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# The South China Sea Dispute and War/Peace Journalism: A Framing Analysis of a Malaysian Newspaper

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**Yang Lai Fong<sup>1</sup> and Jenny Heng Gek Koon<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Journalism, Xiamen University Malaysia, MALAYSIA

<sup>2</sup>School of Media and Communication, Taylor's University, MALAYSIA

**Abstract:** News coverage of crises, conflicts, and wars is grounded in the notion of news value. Conflict reporting is often sensational and used as a device to boost circulation and ratings. Therefore, Norwegian Professor of Peace Studies Johan Galtung proposed peace journalism as a self-conscious working concept for journalists covering wars and conflicts. In recent years, tension has steadily increased over the South China Sea dispute. There are fears that the overlapping claims in the South China Sea will turn the region into an area of conflict, with potentially serious global consequences. This study aimed to examine the reporting of the South China Sea dispute by *The Star*, the English daily newspaper with the largest circulation in Malaysia. War/peace journalism and framing were employed as the theoretical framework, while content analysis was used as the research method to analyze the news coverage of the South China Sea dispute by *The Star* from 2014-2016. The findings showed that coverage in *The Star* was dominated by the war journalism frame but carried a neutral valence towards China. Implications of the findings to the understanding of war/peace journalism, conflict reporting, and news value studies were discussed.

**Keywords:** South China Sea dispute, war/peace journalism, framing, conflict reporting, crisis communication

## Introduction

In recent years, tension has steadily increased over the South China Sea dispute. It involves both island and maritime claims among several sovereign states within the region. While China claims almost the entire South China Sea, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Brunei, Vietnam, and Taiwan have also made claims over it. The seabed of the South China Sea contains oil, gas, minerals, and fisheries, which would bring great benefits to any country that can establish their claims to the region's waters. More importantly, the sea's key value is strategic—shipping lanes vital to about 5 trillion US dollars' worth of world trade pass through it every year (Kwan, 2018).

Address for Correspondence: Yang Lai Fong, email: nicoleyanglaifong[at]gmail.com

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China has become a major global power with its multidimensional growth ranging from economic, military, education, scientific to technological. Intellectuals from a variety of backgrounds emphasize that the rise of China will inevitably change the structure of world politics and the global economy (Bing, 2025; Li, 2016). It was also pointed out that Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea reflects China's effort to dislodge the US as the hegemonic power in the East Asian region and establish a Chinese sphere of influence instead (Cotillon, 2017; Golan & Lukito, 2015). Nevertheless, there are fears that the overlapping claims in the South China Sea will turn the region into an area of conflict, with potentially serious global consequences (Guo, Mays, & Wang, 2019).

The rise of China is especially relevant to Malaysia—China is Malaysia's biggest trading partner. Malaysia, on the other hand, is China's third-biggest trading partner in Asia and the biggest trading partner among member countries that make up the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In addition, the bilateral ties between Malaysia and China have also been shaped by long historical links (tracing back to the Malacca Sultanate and China's Ming dynasty in the 15th century), geographical proximity, and demographic structure (about 25% of Malaysia's population is ethnic Chinese) (Kuik, 2016). In fact, Malaysia was the first ASEAN member to establish diplomatic relations with China in 1974, thereby subsequently setting a model relationship for the region (Bower & Nguyen, 2015). Kuik (2015) pointed out that China is the key point of reference for Malaysia's foreign policymakers. It is also important to note that bilateral relations between Malaysia and China remain on good terms despite a significant political change in May 2018, when the new government of Mahathir Mohamad announced a change in its relations with China (Hruby & Petru, 2019; Yeoh, 2019).

China's assertiveness towards its neighbors in the South China Sea has been a much-debated topic in the international media and academic literature. However, Kreuzer (2016) addressed that the vast majority of academic studies focused almost exclusively on the Sino-Vietnamese and Sino-Philippine conflicts. It is important to note that China demonstrated much more restraint towards Malaysia, and Kreuzer (2016) argued that it is due to Malaysia's approach for establishing its overall bilateral relationships with China. Specifically, the author observed that China possesses a higher level of tolerance towards its opponent in the South China Sea dispute when the opponent displays recognition and respect for China's national self-rule<sup>1</sup> and world order conceptions. This is because the recognition "allows the Chinese elites to portray China (and by extension themselves) as a highly respected international actor and thereby enhance their domestic legitimacy" (Kreuzer, 2016, p. 240).

In addition, scholars (e.g., Loyn, 2007; Shaw, Lynch, & Hackett, 2011; Zillich et al., 2011) recognized that a range of theoretical approaches has been developed to explain the media's role and function in conflict reporting and crisis communication. The normative approach of peace journalism postulates a media coverage that aims for the solution and de-escalation of conflicts. Peace journalism can be considered a special mode of socially responsible journalism, which aims to translate theoretical notions into practical advice for journalists.

The following sections of the paper will offer a synthesis of the literature on war and peace journalism, focusing on the connection between journalism type and journalistic framing. Considering the potential consequences of the South China Sea dispute, the bilateral relations between Malaysia and China, and the role of media in conflict reporting, this is followed by a content analysis of news articles from *The Star*, the largest circulation English daily newspaper in Malaysia. Analyzing the coverage of the South China Sea dispute between 1 January 2014

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<sup>1</sup> National self-role conception includes three elements: a description of national mission in the world, specific notions of interstate relationships, and stability over time (Shih & Yin, 2013).

and 31 December 2016, the findings offer new insights into the dominant frames and framing approaches used by this media as well as its valence toward China in general.

### **War/Peace Journalism**

Norwegian Professor of Peace Studies Johan Galtung proposed peace journalism as a self-conscious working concept for journalists covering wars and conflicts. The proposal of the concept was triggered by the Gulf War of 1991, and it penetrated the field of mass communication in the early 1990s. Galtung (2003) observed that traditional war journalism is modeled after sports journalism, with a focus on winning in a zero-sum game. In Galtung's vision, peace journalism approximates health journalism. A good health reporter describes a patient's battle against cancer and yet informs readers about the cancer's causes as well as the full range of cures and preventive measures. In his advocacy of peace journalism, Tehranian (2002) called it "a system of global media ethics" (p. 58),

War journalism is elite-oriented in its news sourcing practice, whereby leaders and elites are often given the privilege to define and interpret an event or issue in news stories. War journalism also focuses on here and now; it only reports about the what, who, where and when of a conflict, while neglecting the factors contributing to the problem. This mode of journalism plays up conflict as an arena where participants are grouped starkly into two opposing sides ('them vs. us'). It advocates the fate of "our side", and only exposes the untruths and perpetrators of atrocities of the "other side". Meanwhile, the lies and cover-up attempts of "our side" will be supported (Tehranian, 2002).

In addition, war journalism stressed on visible effects of war such as casualties and damage to property (Lee and Maslog, 2005). Given its strong victory orientation, war journalism disapproves of covering peace initiatives – at least as long as it was not yet clear who would win the war. At the conclusion of hostilities, war journalism turns its attention to the next "hot" conflict arena and may return if the old conflict flickers up again (Shaw, Lynch and Hackett, 2011).

In contrast, peace journalism is a broader, fairer and more accurate way of framing stories, drawing on the insights of conflict analysis and transformation (Galtung and Fischer, 2013). It is people-oriented in its news sourcing practice, whereby common people are reported as actors and sources of information in news stories. By taking an advocative and interpretative approach, peace journalists concentrate on stories that highlight peace initiatives, tone down ethnic and religious differences and prevent further conflict (Tehranian, 2002). Peace journalism also reveals the sufferings of all the parties within the conflict, while presenting the invisible effects of violence such as emotional trauma and damage to social structure (Terzis, 2002; Lynch & Galtung, 2010). In addition, it also exposes lies, cover-up attempts and culprits on all sides (Tehranian, 2002).

Lynch and McGoldrick (2007) asserted that peace journalism provides necessary context, which includes the structural and cultural processes involved in the formation and development of conflicts. This would also help to make the issue transparent to the audience. Furthermore, the authors stated that space could be created to identify all parties involved as well as their goals, needs and interests. Due to its orientation towards solutions, this mode of journalism also dedicates particular attention to post-war developments (Lee and Maslog, 2005).

Despite its popularity within peace research, the concept of peace journalism has been widely criticized by communication researchers and practitioners for attributing political and military responsibility to the media (Hanitzsch, 2004). For example, Fawcett (2002) explained that the function of journalism lies in reporting issues for public communication from a system-

theoretical perspective. Therefore, journalism cannot fulfil the roles of other public systems, such as politics, law or the military, to engage in the peaceful settlement of a conflict.

Lynch and McGoldrick (2007) defined peace journalism as an approach undertaken by editors and reporters in making choices about what to report and how to report in order to encourage non-violent responses to conflicts. However, scholars (e.g. Iggers, 1998; Loyn, 2007) criticized that it is against journalistic principle of objectivity because it expects self-conscious intervention by journalists.

Wolfsfeld (1997) also pointed out the structural incompatibility between the needs of a peace process and journalistic imperatives. It was mentioned that many of the significant developments within a peace process take place in closed doors, which consequently exclude journalists who demand for information. The author also argued that a peace process is complicated, however, journalists demand simplicity for news presentation purpose. Furthermore, most of the peace processes are marked by dull and tedious negotiations, whereas journalists require drama and conflict to enhance the news value of their stories.

In addition, Hanitzsch (2007) also argued that the peace journalism advocates underestimated the material conditions for modern news reporting and overestimated the possibilities for journalists to contextualize their stories. The author found that a complex model like Galtung's is not suitable for the highly standardized narrative schemes of modern news production.

Scholars (Lynch and McGoldrick, 2007; Seow and Maslog, 2005) found that war/peace journalism is supported theoretically by the framing theory. Entman (1993, p. 52) defined framing as the process "to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described". In addition, Lynch and McGoldrick (2007, p. 258) stated that framing refers to the "construct of a communication – its language, visual and messengers – and the way it signals to the listener or observer how to interpret and classify new information". It was also mentioned that framing means "how messages are encoded with meaning so that they can be efficiently interpreted in relationship to existing beliefs or ideas" (p. 258).

Manheim (1994) mentioned that news framing analyses usually cover three aspects: visibility, valence and frame genres. Visibility refers to both the amount of coverage and the prominence level of an event/issue or a nation receives in the news coverage. Prominence is usually demonstrated by certain typical elements such as the article's placement in the newspaper or web sites, the headline, the visual tools associating with the text, the mention on the evening television news etc. Valence or slant is the tone of a news story or comment regarding certain frames. It is believed to have the potential to generate behavioural effects. By indicating discourse valuations or carrying positive and/or negative elements, valenced news frames present the extent to which the coverage reflects favourably or unfavourably on the event/issue. Entman (2007) also stressed that agenda setting, priming and framing fit together as tools of power, and he connected them to explicit definitions of news slant and bias.

Reviewing the literature on frames and framing, Carter (2013) asserted that one aspect to how the media construct reality concerns the distortion of events. This is because reporting of events requires interpretation, and interpretation can lead to misrepresentations of reality due to subjective opinions of the witnesses or sources. In addition, the author emphasized that time or immediacy is also an important aspect to understanding how news media construct reality. Media outlets work in a temporal setting in which deadlines are common. Therefore, the types of stories and the way in which they are presented are dependent on the readiness of sources, reporters, editors and others to produce stories. Carter (2013) also stressed that social construction of reality deals with media and historical context. Due to time constraints, space limitations and other institutionalized boundaries specific to media, events cannot always be

contextualized sequentially. Therefore, stories are framed apart from their whole, making certain aspects more salient than others.

Similarly, many scholars (e.g. De Vreese, 2014; Holton, Lee & Coleman, 2014; Kim, 2015) have discussed the issue of “episodic framing” as compared to “thematic framing”. “Episodic” frames focus on individual cases and encourage an audience to make internal attributions for events (Iyengar, 1996, p. 62). On the contrary, “thematic” frames focus more on broader social issues, such as social, political, and economic forces; these frames encourage viewers to make external attributions (Iyengar, 1996, p. 62). Furthermore, episodic framing describes concrete events that illustrates issues, while thematic framing presents collective or general evidence.

The concept of “focuses on here and now” in war journalism fits into the notion of episodic framing because it only reports about the what, who, where and when of an event. It does not report on the factors contributing to the conflict nor the consequences of it. In contrast, peace journalism emphasizes on “reporting causes and consequences”, in which news reports about the factors contributing to the conflict as well as the consequences of it, and the idea is consistent with “thematic framing”.

Specifically, this study asked the following questions:

RQ1: What was the visibility of the South China Sea dispute in *The Star’s* coverage?

RQ2: What was the dominant frame – war or peace journalism – in *The Star’s* coverage on the South China Sea dispute?

RQ3: What were the salient indicators supporting the war/peace journalism frame in *The Star’s* coverage on the South China Sea dispute?

RQ4: What was the valence towards China in *The Star’s* coverage on the South China Sea dispute?

## Research Method

This study was based on a content analysis of news articles from *The Star*, the English daily newspaper with the largest circulation in Malaysia. According to the Audit Bureau of Circulations Malaysia, the 2018 average daily circulation of *The Star* was 175,986 ([www.abcm.org.my](http://www.abcm.org.my)). *The Star* has a national circulation, albeit predominantly within Peninsular Malaysia (Selva, 2018).

### *Sampling and Coding Procedure*

The study investigated the coverage of the South China Sea dispute over three years, that is, from 1 January 2014 to 31 December 2016. There were several important events that took place during this timeframe. The year 2014 was designated as “Malaysia-China Friendship Year” to commemorate the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Nonetheless, diplomatic ties between the two countries were tested in 2015 when the Chinese ambassador to Malaysia visited China Town in the capital Kuala Lumpur before a pro-Malay rally, and warned that Beijing would not fear voicing out against incidents which threaten the interests of China (Sipalan, 1 June 2016). In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA),

an arbitral tribunal under the United Nations ruled against China, mentioning that China has no historic title over the waters of the South China Sea. Specifically, the PCA ruled that the 1982 UNCLOS supersedes China's nine-dash line (*The Star*, 12 July 2016b).

The articles were collected from *The Star's* library, where they were kept as digital archive and could be accessed by indicating the search term. This study used "South China Sea" as the search term because it is predominantly used in Malaysia as well as other Southeast Asia's regional English-language newspapers – with the exception of Vietnam's and Philippine's press, where "East Sea" and "West Philippine Sea" is preferred by the respective countries (Freeman, 2017). The sample consisted of 384 articles derived from *The Star's* library online database. The unit of analysis was the article, which included straight news, editorial, opinion columns and letters to the editors.

As mentioned earlier, visibility of coverage refers to the amount of coverage and the prominence level that an event/issue or a nation receives in the news coverage. For the current study, visibility was investigated from two angles: 1) number of news articles, and 2) types of news articles. In addition, this study adopted and modified the war/peace journalism classification suggested by Galtung (1998). This study established eight indicators for each war and peace journalism frame as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Coding Categories for Frames

War Journalism	Peace Journalism
<p><b>1. Elite-oriented</b> – Focuses on leaders and elites as actors and sources of information.</p> <p><b>2. Differences-oriented</b> – Reports on areas of differences that might lead to the worsening of the conflict.</p> <p><b>3. Focuses on here and now</b> – Does not report on the factors contributing to the conflict nor the consequences of it. Only reports about the what, who, where and when of an event.</p> <p><b>4. Dichotomizes the good and the bad</b> – Points finger at other quarters as parties responsible for the issue.</p> <p><b>5. Two-party orientation</b> – One party wins, one party loses.</p> <p><b>6. Partisan</b> – Biased towards one side in the conflict.</p> <p><b>7. Zero-sum orientation</b></p>	<p><b>1. People-oriented</b> – Focuses on the common people as actors and sources of information.</p> <p><b>2. Reports areas of agreement</b> – Reports on areas that might lead to a solution to the conflict.</p> <p><b>3. Reports causes and consequences</b> – Reports on the factors contributing to the conflict as well as the consequences of it.</p> <p><b>4. Avoids labeling of good guys and bad guys</b> – Does not point finger at other quarters as parties responsible for the issue.</p> <p><b>5. Multiparty orientation</b> – Gives voice to the various parties involved in the conflict.</p> <p><b>6. Nonpartisan</b> – Neutral and not taking sides.</p> <p><b>7. Win-win orientation</b></p>

<p>– One goal: to win.</p> <p><b>8. Uses victimizing/ demonizing/ emotive language</b></p> <p>– Reports what has been done to the people or the environment. Some examples include engendered fear for the rest of the world; eroded trust and confidence; increased regional tension; China criticized the Philippines as “cute little submissive”; exploited natural resources and fish in the sea; permanent loss of coral reef areas in human history; etc.</p> <p>– Uses language to paint the enemy’s image as wicked or threatening. Some examples include bullying; hostility; dangerous; reckless; antagonize; show off; troublemaker; aggressiveness; deliberate blatant provocation; flexing its muscle; undermining peace; security and stability; acting outside of global norms; violations of rights; unabashed nationalism; China liken to Nazi Germany; etc.</p> <p>– Uses language to evoke readers’ negative emotional reaction towards the enemy. Some examples include unhappiness; outraged; bitter maritime dispute; ugly territorial spat; etc.</p>	<p>– Many goals and issues; solution-oriented.</p> <p><b>8. Avoids victimizing/ demonizing/ emotive language</b></p> <p>– Reports what has been done and could be done by the people, and how they are coping.</p> <p>– Uses more precise descriptions, titles or names that the people give themselves.</p> <p>– Reserves strongest language only for the gravest situation; does not exaggerate.</p>
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Valence of the articles refers to the attitude expressed towards any individual, group, party or institution by its author (Baumgartner and Wirth, 2012). This study used the categories of supportive, critical and neutral for the analysis of attitude expressed towards China in regard to its stance in the South China Sea dispute:

1. Supportive – conveyed a positive or favorable impression towards China’s claims, arguments, policy, actions, etc. on the South China Sea dispute.
2. Critical – conveyed a negative or unfavorable impression towards China’s claims, arguments, policy, actions, etc. on the South China Sea dispute.
3. Neutral – neither favorably nor unfavorably portrayed China’s claims, arguments, policy, actions, etc.

### *Data Analysis and Inter-Coder Reliability*

The 384 articles collected from *The Star*'s were analyzed by the first author using descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentage. To ensure the reliability of this study, the second author was also trained as the second coder. During the training session, the first author (who was also the first coder) and the second coder coded 50 articles that were chosen randomly from the sample of this study. Disagreements were analyzed and some additional explanations were included to the coding instruction in the code book.

The inter-coder reliability for this study was established by randomly selecting 10% of the news items, which was equivalent to 38 articles. Using Holsti's formula (cited in Wimmer & Dominick, 2006), it was found that the inter-coder reliability for number of articles ad types of articles was 1.0. In addition, news frames scored 0.95 for inter-coder reliability, while salient indicators for war/peace journalism was recorded as 0.92, and valence obtained 0.99 as inter-coder reliability.

## **Results**

### *Intensity of Coverage*

This study collected 384 news articles published within three years (2014-2016). Table 2 shows the breakdown of the number of articles for each year. *The Star* published the greatest number of articles on the South China Sea dispute in 2016, which amounted to 52.60% of the sample size. This was most probably because in 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), an arbitral tribunal under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), issued its ruling on the arbitration case filed by the then Philippines President Benigno Aquino (*The Star*, 12 July 2016a).

In 2013, the then President Aquino of the Philippines brought the case before the tribunal to dispute China's claim of "indisputable sovereignty" over almost the entire South China Sea through its "nine-dash line" claim (*The Star*, 12 July 2016a). On July 12, 2016, the PCA in The Hague, Netherlands finally ruled that the 1982 UNCLOS supersedes China's "nine-dash line". Therefore, this judgement means that China has interfered with the fishing rights of the Philippines. However, China denounced the tribunal ruling as "null and void and has no binding force" (*The Star*, 12 July 2016b).

Table 2: Number of Articles Covering the South China Sea Dispute

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of News Articles</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
2014	89	23.18
2015	93	24.22
2016	202	52.60
<b>Total</b>	<b>384</b>	<b>100.00</b>

As demonstrated in Table 3, most articles were published in the form of straight news (83.46%), followed by opinion columns (15.77%), editorials (0.38%) and letters to the editors (0.38%).

Table 3: Types of Articles Covering the South China Sea Dispute (in percentage)

Type of Articles	Percentage ( <i>n</i> = 384)
Straight news	86.72
Opinion Columns	12.76
Editorials	0.26
Letters to the editors	0.26

### *War Journalism as the Salient Frame*

The findings of this study reflected that the indicators of war journalism (*n* = 1216) were almost 40% more than the indicators of peace journalism (*n* = 733) in *The Star*'s coverage of the South China Sea dispute. Most of the news articles reflected more than one indicator of war journalism (see Table 4). The three strongest indicators of war journalism were elite-oriented (20.72%), differences-oriented (16.53%) and focuses on here and now (15.13%).

Table 4: Indicators of War Journalism in Covering the South China Sea Dispute (in percentage)

Indicators of War Journalism	Percentage ( <i>n</i> = 1216)
Elite-oriented	20.72
Differences-oriented	16.53
Focuses on here and now	15.13
Dichotomizes the good and bad	12.01
Two-party orientation	7.40
Partisan	12.83
Zero-sum orientation	7.24
Uses victimizing/demonizing/emotive language	8.14

The news sourcing practice was elite-oriented as the frequently cited news sources were the Chinese President, the Chinese Premier, Chinese foreign affairs, defense or military officials, the US President, US foreign affairs, defense or military officials, the Malaysian Prime Minister, foreign affairs or defense officials, experts and professionals in politics and officials from other countries.

In its differences-oriented coverage (16.53%), *The Star* reported that President Aquino, then president of the Philippines, warned that China's efforts to claim disputed territories were like Nazi Germany's actions before the World War II, drawing a fierce Chinese response

branding him ignorant and amateurish (*The Star*, 6 February 2014). In January 2016, Vietnam accused China of threatening peace after more Chinese aircraft landed on a contested reef in the South China Sea (*The Star*, 9 January 2016). In addition, the US has called for an immediate end to China's intensifying reclamation works in the South China Sea and has vowed to keep sending military aircrafts and ships to the region. The then US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter was reported as accusing China to be threatening freedom of navigation while saying that "turning an underwater rock into an airfield simply does not afford the rights of sovereignty [for China] or permit restrictions on international air or maritime transit... There should be no mistake: the United States will fly, sail and operate wherever international law allows, as US forces do all around the world" (*The Star*, 31 May 2015a).

In response, China warned that Washington's actions will only make the region less stable. *The Star* reported that the Chinese Ambassador to US Cui Tiankai alerted that the US overreaction to China's moves in the South China Sea is escalating the situation and will make the region less stable (*The Star*, 31 May 2015b). Furthermore, *The Star* also reported that China would pressure Washington over maritime issues during the annual Strategic and Economic Dialogue as the United States' increasing military presence in the South China Sea is among China's major concerns (*The Star*, 1 June 2016). Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi was also quoted as arguing that Beijing's control over the disputed water was justified because China was the first to discover the Sea (*The Star*, 9 March 2016).

It is also noteworthy that *The Star* published a column article, which was written by the then China Ambassador to Malaysia, Huang Huikang in June 2016. In the article, Huang called for the South China Sea dispute be solved through negotiation and consultation by parties directly concerned. He regretted that the approach of non-conflicting and friendly consultation has been overshadowed by "noise and chaos". He also mentioned that

As China's close neighbors, Malaysia and the Philippines have enjoyed traditional friendship with China. Both were the first countries to established diplomatic relations with China among ASEAN states. However, while the Malaysia-China relationship is at its best in history and on the path to a new era of Diamond 40 Years, the Philippines-China relationship is experiencing severe difficulties. The reason behind such a striking contrast lies in the different ways the two claimants chose to deal with the dispute with China. While Malaysia has consistently been committed to maintaining friendly relationship, properly handling dispute, strengthening cooperation and enhancing comprehensive strategic partnership with China, the Philippines President Benigno Aquino III, on the contrary, misjudged the international situation, acted as a pawn of an outsider's geopolitical strategy, and chose to confront China (*The Star*, 13 June 2016).

*The Star* also reported that ASEAN had criticized China's actions in the South China Sea maritime dispute, with the regional body adopting its strongest terms yet in expressing its unhappiness in the 48<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Ministerial Meeting Joint Communique. The joint statement said land reclamation activities being carried out in the disputed area could undermine the peace, security and stability in the area (*The Star*, 7 August 2015). Nonetheless, *The Star* reported in 2016 that the 49<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting faced a deadlock as Cambodia had refused to form a consensus in fear of China. Although Indonesia insisted that ASEAN should continue to push for the issuance of a statement on the South China Sea acceptable to all of its member states, Cambodia blocked the statement on how to counter China's territorial expansion in the region. It was also reported that Cambodia did not want China to be criticized, while a diplomat who attended the closed-door meetings was quoted by the Associated Press

as describing Cambodia as “a loyalist of the big country C”, referring to China (*The Star*, 25 July 2016).

Through focuses on here and now (15.13%), *The Star* reported that Japanese education chiefs instructed schools to teach children that islands at the center of dispute with China and South Korea respectively belong unequivocally to Tokyo. A revised teachers’ manual for junior and senior high schools describes both Takeshima and Senkaku islands as integral parts of Japanese territories (*The Star*, 29 January 2014). Furthermore, *The Star* reported that China’s use of dredged sand and corals to build artificial islands on seven reefs has done severe harm to one of the most important coral reef systems in South-East Asia (*The Star*, 27 June 2015). These two news stories were reported as episodic events, whereby no historical references were provided to help the readers to understand better about the context of the South China Sea conflict.

### *Peace Journalism*

The top three strongest indicators of peace journalism found in *The Star*’s coverage of the South China Sea dispute were avoids; victimizing/demonizing/emotive language (20.87%), multiparty orientation (15.83%), and avoids labeling of good guys and bad guys (14.73%).

Table 5: Indicators of Peace Journalism in Covering the South China Sea Dispute  
(in percentage)

<b>Indicators of Peace Journalism</b>	<b>Percentage (n = 733)</b>
People-oriented	0.82
Reports the areas of agreement	10.64
Reports causes and consequences	9.96
Avoids labeling of good guys and bad guys	14.73
Multiparty orientation	15.83
Nonpartisan	13.64
Win-win orientation	13.51
Avoids victimizing/demonizing/emotive language	20.87

Through avoiding victimizing/ demonizing /emotive language (20.87%), *The Star* reported that the then Malaysian Foreign Minister Anifah Aman mentioned that ASEAN would not be confrontational in dealing with China on the South China Sea territorial claims and will continue to explore every avenue to find a solution that will benefit all parties (*The Star*, 27 April 2016). *The Star* also reported that Malaysia’s non-confrontational approach towards China demonstrated Kuala Lumpur’s own faith in championing China’s “peaceful rise” and was needed to reassure other ASEAN states that China’s future behavior could be shaped. For Malaysia, it was far better to welcome China as a full participant in ASEAN-led forums to “socialize” the rising power than to prematurely pursue a counter-productive policy of

diplomatic isolation. It was also reported that Kuala Lumpur's approach has met with some success. China has emerged as Malaysia's largest trade partner, even if some elements of both economies such as export-manufacturing in the electronics sectors are in competition as well as complementary (*The Star*, 2 February 2014).

Furthermore, *The Star* also reported that Beijing would not sit by and let the South China Sea issue descend into chaos. Chinese Admiral Sun Jianguo said he believed that parties involved in the dispute have wisdom and patience – like China – in charting a path of peaceful negotiation. He also stressed that the world is undergoing historic changes as never before and the Asia-Pacific countries share good times and bad times together (*The Star*, 2 June 2016).

Through its multiparty orientation (15.83%) coverage, *The Star* reported that the then Malaysian Defense Minister Hishammuddin Hussein stated that ASEAN must prioritize the security of its region in its entirety and not merely think along sovereign lines. He added that ASEAN must stand united on several key defense issues and not be pulled in different directions. In addition, he asserted that ASEAN nations need to establish clear communication channels and intensify policymaking as a group. Nonetheless, Hishammuddin pointed out that it was unnecessary to adopt a one-size-fits-all defense policy for ASEAN. Instead, they should work together towards establishing a common policy position on important issues such as maritime security and ASEAN relations with major world powers (*The Star*, 1 June 2014).

In 2016, *The Star* reported that China and ASEAN have agreed to explore Singapore's proposal of an expanded Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) that includes coast guard ships to prevent untoward clashes in the South China Sea. It was also reported that the Singapore Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan stated that Singapore was not a claimant of the Sea, and hence it allows the country to play a neutral role in peace negotiation. It was added that Singapore did not want to make any judgement as to the merits of competing arguments but to promote peace and stability in the region. Singapore aimed to focus on peaceful resolution of differences or conflicts, and to be an honest broker (*The Star*, 3 March 2016).

It was also reported that Vietnam Deputy Minister of National Defense, Nguyen Chi Vinh, said his country warmly welcome Chinese warships to visit one of its harbors and was ready to boost cooperation between the two countries' coast guards. Nguyen also mentioned that Chinese vessels were welcome to conduct joint drills with the Vietnamese Navy in humanitarian relief and maritime search and rescue programs. *The Star* reported that experts said the move would improve interaction for regional security and help ease tensions (*The Star*, 5 June 2016).

In its coverage that avoided the labeling of good guys and bad guys (14.73%), *The Star* reported that Professor Dr David Arase from the John Hopkins University-Nanjing University-Centre for Chinese and American Studies said that Malaysia can play a role in easing regional tensions in the South China Sea dispute. In an interview with *The Star*, Professor Arase stated that nobody wanted war, and hence to minimize the risk, as the 2015 chairman of ASEAN, Malaysia should negotiate for a maritime code of conduct (COC) agreement with China (*The Star*, 22 June 2014). In addition, *The Star* also reported that the then Malaysian Foreign Minister Anifah stressed that ASEAN and China have stood together through challenging times. He also emphasized that ASEAN's and China's fates were inextricably intertwined and that prosperity for one was prosperity for the other (*The Star*, 23 April 2015). In 2016, after the tribunal ruling, *The Star* reported that the Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte's administration hoped to quickly begin direct talks with China following the verdict. It was hoped that the negotiation would cover the joint exploitation of the natural gas reserves and fishing grounds within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone (*The Star*, 9 July 2016).

### Valence

In its reporting on the South China Sea dispute between 2014-2016, 42.97% of the coverage by *The Star* carried a neutral valence towards China. Nonetheless, the coverage that portrayed a critical valence (35.42%) towards China was more than that of the supportive valence (21.61%).

Table 6: Valence of Articles Covering the South China Sea Dispute (in percentage)

Valence of Articles	Percentage ( <i>n</i> = 384)
Supportive towards China	21.61
Critical towards China	35.42
Neutral	42.97

### Discussion

Drawing upon War/Peace Journalism and framing theory, this study examined the reporting of the South China Sea dispute by *The Star*, a national English-language daily newspaper with the largest circulation in Malaysia. First, the study examined visibility of the South China Sea dispute in *The Star's* coverage, where it was investigated from two angles: 1) number of news articles, and 2) types of news articles. The number of articles increased gradually from 2014 to 2015, but it raised more than double from 2015 to 2016. This was most probably because in 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), an arbitral tribunal under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), issued its ruling on the arbitration case filed by the then Philippines President Benigno Aquino against China's nine-dash line claim.

Another element of visibility—type of articles—plays an important role too in shaping readers' awareness, perception, and evaluation of an issue. It may even have an effect on governments policies (Zhang, 2019). This is because straight news articles give facts or quote references on general information like who, what, when, where, why, and how, which Palvik and McIntosh (2004) called the "surveillance function of journalism." On the other hand, editorials are opinion pieces that often identify, define, articulate, and address current events or public controversies. Written by members of the editorial board, editorials reflect the stance of the respective newspapers. Palvik and McIntosh (2004) called this type of journalism function "correlation." While editorials reflect the newspaper's official stance on issues, opinion columns are written by members of the editorial staff and typically reflect a more personal point of view than the editorials. Other than these, newspaper opinion pages like letters to the editors provide a ready-made public forum for readers to share information. By devoting most of their coverage to straight news, *The Star* mostly performed surveillance instead of the correlation function.

Furthermore, this study found that *The Star* presented the South China Sea dispute mostly in war journalism framework, which is through "focuses on here and now." This revealed that the episodic framing approach was most frequently used, and little contextualization was offered. Van Dijk (2013) remarked that when straight news dominated the coverage, it left little room for the creativeness of journalists, resulting in a top-down communication format, and this is consistent with the fact that *The Star* relied mostly on elites as its news sources in its straight news reporting.

Second, this study looked at the dominant frame in *The Star's* coverage of the South China Sea dispute. As mentioned in the findings, this study found that the indicators of war journalism were almost 40% more than the indicators of peace journalism. This finding is comparable to previous studies on war and peace journalism, such as Lee and Maslog (2005), who found that the coverage of four Asian conflicts was dominated by war journalism. Siraj (2008) also stated that US elite newspapers employed war journalism frames in their coverage of Pakistan-India conflict. Furthermore, Wolfsfeld (2004) argued that the default mode of operation for the press is to cover tension, conflict, and violence. Shinar (2004) also recorded that the media preferred to use war frames even while covering peace negotiation. Similarly, Fawcett (2002) mentioned that the Irish media found conflict frames more attractive than conciliation frames.

Third, this study investigated the salient indicators supporting the war/peace journalism frame in *The Star's* coverage on the South China Sea dispute. This study found that the three strongest indicators of war journalism were “elite-oriented,” “differences-oriented,” and “focuses on here and now.” Previous studies confirmed that sources from the government tended to dominate news coverage of wars or conflicts. For example, Ibrahim et al. (2011) found that an official spokesperson was usually quoted by Malaysian journalists in war reporting. It was explained that news media favor sources who occupy places highest in the hierarchy as they are deemed more credible by journalists. In addition, Curran (2005) pointed out that the convention of quoting elite sources can lead to an emphasis on the elite or established point of view at the expense of more diverse viewpoints. In addition, Melkote (2009) stressed that the use of sources in news narratives is an extremely important part of not only the story's construction but also of its orientation and, ultimately, the point of view being supported or legitimated in a story. Ross (2007, p. 451) even argued that “if news reports are based on a selective articulation of certain voices about a given topic, then the journalist's power in inviting (or preventing) these voices is considerable.”

In their study on news sources used in war reporting, Ibrahim et al. (2011) reminded that one way to provide objective and balanced news is by using balanced facts provided by multilevel sources. The use of multilevel sources enables journalists to assemble various opinions from a multiplicity of perspectives in a single story. Gans (cited in Ibrahim et al., 2011) identified two types of news sources—the knowns and the unknowns. The knowns are the elites and official sources, namely heads of government, ministers and deputy ministers; official spokespersons, usually the public relations practitioners; leaders of NGOs; experts; celebrities and the like. While the unknowns are not persons at the higher hierarchy, but rather ordinary people or non-elites who become relevant sources because of their connections with certain news events as eyewitnesses, victims, and families of victims. It was stated that news sources quoted by the media are primarily those at or near the top of the power hierarchies and on those low in the hierarchies who threaten the top.

According to Francis (2002), when editors and reporters inform readers and audiences about “who, what, when, where, why and how” relating to conflicts or wars, the media practitioners are also corresponding to what peace researchers called “conflict dynamics” (p. 28). The author emphasized that any statement of the dynamics of a conflict must identify “its history, recent causes, and internal composition—the different parties, the nature of their involvement, their perspectives, positions and motivations, and the different relationships between them in terms of power, allegiance and interests” (p. 28). The three strongest indicators of peace journalism found in *The Star's* coverage of the South China Sea dispute were “avoids victimizing/demonizing/emotive language,” “multiparty orientation” and “avoids labeling of good guys and bad guys,” while “reports causes and consequences” was the weakest indicator. This is an area the newspaper could look into and improve in its future reporting of the dispute.

Significantly, Rodrigues (2014) observes that peace journalism is when editors and reporters make choices—of what stories to report and about how to report them—that create opportunities at large to consider and value nonviolent responses to conflicts. It was stressed that peace journalism should use the insights of conflict analysis and transformation to update the concepts of balance, fairness, and accuracy in reporting. Editors and reporters should also provide a new route map tracing the connections between media practitioners, their sources, the news stories and the consequences of their journalism, which Lynch and McGoldrick (2007, p. 256) called the “ethics of journalistic intervention.”

Fourth, this study examined the valence towards China in *The Star's* coverage on the South China Sea dispute. A closer examination of war journalism coverage in *The Star* revealed that the framing of the South China Sea dispute was mostly dominated by a neutral valence towards China. Given the fact that China has emerged as the largest trade partner of Malaysia since 2009, while Malaysia is the largest trade partner to China among ASEAN countries, it is only natural that *The Star* devoted more coverage that undertook a neutral valence towards China. In addition, these findings are consistent with previous studies, in which scholars (Balakrishnan, 2006; Chinvano, 2015; Finkbeiner, 2013; Lim 2009, Liu & Lim, 2019) remarked that Malaysia has been adopting a “playing it safe” approach in the South China Sea dispute. This means that Malaysia is pursuing a combination of diplomatic, legal, economic, and security initiatives that can secure its interests as a claimant state while being careful not to disrupt its vital bilateral relationship with China. Kreuzer (2016) succinctly pointed out that the fundamental aim of such a bilateral relation between Malaysia and China is to achieve a reciprocal relationship resulting in long-term stability. Significantly, scholars (e.g., Johnston, 2013; Li & Guo, 2018) also argued that China, preoccupied with upholding stable relationships and minimizing future uncertainty, is willing to make compromises even with weaker opponents and to negotiate short-term interests for the sake of long-term benefits.

This study also found that Malaysian officials often highlighted to other ASEAN nations that there is no need to undertake a confrontational approach in dealing with the South China Sea dispute. It is interesting to note that in 2013, the then Chinese Ambassador to Malaysia, Chai Xi, proclaimed that “Sino-Malaysia relations have embarked on a track of comprehensive, steady and fast development in recent years,” and that the bilateral relationship was a “role model for other ASEAN countries” The latter sentiment was repeated by Chinese President Xi Jinping when he visited Malaysia in the same year. During his meeting with the then Malaysian Prime Minister Najib, President Xi stated that the Sino-Malaysia relationship served as “a fine example in the region” (Lee, 2014, p. 67).

In his study to compare Malaysian and Philippine response to China in the South China Sea dispute, Kreuzer (2016) recorded the differences of media coverage in both countries. The author found that the Malaysian strategy of toning down the South China Sea dispute rested on withholding information. In sharp contrast, the Philippine government was giving uttermost publicity to acts of Chinese assertiveness. In addition, it was found that the restraint undertaken by the Malaysian media is inconceivable in the Philippines, where the conflict was widely reported and commented on. The author further explained that regime type might play a certain role in determining the options open to government, with non- or semi-democratic regimes having a higher ability to spin-doctor information.

## **Conclusion and Suggestion for Future Studies**

This study extended war/peace journalism to an international scope while combining the approach with framing theory. In addition to the specific findings for South China Sea dispute, this study contributed to bilateral and power relations literature between Malaysia and China.

A detailed analysis of *The Star* revealed that the coverage of the South China Sea dispute was dominated by a war journalism frame. The top three strongest indicators of war journalism found in *The Star*'s coverage were "elite-oriented," "differences-oriented" and "focuses on here and now." It was also found that episodic framing approach was most frequently used, and little contextualization was offered by *The Star*.

In addition, the top three strongest indicators of peace journalism were "avoids victimizing/demonizing/emotive language," "multiparty orientation," and "avoids labeling of good guys and bad guys." A closer examination of *The Star* revealed that the framing of the South China Sea dispute was mostly dominated by a neutral valence towards China. It revealed that Malaysia is being careful not to disrupt its vital bilateral relationship with China. The English-language daily also reported about Kuala Lumpur's faith in championing China's peaceful rise. Significantly, this study also found that Malaysian officials often highlighted to other ASEAN nations that there is no need to undertake a confrontational approach in dealing with the South China Sea dispute, while Chinese officials stated that the Sino-Malaysia relationship served as an example in the region.

This paper suggests some important questions to be investigated by means of further research, specifically those that are focusing on war/peace framing, conflict reporting, and news value studies.

First, a micro-level analysis that deals with journalists as individuals should be conducted. It is essential to discover the professional views of journalists, especially those who write about crises, conflicts or wars. Future studies could look into journalists' perception of their role in modern society and how they define their communication goals. In addition, future studies could also examine how journalists deal with the structural constraints under which they have to operate.

Second, a meso-level analysis, which investigates journalism as a process of organized news production, should be carried out. Researchers may look into how the structures of editorial work, such as decision-making hierarchy and quality control, influence war/peace framing or conflicts reporting. It is also important to examine how the availability of resources (staff, time, budget, etc.) affect crises, conflicts or wars reporting.

Third, a macro-level analysis, which examines the social function of journalism and the interrelation between journalism and its environment, future studies need to investigate the role of war/peace journalism and its functional contribution to modern society from a non-normative perspective. On this level of analysis, researchers ought to look deeper into the interplay between journalism and other public systems, for example, economy, military, or politics.

Finally, a public opinion survey, which studies how, why, and to what extent does war/peace journalism have an impact on the audience should be carried out. On the one hand, Carter (2013) argued that propaganda is an exercise in framing, which is intended to bring about short-term shifts in public opinion. On another hand, Choi, Watt, and Lynch (2006) believed that media only reinforce existing attitude. Therefore, it is essential for future studies to look into how do media frame influence individual's perception? And how do audiences react to competing frames?

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