

## Media Coverage of Environmental Issues: A Case Study of Waste Management

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### ABSTRACT

We generate waste everyday in our lives. Due to population growth, improvements in standards of living, and changing life style of the people, more wastes will be generated. Hence, the public needs to be informed, educated, acknowledged, and reminded of their role to reduce wastes and overcome waste problems. The media have a role as information transmitter to the public; exposing and creating awareness among the public regarding general environmental issues and those related to waste control and management. How much coverage do the media give to waste-related issues? This paper reports a quantitative and qualitative content analysis study which examined how environmental issues were covered and how wastes issues were framed in selected Malaysian English language newspapers. Articles regarding environmental issues published from January 2002 to December 2006 in *The Sun* and *New Straits Times* were analysed. For this paper we narrowed the scope to the period of January to March 2006 for a framing analysis as informed by Entman (1993). Each article was analysed to determine the presence of Entman's four framing functions: to define problems, to diagnose causes, to make moral judgment and to suggest solutions. We found 45 articles about waste management from January to March 2006. A big majority (98%) presented two or more Entman's framing functions. Most prominent functions were problem definition (73.3%) and suggestion of solutions (68.9%). Moral evaluations had the least presence with only 28.9%. Beside the four Entman's functions, the analysis detected another framing function, stating consequences or impacts, in 77.8% of all articles. The coverage of wastes in selected Malaysian newspapers was informative with most focusing on stating consequences or impacts, defining problems and suggesting solutions.

**Keywords:** Content analysis, environmental issue, Malaysia, media coverage, waste management.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Malaysia should take sustainable development more seriously to stop further destruction to the environment. Sustainable development can be briefly understood as using, conserving, and enhancing the community's resources so that ecological processes, on which life depends, are maintained and the total quality of life, now and in the future, can be increased. According to World Conservation Strategy (1980), for development to be sustainable, it must take into account the social and ecological factors, as well as economic ones; of the living and the non-living resource base; and of the long- and short-term advantages and disadvantages of alternative actions (Kandula, 1980). Hence, the mass media, as channels of information as well as agents of change, play important roles in providing the public with accurate, reliable, and unbiased sources of information.

In Malaysia, solid waste is currently one of the most debatable environmental issues (Zolkifli, 1998; Abd Ghani et al, 2006). It was reported in the *Ninth Malaysia Plan* that the amount of solid waste generated in Peninsular Malaysia increased from 16,200 tonnes per day in 2001 to 19,100 tonnes in 2005 or an average of 0.8 kg per capita per day. Solid waste in Malaysia comprises on average 45.0 per cent food waste, 24.0 per cent plastic (SMI Association of Malaysia, 2007).

The waste problem has become so grave that a cabinet committee on solid waste management had to be set up in early 2006. At the end of April, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Abdul Razak, who heads the panel, ordered sixteen of the dumpsites that posed a threat to public health to be closed immediately. Another 33 that were situated close to water sources would have to be shut down as soon as possible (Battacharjee, 2006)

What role do the media play in informing the public about environmental issues of consequence such as the waste management? This paper reported an on-going study that examined the newspaper coverage of environmental issues. Here we focused on one area of how newspapers frame waste related articles; by looking at the framing functions as proposed by Entman (1993).

The article's frame sets limits on the information available to newspapers readers who are trying to make sense out of the reported event, which is usually beyond their direct experience. Media frames, according to Gitlin (1980), also serve as working routines for journalist that allow them to quickly identify and classify information and to package it for efficient relay to their audience. According to Entman (1993), framing involves both selection and salience. To frame, is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them

re salient in a communicating context, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described (Entman,1993).

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

All the 45 news articles on waste management that were published in *The Sun* and the *New Straits Times* in January to March 2006 were subjected to a framing analysis. Following established procedure of framing analysis, a careful reading and re-reading of the articles were undertaken. Specifically they were examined for presence of Entman's framing functions or any other frames: 1. To define it as a problem 2. To diagnose causes 3. To make moral judgment 4. To suggest solutions 5. Other frame.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There were 45 waste related articles published during the three month study period --29 articles were in the *New Straits Times* (NST) and 16 were in *the Sun* (TS). Headlines of the articles as shown in Table 1 indicated range of themes (frames) of the coverage.

Table 1

Headlines of waste related articles published in *The Sun* (TS) and *New Straits Times* (NST), January – March 2006

No.	Headlines of articles	Newspaper	Date
1.	Gas fumes traced to illegally dumped ammonia waste	TS,	12 January 2006
2.	'Environment auditing needs more clout'	TS	13 January 2006
3.	Removal of toxic waste progressing well	TS,	16 January 2006
4.	Stop this illegal dumping	NST,	16 January 2006
5.	Broga residents cry foul over move	NST	17 January 2006
6.	Alternative site proposed	NST	18 January 2006
7.	Broga project settled	NST	18 January 2006
8.	693 villagers go home	NST	18 January 2006
9.	Results of probe to be given to DOE	NST	18 January 2006
10.	Lorry owner: I dumped toxic waste at three residential areas	TS	19 January 2006
11.	Toxic revelation	NST	19 January 2006
12.	Mandatory jail term planned	NST	19 January 2006
13.	RM8m to clean up aluminium dross	NST	20 January 2006
14.	Two dumpsites cordoned off by DOE	NST	20 January 2006
15.	Stored toxic waste pose danger to Johor Port	NST	20 January 2006
16.	Toxic waste found in Taman Mewah	TS	24 January 2006
17.	Creating a solid waste management model	TS	27 January 2006
18.	Amend act to include all kinds of waste	NST	27 January 2006
19.	Don't just throw away used batteries	NST	1 February 2006
20.	Work to remove toxic waste resumes	NST	7 February 2006
21.	Another toxic dump site found	NST	8 February 2006
22.	Leftovers to power cars? Singapore says yes	TS	10 February 2006
23.	'Spiral waste bins' to keep markets clean	TS	17 February 2006
24.	Landfill blamed for smelly water	NST	5 March 2006
25.	Refund system can reduce littering	TS	7 March 2006
26.	Landfill to blame	NST	7 March 2006
27.	Stop the pollution	NST	9 March 2006
28.	Two weeks to complete probe	NST	9 March 2006
29.	Crisis-busters on pollution	TS	10 March 2006
30.	Multiple sources of pollution in Sg Selangor	TS	10 March 2006
31.	Raising a stink	NST	10 March 2006
32.	'Make best use of Bukit Tagar landfill'	TS	13 March 2006
33.	Stop soft-peddling on waste	TS	13 March 2006
34.	Azmi proposes closing all open dumps	TS	14 March 2006
35.	Mandatory jail time proposed for toxic waste dumping	TS	15 March 2006
36.	Last open dump site closed after 13 years	TS	16 March 2006
37.	MB: Landfill a costly option	NST	16 March 2006
38.	Jinjang landfill finally closes	NST	16 March 2006

39.	Creating wealth from waste with RDF plants	NST	17 March 2006
40.	The only option left	NST	17 March 2006
41.	Dumpsite fouling Sungai Perlis	NST	21 March 2006
42.	Landfill operators to sort waste for recycling	NST	21 March 2006
43.	Human waste not wasted	NST	28 March 2006
44.	Neglected landfills cause of problem	NST	28 March 2006
45.	River monitoring station now closer to Bukit Tagar landfill	NST	29 March 2006

Table 2 shows that of the 45 articles, 11.1% had all five framing functions present, 13.4% had four, 40% had three and 33.3% had two.

Table 2

Percent of all articles with the number of framing functions present in all articles, January to March 2006.

Number of framing functions present	Percent of all articles
5	11.1%
4	13.3%
3	40.0%
2	33.3%
1	2.2%

An interesting finding is the big presence (77.8%) of another framing function, i.e. to state consequences/impacts alongside Entman's frames of problem definition and solution suggestion (Table 3).

Table 3

Percent of framing functions present in waste related articles in *The Sun* and the *New Straits Times*, January to March 2006.

Presence of framing functions	NST (n= 29)	TS (n=16)	All (n=45)
1. To define problem(s)	75.9%	68.8%	73.3%
2. To state cause(s)	58.6%	50.0%	55.6%
3. To make moral evaluation/judgment(s)	24.1%	37.5%	28.9%
4. To suggest solution(s)	65.5%	75.6%	68.9%
5. To state consequences/impact(s)	72.4%	87.5%	77.8%

### 3.1 Illustrations of Framing Functions

In the remaining of the paper, we illustrate how selected articles from *The Sun* and *New Straits Times* presented the various framing functions in their headlines and leading paragraphs.

#### 3.1a To define the problem:

“Stop this illegal dumping” *Johor has again become the centre of unwanted attention owing to the illegal disposal of hazardous waste in Kampung Sungai Gatom, Labis .In 2004, the illegal import and storage of scheduled waste in Simpang Renggam became front-paged news.*

*The problem will probably get worse... (New Straits Times, 16 January 2006).*

“Neglected landfills cause of problems”. *Neglect and poor management have turned many of the country's landfills into polluters. The problem is compounded by lack of enforcement and archaic or non-existent treatment facilities. (New Straits Times, 28 March 2006).*

#### 3.1b To suggest solutions:

“Make best use of Bukit Tagar landfill” *Pollution of the Sungai Selangor would be greatly reduced if the federal and Selangor governments tackled the bottlenecks that hamper full use of the Bukit Tagar sanitary landfill. In particular, the construction of the transfer stations in Shah Alam and Kampung Bogor and the purchase of waste collection trucks need to be speeded up so that contractors will find it viable to send their waste to Bukit Tagar. (The Sun, 13 March 2006).*

#### 3.1c To make moral evaluations:

“State of pig farms is awful, says CM”. *Pollution and unhygienic conditions led to authorities to crack down on pig farm. (New Straits Times, 16 March 2006)*

“Environmental auditing needs more clout” *This may be shocking but it's true!; A company that produces toxic waste in Selangor will only be subject to an environmental audit once in six years! (The Sun, 13 January 2006)*

▪ **“Stop soft-peddalling on waste”.** The finding that most of 144 landfills in the country are situated in environmentally-sensitive areas, indicates the insufficient urgency placed on solving the waste management dilemma to date. (The Sun, 13 March 2006)

### 3.1d To show causes:

▪ Following the public outcry over a foul smell in their tap water, the Bukit Tagar sanitary landfill was named as a cause of the problem. Earlier this month, however, Selangor officials identified livestock farms, palm oil and rubber factories, abattoirs, rubbish dumps and sewage ponds as the culprits. At the Kundang dumpsite, leachate can be seen flowing unchecked within a few metres of the Kundang river ( The Sun, 13 March 2006).

▪ **Dumpsite fouling Sungai Perlis.** A dumpsite along Sungai Perlis is now contaminating the river. The dumpsite, which has been in operation for the past 25 years, has emerged as a health hazard for the thousands of students at the Northern Malaysia university College of Engineering (KUKUM) hostels, just 50 metres away. (New Straits Times, 21 March, 2006).

### 3.1e To show consequences:

▪ **Lorry owner: I dumped toxic waste at three residential areas...** The 300 tonnes of dross dumped in an orchard in Kampung Sungai Gatam emitted toxic ammonia fumes early this month, forcing some 1,000 villagers to flee their homes, and the closure of six schools ( The Sun, 19 January, 2006).

▪ **RM8m to clean up aluminium dross.** It's going to cost the Government about RM8 million to clear the aluminium dross dumped at three locations in Labis, Johor (New Straits Times, 20 January, 2006).

▪ **“MB: Landfill a costly option.”** Local governments in Selangor will suffer a heavy financial strain if landfills are the only option for garbage disposal. He said thousands of tonnes of garbage were generated in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor daily, and the cost of disposal would be staggering if no alternatives were found. Currently, up to 40 per cent of local government money was spent collecting and disposing of garbage, but the figure may rise to 80 per cent if dumpsites were closed.. (New Straits Times, 16 March 2006).

## 4. CONCLUSION

This paper reported the findings of a small aspect of an on-going research project on the Malaysian media coverage of environmental issues. Focusing only on waste management issues reported during the short duration in 2006, the study found extensive coverage with a majority of the articles examined presenting relevant information about the problem associated with waste management, the consequences of action or inaction, its causes (perceived or real), and possible solutions or remedies. The high number of news articles found during this short study shows that the media have keen interest in covering environmental issues.

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