Malaysian government.

The findings from the Means of both studies indicated that the local media are prone to report more on the ugly sight of war in the Lahad Datu incident, due to proximity as compared to the coverage of distant wars in other countries.

Table 1. Respondents’ perceptions towards coverage of war and peace news

| Emotions                                   | Foreign (Mean)<br>N= 348 | Local (Mean)<br>N=251 |
|--|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| Conflict and war news from global agencies | 3.64                     | 3.22                  |
| Coverage is realistic                      | 3.29                     | 3.27                  |
| Focus on disaster                          | 3.42                     | 3.57                  |
| Conflict and war news are western slanted  | 3.91                     | 3.73                  |
| More Peace oriented news                   | 3.11                     | 3.39                  |
| News educate the public                    | 3.29                     | 3.53                  |
| News are covered fairly                    | 2.75                     | 3.25                  |
| More war oriented news                     | 3.40                     | 3.57                  |

### 3.3. Types of emotions invoke by the incident of wars (Foreign and Local)

How do the public feel about the incident of war in foreign country and in their own country? Respondents from both surveys are touched by the incident of war, whether the war is happening in other countries or in their own country. However, in comparison, the magnitude of emotions for local ‘war’ is slightly higher. Table 2 demonstrates this contention.

From the first survey which refers to foreign war, the top three emotions were sad (88.8%), sympathy (88.1%) and anger (82.5%). Only a small group like war (6.3%) or indifferent towards war (6.6%).

In the second survey, due to the nature of the incident and close proximity, the top three emotions felt by the respondents were sympathy (88.1%), anger (82.5%) and hate (78.2%). Unlike distant war where the respondents felt sad which scored the highest percentage, sadness for local war recorded a moderate 42.6%. Only, a small group like war (14.7%) and indifferent to the incident of war (11.2%). The findings from both surveys showed that the respondents do not like the incident of war and they are not indifferent towards war.

Table 2. Public’s emotions regarding war (Foreign and local):

| Emotions     | Foreign F (%) - Agree<br>N= 348 | Local F (%) - Agree<br>N=251 |
|--------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Sad          | 309 (88.8%)                     | 107 (42.6%)                  |
| Scared/Fear  | 243 (69.8%)                     | 197 (78.5%)                  |
| Uninterested | 119 (34.2%)                     | 78 (31.1%)                   |
| Angry        | 287 (82.5%)                     | 200 (79.7%)                  |
| Repentant    | 248 (71.2%)                     | 163 (64.9%)                  |
| Hate         | 272 (78.2%)                     | 151 (60.2%)                  |
| Regret       | 244 (70.1%)                     | 157 (62.5%)                  |

|             |             |             |
|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Sympathize  | 310 (88.1%) | 208 (82.9%) |
| Like        | 22 (6.3%)   | 37 (14.7%)  |
| Indifferent | 23 (6.6%)   | 28 (11.2%)  |

#### 4. Discussions

Foreign wars or distant wars have created slightly a different impact on the Malaysian audience in comparison with local incident of ‘war’. Lacasse and Forester (2012) suggested that people depend heavily on the mass media to learn about what’s happening around them, both far and near. Where nearness is concern, the media audience will be more interested to dig further for more information. Information are gathered from various sources, both from traditional and new media, including online and social media and also from word of mouth (WOM). As such the kind of information obtained are multifarious and numerous. This helps in shaping the public’s perceptions. Hence, they sympathized with the victims in Lahad Datu but the feeling of sadness scored a lower percentage.

Furthermore, the public will respond to certain stories at any given moment especially those close to them and associated with them perhaps based on psychological, cultural or ideological proximity as propagated by Galtung and Ruge (1965) and Galtung (2002). The public interpret news according to their knowledge, experience and judgment. Unfortunately, they read and interpret as they see fit, and emotion-laden news such as war and conflicts will trigger most human emotions, leading to distorted perceptions, anger, sadness and anxieties.

This study supports earlier studies by Josephi (2004) that the propaganda function of the local media is likely to come to the fore when covering local incident of conflict; while in the countries further removed from the incident, more considerate reporting can be found. She further reiterates that in a crisis situation, journalists rely more than ever on their routines. Yet, whether this allows for more objective journalism, supporting a culture of peace depends largely on the country’s degree of involvement in the crisis. In a crisis situation, journalists depend heavily on the official newsmakers vis-à-vis the government and the security forces. Hence, what is fed to the journalists, is what the public will get.

#### 5. Conclusions

This paper describes how Malaysians view the performance of the local mass media with regards to the coverage of war and peace, in particular, foreign wars versus local ‘war’. The study showed that while war is perceived to be ugly and emotionally disturbing, the Malaysian audience have a slightly different emotion when referring to incidents of foreign versus local war. This study demonstrated that proximity of the war does play a role in the formation of perceptions. There were some similarities and differences in terms of emotions felt by the public with regards to foreign and local wars. Because of proximity, the audience are closer to the Lahad Datu incident, and hence, know more about the reason for the outbreak of ‘war’ and this knowledge had shaped their opinion and perceptions. Besides viewing the incident based on their knowledge and/or experience of the incident, the local media, both traditional and new media, have somehow shaped the audience opinions. The local media are perceived to have covered realistically the incident of war but the focus on peace oriented news is sadly lacking. This calls for a re-orientation of the news content in terms of peace versus war news coverage.

#### Acknowledgements

This research is funded by UKM RU grant, Project No: DPP-2013-162.

#### References

- Baylis, J., Smith, S. & Owens, P. (2008). *The globalization of world politics: An introduction to international relations* (4<sup>th</sup> Ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Faridah Ibrahim, Normah Mustaffa, Fauziah Ahmad, Chang Peng Kee & Wan Amizah Wan Mahmud. (2013). Peace journalism: Implications of war and peace news amongst Malaysian audience. *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*, 23 (2), 262-274.
- Galtung, J. (2002). Peace journalism: A challenge. In Kempf, W. & Schmidt-Regener, I. (eds). *Journalism and New World Order: Studying war*

- and the media* (pp. 259-272). Goteborg: Nordicom.
- Galtung, J. & Ruge, M.H. (1965). The structure of foreign news: The presentation of the Congo, Cuba and Cyprus. *Journal of Peace Research*, 2 (1), 64-91.
- Joseph, B. (2004). Media terrorism of culture of peace: Reporting September 11. In S. Venkatraman (Ed.). *Media in a terrorized world. Reflections in the wake of 9/11* (pp. 34-53). Singapore: Eastern Universities Press.
- Laccase, K. & Forster, L. (2012). The war next door: Peace journalism in US local and distant newspapers' coverage of Mexico. *Media, War & Conflict*, 5(3), 223-237.
- Mohd Rajib Ab Ghani & Taylor, P.M. (2006). *Strategic communications – Psyops, information operations, and public diplomacy. The relationship between governmental information activities in the post 9/11 world*. Shah Alam: Center for Media and Information Warfare, UiTM.
- Von Clausewitz, C. (1989). *On war*. Translated by Michael Howard & Peter Paret. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.