

Constructing War Accounts In Malaysia

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Introduction

Almost all journalism texts agree that news is an account (Schoenbach 1983) of an event of a life world for the purpose of serving the audiences (Pitts et.al 1997). Narrative meanwhile is the organising principle of the said account. Organising in brief is a set of process, personal or collective that provide a certain ordered reality, imagined and/ or in action whereby people will construct or mediate their experiences in, knowledge about, and transaction with the social world (Bruner 1990). In the context of news production, the account becomes *the way* the news is reported and the kind of interpretation made by the press (Dobkin 1993). Specifically, news as an account revolves around the state of narrative reality in telling, relating, and narrating a story, if we used Genette's (1980) as a reference in understanding what a narrative is. Tunstall (1977) noted that in that narrative reality, a certain preferred meaning prevails, and a certain kind of mediation is at works. With reference to the mediation, the 'accounted narrativised news' are expected to be interactively developed and modified (Cobb 1994) with the reality of the concerned life-world (Nasser 1983, Lendvai 1983, Wiio 1983, Karch 1983). In this reality, understanding and construction of news are related to contextualized or configured knowledge, which means a particular event is understood upon being located in a narrative sequence of the significant order of representation. The narrativised news in this regard is news that has been authored within a specific frame of reference and point of view. The news-truth in this respect is of particularity in nature.

In relation to the above, 'tradition' of a particular society where a certain socially accepted reality exist (Hacten 1996, Galtung & Ruge 1970) is one of the factors that coloured the narrativised news. In Malaysia the tradition must adhere to the Rukunegara based Canons of

Journalism. As most newspapers in the country are more or less owned directly or indirectly by various ruling parties that form the government of the day (Nain and Kim, 2005), the social accepted reality is usually 'political' in nature. Once, two editors from two newspapers, *Berita Harian* and *Utusan Malaysia*, were 'asked to resign' upon losing the trust of the government. One of editors of *New Straits Times* was replaced upon publishing a story that said to be 'arousing anxiety' of a friendly nation. Simply, there is an aura of intimacy between newspaper production of news and the government gazing. Such behaviour is seen as an appropriate behaviour. Various laws meanwhile acted like the Damocles' sword hanging over all newsrooms. Newspaper discourses therefore are expected to be in line with government voices. The narrativised news therefore must be written and presented in the 'collaborative language' that represents a life world in accordance with 'Malaysian tradition' of 'meaning-environment' (Louw, 2001:2).

This work concerns the narrativised news about the Gulf War in 2003 as accounted in *Utusan Malaysia* and *New Straits Times*. *Utusan Malaysia* is a leading Malay language newspaper in Malaysia while *New Straits Times* is the influential English language newspaper of the country. In terms of simplicity, *Utusan Malaysia* is very popular with the 'rural' Malay-Muslims while *New Straits Times* is perceived to be the staple paper for the 'urbanites'. In this work we focus on the construction of preferred meaning, which leads to a certain kind of preferred reality, by *Utusan Malaysia* and *New Straits Times*. As a matter of emphasis, we attempt to discuss the above issue of preferences in relation to the following questions: What was the nature of coverage of the war by both newspapers; what was the preferred meaning suggested by *Utusan Malaysia* and *New Straits Times*; what kind of stories were reported; what were the strategies used to construct preferred meanings; and what were the differences and similarities of coverage portrayed by both papers. In our attempt to understand what is going on in both papers, we rely on our reading of 1365 war stories in *Utusan Malaysia* and 1208 in *New Straits Times* over the period of 43 days (March 20, 2003 – May 1, 2003). We used 86 editions of both papers for the above purpose. The period covered was in line with George W. Bush's definition about the beginning and the ending of the war.

In analyzing 2573 stories-as-data, we engaged ourselves with content analysis.

Malaysian Media And The First Gulf War 1991

Since the coming of Islam to Malaysia, stories about the Middle East were and are close to Malay-Muslims. This is in line with the notion of 'communitas' (Turner 1969). Indeed this spirit colored Malaysian media coverage of the first Gulf War in 1991 even though almost all Malaysian media relied on Western news wires, particularly CNN, Reuters, Associated Press and AFP. Two important studies, by Zaharom Nain (1992) and Swanson & Smith (1993) were conducted about the behaviour of Malaysian media toward war. Nain notes:

At first, the Malaysian government took a firm stand against the invasion of Kuwait by Saddam's government of Iraq, and supported the United Nations' Resolution 678. The West, particularly the United States government under Bush Sr. translated such support as a thumb up for war against Iraq. Later Malaysian government argued that any conflict should be resolved through negotiation, not war. Malaysian media during period of crisis acted as the 'mouthpiece' of the government as 'news presentations' were done without with critical assessment on government stances. Malaysian mainstream newspapers in this regard failed to educate the domestic public about the war as no sufficient knowledge about the complexity of the war and its implication for Malaysia were presented. The press then was preoccupied to present the 'official version' of the war. The published news was often framed with the 'ethno-religious angle'.

Swanson and Smith conducted their study on TV3 coverage about the war. TV3 as a whole tried its best to construct narratives that reflected national sentiments as espoused by the government of Malaysia.

Malaysian Media and Gulf War 2003

We categorized stories about the Gulf War 2003 in *Utusan Malaysia* (UM) and *New Straits Times* (NST) into five; story of ordinary Iraqis, story on Saddam's regime, story of pro-war coalition, story of anti-war coalition and story on Malaysia (the government and its people).

Types of story	UM (n=1365)	NST (n=1208)
Iraqis	13.68 %	13.33 %
Saddam's	14.04 %	7.78 %
Pro-war	34.38 %	27.78 %
Anti-war	19.65 %	29.26 %
Malaysia	18.25 %	21.85 %

Based on the above percentage of stories, UM gave more space on stories related to pro-coalition forces headed by the United States of America. The stories revolved around combats in the field, military strategies and tactics, weapons, the physical and emotional state of soldiers, challenges faced by the forces, defeats, opportunities, military briefings, officers' claims and military accidents. Language used in those stories was often euphemistically worded in a manner 'unfavourable' to the pro-coalition forces. For example the headline on March 29 read as the following: The [US] Marines were **shocked** with Iraqis resistance. For NST, almost similar amount of coverage were given to pro-coalition and anti-coalition forces. In between lines, NST showed tinges about the coalition forces weaknesses. On March 25 for example NST printed the following headlines: Britain reports **first soldier killed** in Southern Iraq. The NST gave a lot of coverage on anti-war protesters and showed how the war negatively affected the world economy. The paper pursued along the line that whoever wins the war, it was not the best choice to end a conflict. Comparatively we observed that NST gave more emphasis on the impact of war on economy and international stock exchange as compared to UM. Perhaps such differences were related to the tradition; NST was perceived by many people as 'business' paper while UM was a 'humanity' paper.

In general, the mood of 'particularism' was very visible in UM's news. The narrativity of its news showed strong preferences to the Iraqis even though accounts were on the success of the pro-coalition forces. In NST, stories published were more in line with 'universalism' mood whereby it put forward the notion that the war was a violation of human rights and international law. Here, perhaps both papers were conforming to McManus's (1999) who suggested that journalism was designed to serve the market.

Contextually, before the fall of Tikrit that marked the end of the war on April 15, 2003, narrativised news in UM and NST basically appeared in two types: Action/combat/"hard" news from the field and the 'soft armed chair' news.

Contextual types	Stories
Action/hard news from the field	•The coalition forces: The strategies, tactics and success, military weapons, armies, challenges and defeats, opportunities, military briefings, claims and accidents, •Saddam's dead or alive, regime's surrender. - Saddam's: Iraqi army, battle success and defeats, resistances, chances, patriotism, tactics and strategies, denial of coalition's success. •Suffering of civilians.
"Armed-chair"/soft news outside the battle field	•Motives of war •Effects of war on economy and diplomatic relationship •Anti-war protesters •Journalists activities and positions in the war •The coalition headed by US plan on reconstruction of Iraq •European Union, Arab League, ASEAN and OIC stances •Malaysia (government and its people) in relation to the war.

UM and NST began their coverage on 2003 war with the coalition's motives of war. Both papers published accounts about the coalition idea about winning or losing the war. With regard to the former, it means toppling Saddam as the war is about 'liberation'. In that manner of narrating, the issue of weapons of mass destruction was marginalized. Instead, the 'war-for-oil' and 'neo-imperialism' at work were suggested for the real motives of the war. NST in particular suggested that the notion of the New World Order and the role of United Nations in unipolar world were up for rethinking. In line with that support for those motions the NST published many accounts on anti-war protesters around the world. To support the 'neo-imperialism' motives, a great number of accounts about the coalition forces plan on reconstructing

new Iraq were also given. Those accounts revolved around the grant of contract given to US companies and the changing tone of previously anti-war countries toward the pro-war coalition forces. Accounts about different opinions (for or against the war) among European Union, Arab League, ASEAN and OIC countries were also presented. The image of the United Nations as incompetent body in handling the war was also projected especially by the NST. For the English paper the war implied that US 'hegemonic rules ruled'. It also suggested that such phenomena would increase the threat of terrorism. As expected UM accounts were focusing more on the effects of Iraq's war on Muslim countries and Muslim communities.

Both UM and NST meanwhile without fail gave a lot of space on the government efforts to reduce negative effects of the war on the life of Malaysians. The peace loving Malaysians generosity of collecting funds for the displaced Iraqis was highlighted by both papers. Suggestions for Malaysians to voice their disagreement with the pro-war coalition forces in a 'civilized' way were promoted. However, both papers clearly presented the 'official' accounts that Malaysia was not anti-American, a stance taken by the government. Similarly, both UM and NST tried their best to portray Malaysia as the leading Third World nation to find solutions to end the war. In due course Malaysia as a model of a moderate Islamic nation was narrated.

After the fall of Tikrit, both UM and NST showed different moods of narrativation. Most accounts were about non-action battlefield news. Basically news published were about coalition forces agenda for the new Iraq. The stories ranged from granting of contracts for re-construction projects, US government asking for more financial help to build new Iraq, US concerns to lift sanction against Iraq, appointment of US officers in the temporary government of Iraq, effort of coalition forces to bring order, capturing Saddam's men, and speculations on Saddam's whereabouts. A considerable attention was given on the life of ordinary Iraqis after the war. Voices about the need for US armies to leave Iraq were presented too. Accounts about the anxiety and fear of the coalition forces in managing order in Iraq now were also emphasized. With regard to the role of UN, both papers reiterated that that world body should be given more clout in maintaining world order, and not to be swayed by external pressures of the US government. Accounts about Syria as the next target of US agenda to configure the Middle East politics were prominently displayed by Utusan Malaysia not New Straits Times. The

Malay language paper suggested such extension of war theory based on Donald Rumsfeld's claim that Syria was helping Saddam. During this period, Rumsfeld and Colin Powell, US Secretary of State, were 'newsmakers' not Bush, the president. The NST meanwhile continued to give more space on stories about protestors on US led forces occupation of Iraq. Accounts about anti-war countries repairing their diplomatic ties with US were given much attention by both *Utusan Malaysia* and *New Straits Times*. Any changes on Malaysia's stance about the war, if any, were not accounted. On the domestic fronts, both papers carried a lot of accounts about the effects of war on Malaysian economics, the role of MERCY Malaysia and Joint Media Team Malaysia, evacuation plan for Malaysians in Syria as well as on Malaysians' commitment toward the Malaysian International Peace Fund.

In brief, accounts on post-war Iraq posited as follows:

Utusan Malaysia	New Straits Times
•Reconstruction of Iraq •The success of the US led coalition forces •Iraqis life after the war •Iraqis demand for self-administration •UN role in the post-war Iraq •Syria as the potential site for a new war •Stories on Malaysia and Malaysians - Repairing broken diplomatic ties	•Iraqis life after the war •Reconstruction of Iraq •Iraqis demand for self-administration •The success of US led coalition forces •Repairing broken diplomatic ties •UN role in the post-war Iraq •Stories on Malaysia and Malaysians

Narrativised news framing

Narrativised news and framing are interrelated. Roach (1995) noted that narrativised news is constructed over a certain issue with a format that shape the way stories are told. News framing is basically the conscious selection of some aspects of reality (Watkins 2000). It is an enactment

that gives privileges certain reality over others out of scattered events (Bird & Dardene 1997). In so doing, both *Utusan Malaysia* and *New Straits Times* were aware that the enactment of accounts must be in line with the interest of the government. Such parallelism was displayed clearly as both papers frame the war as aggression, a point stressed by the government of Malaysia.

With regards to the issue of opposing the war, both *Utusan Malaysia* and *New Straits Times* published the government reminder that anti-war sentiment should not be equated with anti-America. Thus Malaysians were advised not to boycott American goods as such action was construed of not reflecting anti-war sentiment. Perhaps that was the main reason why news on the relationship between US foreign policy and its economy was marginalized on both papers' pages. However, accounts about anti-war protestors else where boycotting American goods were reported in *New Straits Times*.

Malaysian political leaders meanwhile were portrayed as having a good relationship with the US government while cautiously speaking about the wrong doing of the coalition forces of invading Iraq. Calls for Malaysians' rationality in dealing with the war were heightened when the government of Malaysia noted its trust in UN. Both *Utusan Malaysia* and *New Straits Times* in this regard repeatedly published accounts on the importance of UN in ensuring world's peace.

During the early period of the war, *Utusan Malaysia* gave the impression that US led coalition forces was attacking Muslims. After a while a 'paradigm repair' (Reese 1997) was made by the paper. Such position was not happily received by the government. Appropriately Prime Minister Mahathir and his deputy told Malaysians not to view the war as a religious war, which is between Christianity and Islam. Malaysians were also told not to channel their anger on US interests in the country. Similarly, Mahathir noted that even though Malaysia was against the war of aggression in Iraq, Malaysia was not against US per se. *Utusan Malaysia* on 22 March 2003 dutifully published the following headlines: *Perang Iraq bukan antara penganut Islam, Kristian* (Iraq War is not between Muslims, Christians). In the new position, *Utusan Malaysia* framed the war as an extension of US hegemony in the Middle East. In sum, the process of the paradigm repairs took the following sequences:

Original theme (US led coalition forces is attacking Muslims)

Intervention	(The ruling elites ruled out the notion of religious war)
New theme	(Iraq war is an extension of US hegemony in the Middle East)

New Straits Times in the above sense was spared from any paradigm repair as the paper framed the war as an extension of the New World Order since the first day. In the tradition of Malaysia, the paradigm repair was understandable as religious issues may lead to or exacerbate turmoil in the multi-religious society of the country (Idid and Pawanteh 1989). The above action was simply a strategic political communication, if one refers to Manheim (1991).

Managing Scattering War Narratives

In constructing war narratives, UM and NST depended on 'scattered' information. In this regard their reliance on foreign news agencies, like AFP, AP and Reuters, was very high. *Utusan Malaysia* on April 5 noted that Malaysians were not happy with that dependency as many narratives were perceived as 'single sided information'. As part of strategy to overcome the deficiency, JMTM was set up. Besides the above sources, NST in particular utilized *The Independent*, *Times* and the *Guardian* of United Kingdom, *Yonhap* (Korea), *Xinhua* (China), Asia Pacific News Agency, Ria Novosti (Russia), IRNA (Iran), PTI (India), Graphic News, Bloomberg and New York Times of USA, Bernama and *Star* (Malaysia). *Utusan Malaysia* meanwhile showed a high degree of intimacy with CBS News.com (USA), Al Jazeera, Bernama, *Star* (Malaysia), *Sydney Morning Herald* (Australia), Arabic News.com, *Guardian* and the Observer of United Kingdom. In the context of usage of purposes, *Utusan Malaysia* and *New Straits Times* showed the following pattern.

Agency / Source	Pattern of usage
Multiple news agencies	Both side of the stories (coalition forces+Iraq)

The Independent, The Guardian, Yonhap, Xinhua, Oana, Ria Novasti, IRNA, PTI, Bernama, The Star, Al Jazeera, Arabic News.com, The Observer and Graphic News	Anti-war sentiments. News that showed strong parallelism with the government of Malaysia stance
New York Times, Times, Sydney Morning Herald	Mostly about coalition forces activities World reactions about the war
JMTM	War narratives from Malaysians/ the government of Malaysia perspectives

On the production level, both papers helped their readers about the 'scattered war narratives' by having sections.

Section	UM	NST
Front page	88 (7%)	62 (5%)
Nation	193 (14%)	341 (28%)
World	111 (8%)	98 (8%)
Focus Report	945 (69%)	577 (48%)
Economy	13 (1%)	99 (8%)
Editorial	15 (1%)	31 (3%)

With regard to editorials, *Utusan Malaysia* (n=15) and *New Straits Times* (n=31) showed the following themes:

Theme	UM	NST
Negative effects of war US imperialism / The peril of unipolar world	2 (13%)	7 (23%)
Role of UN	1 (7%)	4 (13%)

Effects on Muslims and Arab Nations	1 (7%)	3 (10%)
Malaysia: Effects / roles / stance / diplomatic ties with US	7 (47%)	6 (19%)
The need for media literacy	0	2(6%)
Negative effects on Iraq	2 (13%)	4 (13%)
US war	2 (13%)	5 (16%)

With reference to the above, UM and NST shared a similar theme in reporting war narratives for Malaysian readers. The NST however showed repeated attention towards the need for media literacy in reading narrativised news. Here, a tinge of contested reality showed its tail. The NST here and again provided that nuances for readers to read meaning between lines.

Reflections

In this Gulf War 2003, both UM and NST reiterated that they were not taking sides in the war, the coalition forces nor Saddam's. Both papers maintained that the people of Iraq were the hero and the victim in the war; Bush went to war against the will of UN and Saddam was the dictator. UM and NST therefore put forward the following paradigm: Against the war, against dictatorship and against violence. UM and NST stance was indeed following the indexing hypothesis. Bennet (1990:106) notes;

Mass media news professionals, from the boardroom to the beat, tend to 'index' the range of voices and viewpoints in both news and editorials according to the range of views expressed in mainstream government debate about a given topic.

With indexing, news produced were attached to 'situational rules' of cautiousness especially with regard to foreign policy (Zaller and Chiu, 1996). We strongly believe that this phenomenon is very much related to the politics of editorship which in turn is subjected to the voices of the owners. In Malaysia almost all owners are directly or

indirectly related to the ruling parties. Both papers realized that readers were able to find other scattered war narratives else too, like the internet and alternative papers. In that constraint of the need to adhere to the government discourses NST in particular published 'contrary' narratives, for example narratives on boycotting of US goods and anti-war/anti-US demonstrations at various capitals, as part of their strategy for a 'balanced journalism'. (*Europeans take Coca-Cola off menu in US good boycott*, April 2; Japan's anti war movement boycotts US goods, March 27). UM at one point even suggested that the war was about 'controlling Muslims'. Furthermore, both papers from the very beginning were not convinced with Bush's motives for war as said in 'the national address,' on March 19, 2003. Bush said,

Our nation (USA) enters this conflict reluctantly ... yet, our purpose is sure. The people of USA and our friends and allies will not live at the mercy of an outlaw regime that threatens the peace with weapons of mass murder. We will not meet that threat now, with our Army, Air Force, Navy, Coast Guards and Marines, so that we do have to meet it later with armies of fire fighters and police and doctors on the streets of our cities.

As UM and the NST were operating in the country that claim Islam as its official religion, both dailies tried their best not to 'injure' the emotion and the feeling of the Muslim 'communitas'. One way of appeasing was by labeling the US-coalition forces as invaders not 'liberators' who went to war initiated for 'humanitarian and moral purposes'. Iraqis resistance was not labeled as 'outlaws' or 'terrorists.' For UM Iraqis who resisted the 'occupational forces' were labeled as 'fighters' not terrorists. Yet in that anxiety of giving 'positive label' for Iraqis, the NST still considered some fighters, especially those with Islamic faith, as doing 'suicide' works (*Islamist group preparing suicide attacks on pro-war*, NST 1 April). A point to note, a similar labeling was used regularly in Western press. In our opinion this contradictory labeling was arising out of confusion in 'cleaning Western discourses'. UM in this regard was more sensitive by saying *pejuang berani mati* (the fighters who dare to sacrifice their lives).

In narrativising war news, both UM and the NST perceived the war to have a long historical line. Both dailies published a long chronology related to the present Gulf war 2003 with the past events of the past since World War I. In due course future states of the world under the unipolar climate was narrated (*Chronology of the United nations*

sanctions imposed on Iraq since 1990, NST April 18). We believe both papers were trying to give readers to decide who the villain was or who was the victim. This framing action was to give the war a context. This work is part of sizing --- magnifying or shrinking elements of a depicted reality to make more or less salient

Nevertheless, narratives on isolated dramatic event were still being pursued vigorously. Maher & Chiasson (1995) noted this media behaviour was normal for most press in covering crises. More often in that dramatization a worthy victim was selected to 'satisfy' readers/audiences (Herman & Chomsky 1988). Among the worthy victim highlighted was Ya Yasmine, a badly injured girl. Narratives about Yasmine's plight were given extensive coverage in both dailies. It was narratives that generous with gory details, quoted expressions of outrage and demands of justice.

Reflexively we observed that war narratives published in *Utusan Malaysia* and *New Straits Times* were to give certain preferred meaning with a certain version of reality. In that construction, the narrativising work was in the state of tension, due to struggle over which meaning should be given a priority. On the one hand the authority of the hidden hand of the government cascading into the newsroom, while at the other, both dailies were trying their best to perform sense-making with all scattered narratives sourced from various news agencies. In the kind of struggle papers were not challenging the indexing hypothesis but was just making an 'amendment', noted Chang-Ho Lee (2004:16). Whatever it is, national interest plays a central role in affecting both dailies accounts of the conflict. Here national interest as a set of shared priorities is basically viewed in the light of relations with the rest of the world. For some this is ethnocentrism, and both *Utusan Malaysia* and *New Straits Times* subscribed to the notion obediently. After all, this is in line with the tradition 'meaning environment' (Louw 2001) of Malaysia where both dailies operate. Besides, very few dailies dare to be cut by the Damocles' sword of the government.

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