

# The Narrative of Fraud: A Framing Analysis of Two Leading Malaysian Newspapers

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## Abstract

This study explores how two leading Malaysian newspapers, a prominent English-language publication referred to as Newspaper A and a widely circulated Malay-language publication referred to as Newspaper B, frame fraud reporting through investigative, neutral, and sensationalist approaches, using framing theory as the analytical lens. Framing theory posits that the media influences public perceptions by emphasizing certain aspects of an issue while downplaying others. A qualitative content analysis was conducted on 94 newspaper headlines, categorized into three framing types: investigative, neutral, and sensationalist. The findings reveal significant differences in editorial strategies. While both newspapers prioritize neutral reporting, Newspaper A allocates 80% of its coverage to this frame, compared to 71% for Newspaper B. Conversely, Newspaper B demonstrates a stronger emphasis on investigative frames (14%) and sensationalist frames (20%) compared to Newspaper A (5% and 15%, respectively). These differences highlight Newspaper B's focus on engaging readers through systemic narratives and dramatic storytelling, whereas Newspaper A leans toward factual, procedural reporting. This analysis underscores the media's dual role as an informant and influencer, shaping public discourse on fraud and accountability. The findings contribute to a broader understanding of media framing in Malaysia, emphasizing the need for a balance between investigative depth and engaging narratives to foster informed citizenship and systemic accountability.

**Keywords:** fraud, media, Framing theory, reporting, qualitative

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Fraud poses a significant challenge in modern societies, impacting public trust, economic stability, and governance structures. From financial scandals to political corruption, fraudulent activities erode institutional credibility and harm the socio-economic fabric of nations. In Malaysia, high-profile cases such as the 1MDB scandal have underscored the pervasive nature of fraud and the critical need for effective oversight mechanisms. Media outlets play a pivotal role in this context, acting as both informers and influencers in public discourse. By reporting on fraud, the media raises awareness, holds perpetrators accountable, and fosters systemic reforms.

### 1.1 Framing Fraud through Media Narratives

Media narratives are not neutral conveyors of information; rather, they are structured through frames that influence how audiences interpret events. Framing theory, introduced by Goffman (1974) and expanded by Entman (1993), suggests that frames selectively highlight certain aspects of reality while omitting others. This process guides public interpretation by defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral evaluations, and suggesting remedies. In fraud reporting, frames can emphasize systemic accountability, factual reporting, or dramatic storytelling. These approaches are categorized as investigative, neutral, and sensationalist frames.

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Investigative frames delve into systemic issues, exposing corruption and institutional failures. Neutral frames provide objective, factual reporting, maintaining journalistic impartiality. Sensationalist frames, on the other hand, focus on dramatic or emotional elements to engage readers. Each of these frames serves distinct purposes, shaping how fraud is perceived by the public and how policy responses are prioritized.

## **1.2 The Role of Media in Fraud Accountability**

In democratic societies, the media serves as a watchdog, ensuring transparency and accountability. Investigative journalism has historically been instrumental in uncovering fraud, shedding light on complex schemes that often escape public scrutiny. For instance, Malaysia's 1MDB scandal came to global attention through rigorous reporting by both domestic and international media. Such cases demonstrate the power of investigative frames to mobilize public opinion and prompt institutional reforms. Neutral reporting, while less dramatic, is equally important in maintaining public trust. By presenting facts without bias, neutral frames allow audiences to form their own interpretations, fostering informed citizenship. Conversely, sensationalist frames, though criticized for oversimplifying issues, can attract widespread attention to fraud cases, ensuring they remain in public discourse. Together, these frames underscore the media's multifaceted role in combating fraud.

## **1.3 Significance of the Study**

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it contributes to the understanding of how media framing influences public perceptions of fraud. In a society increasingly shaped by media narratives, understanding framing patterns is essential for evaluating the effectiveness of fraud reporting. By categorizing headlines from Newspaper A and Newspaper B into investigative, neutral, and sensationalist frames, this research provides insights into the editorial strategies that shape public discourse. Second, the study highlights the differences in how media outlets approach fraud reporting. Newspaper A (a staple source of news for urban and English-speaking audiences) and Newspaper B (caters to a diverse readership, including rural and Malay-speaking audiences) are among Malaysia's most widely read newspapers, catering to diverse audiences with varying preferences. Analysing their framing patterns sheds light on how these outlets balance the need for factual reporting, investigative depth, and audience engagement.

Third, this study has practical implications for journalists, policymakers, and readers. For journalists, understanding framing theory can help refine reporting practices, ensuring a balance between accuracy and engagement. For policymakers, recognizing media framing patterns can inform strategies to promote transparency and accountability. For readers, this study fosters media literacy, enabling critical engagement with news narratives. Finally, this study contributes to the broader field of media and communication studies, particularly in the Malaysian context. While global research on media framing is extensive, studies focusing on fraud reporting in Southeast Asia remain limited. By examining two prominent Malaysian newspapers, this research addresses a gap in the literature, offering a regional perspective on media's role in governance and accountability.

## **1.4 Objectives of the Study**

This research aims to achieve the following objectives:

- i) To analyse the framing patterns in fraud reporting by Newspaper A and Newspaper B.
- ii) To examine the implications of these frames on public accountability and institutional transparency.
- iii) To highlight differences in editorial strategies and audience engagement.
- iv) To understand how media framing shapes narratives on fraud, fostering a more informed and engaged citizenry.

The paper is organized as follows. Following this introduction, the literature review provides an overview of framing theory and its application in fraud reporting, highlighting key studies and theoretical insights. The methodology section outlines the qualitative content analysis approach used to categorize newspaper headlines. The findings section presents the results, comparing framing patterns in Newspaper A and Newspaper B. The discussion interprets these findings in the context of framing theory, emphasizing their implications for media practices and public accountability. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the key insights and offers recommendations for future research and practice.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Framing theory, introduced by Goffman (1974) and expanded by Entman (1993), is pivotal in understanding how media influences public perceptions. Frames selectively emphasize certain aspects of an issue, defining problems, attributing responsibility, and proposing remedies (Entman, 1993). Media's role in shaping narratives is particularly pronounced in fraud reporting, where investigative, neutral, and sensationalist frames guide public interpretation. Media serves a dual role as both an informer and influencer in democratic societies (Norris, 2000). Investigative journalism has historically been crucial in exposing systemic fraud, holding institutions accountable, and driving reforms (Tumber & Waisbord, 2004). For instance, major corruption scandals, such as Malaysia's 1MDB case, underscored the power of media in uncovering fraud and fostering public awareness (Gomez & Jomo, 1997).

### **2.1 The Role of Media in Fraud Reporting**

The media has historically served as a powerful institution in exposing fraud and corruption, fulfilling its role as the "fourth estate" by holding individuals and institutions accountable (Norris, 2000). Investigative journalism, in particular, has been instrumental in uncovering complex fraud cases, using tools such as leaked documents and whistle-blower testimonies to reveal systemic issues that might otherwise remain hidden (Tumber & Waisbord, 2004). This capacity is especially crucial in contexts where institutional mechanisms for fraud detection are weak or compromised. In Malaysia, the media's role has evolved against the backdrop of significant political and economic changes. Key events, such as the exposure of the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal, underscored the critical role of investigative journalism in revealing fraud. Media outlets, such as The Edge and Sarawak Report, played pivotal roles in breaking the story, which ultimately led to international investigations and political fallout (Gomez & Jomo, 1997). These examples highlight the media's potential to serve as a catalyst for public accountability and policy reform.

### **2.2 Challenges in Media Independence and Objectivity**

While the media's role in exposing fraud is well-documented, its independence is often constrained by external pressures. Studies highlight the tension between journalistic integrity and the influence of political and corporate powers. For instance, Besley and Prat (2006) argue that media ownership structures can significantly impact the depth and impartiality of reporting. In Malaysia, the historical intertwining of media ownership with political entities raises concerns about biased reporting or selective coverage of fraud cases (Gomez & Jomo, 1997). This dynamic poses challenges for the media's credibility and its ability to function as an impartial watchdog.

Furthermore, the emergence of digital platforms has introduced new dimensions to fraud reporting. While online media offers opportunities for broader dissemination, it also raises risks of misinformation and sensationalism. Potter (2010) emphasizes the growing need for media literacy to enable audiences to critically assess the information presented. This is particularly relevant in the digital age, where the rapid spread of unverified information can obscure the complexities of fraud cases.

### **2.3 Framing Theory and Its Application to Fraud Reporting**

Framing theory, as introduced by Goffman (1974) and later expanded by Entman (1993), provides a valuable lens for understanding how media narratives shape public perceptions of fraud. The framing of fraud cases whether as isolated incidents, systemic failures, or political scandals can influence how audiences perceive accountability and the urgency of reform. For example, Entman (2007) notes that framing not only highlights specific aspects of an issue but also suppresses alternative interpretations, thereby shaping public discourse and policy priorities. In the context of fraud reporting, framing can take various forms. Investigative reporting frames fraud as a systemic issue requiring structural reforms, neutral framing fosters media literacy by prioritizing clarity and factual accuracy, minimizing the risk of misinformation, while sensationalist narratives focus on scandalous elements to drive readership. Studies suggest that investigative frames are more likely to promote informed public discourse, whereas sensationalist coverage may erode trust in institutions by oversimplifying or exaggerating the problem (Schudson, 2002). Understanding these framing dynamics is essential for evaluating the media's role in shaping public accountability and policy responses.

## **2.4 Media Literacy and Public Engagement**

The relationship between media narratives and public perception underscores the importance of media literacy. As fraud cases become increasingly prevalent, particularly in the digital era, audiences must develop the skills to critically assess media content. Potter (2010) argues that media literacy is a vital component of civic engagement, enabling individuals to distinguish between informative reporting and sensationalism. In Malaysia, initiatives to promote media literacy could enhance the public's ability to hold institutions accountable, ensuring that fraud reporting leads to meaningful outcomes rather than short-term outrage.

## **2.5 Implications for Governance and Policy**

The interplay between media, public perception, and policy change is a recurring theme in the literature on fraud reporting. Besley and Burgess (2002) highlight the media's role in mobilizing public pressure, which can prompt governmental action. This dynamic was evident in Malaysia during the 1MDB scandal, where extensive media coverage contributed to political changes and legal reforms. However, the literature also cautions against over-reliance on media narratives, emphasizing the need for robust institutional frameworks to complement the media's watchdog role.

# **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

## **3.1 Research Design**

This study employs a qualitative research design to analyse how Malaysian newspapers have reported fraud cases between 2003 and 2024. By focusing on the framing of fraud narratives, the research aims to explore the relationship between media reporting, public accountability, and policy development. Qualitative content analysis is chosen as the primary method, as it allows for an in-depth examination of textual data, particularly the themes and patterns embedded within media narratives (Krippendorff, 2013). The study utilizes a purposive sampling approach to select newspapers that are representative of Malaysia's media landscape. Major national newspapers, of Newspaper A and Newspaper B, are included due to their wide readership and historical significance in reporting major fraud cases. Articles published between 2023 and 2024 are analysed to capture the evolution of fraud reporting over two years. Articles explicitly addressing fraud cases, corruption scandals, or anti-fraud policies are included. Articles are retrieved from online archives, newspaper databases, and official publications. To ensure consistency, the following keywords are used for searches: "fraud," "corruption," "scandal," and "accountability." The retrieved articles are categorized by publication year, type of fraud case, and narrative framing. By employing qualitative content analysis within the framework of framing theory, this methodology enables a nuanced exploration of media narratives in fraud reporting. The approach not only identifies patterns and trends but also sheds light on the broader implications of media framing for public accountability and policy-making.

## **3.2 Analytical Framework**

The study employs framing theory (Goffman, 1974; Entman, 1993) as its analytical lens to examine how newspapers frame fraud cases. The analysis focuses on three primary framing categories:

- i) Investigative Frames: Highlight systemic issues and propose solutions, emphasizing accountability and structural reforms.
- ii) Neutral Frames: Provide factual accounts with minimal bias or interpretation.
- iii) Sensationalist Frames: Focus on dramatic or scandalous elements to captivate audiences, often prioritizing impact over depth.

The study adheres to ethical guidelines for media research. All data sources are publicly available, and no personal information is analysed. The research avoids misrepresentation by ensuring that all interpretations are grounded in the textual evidence provided by the articles. Additionally, potential conflicts of interest arising from the political affiliations of media outlets are acknowledged and critically assessed.

## **3.3 Data Analysis and Coding Process**

The dataset for this study comprises 93 newspaper headlines, with 51 headlines sourced from Newspaper A and 42 from Newspaper B. These publications were selected due to their prominence in Malaysia and their reputations for reporting on fraud cases. The following steps were taken to ensure a systematic and comprehensive collection

of relevant data. The study analysed headlines published within a specific period, from January 2023 to August 2024, to ensure sufficient data coverage of fraud-related reporting during this time. Relevant headlines were identified using targeted keywords, including “fraud,” “corruption,” “embezzlement,” “scandal,” and “money laundering.” Headlines were included if they directly referenced fraud-related incidents, such as financial misconduct, corruption, or institutional malpractice. General crime reports, unrelated financial news, or articles lacking a clear fraud narrative were excluded. Examples of inclusion criteria is ‘*Headmistress fined RM10, 000 for fraud*’ and exclusion criteria is ‘*Police arrest man for theft*’. After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 51 headlines from Newspaper A and 42 headlines from Newspaper B were selected, resulting in a total of 93 headlines. The dataset was consolidated and organized using Microsoft Excel for consistency and accuracy.

Each headline was analysed and categorized based on its framing approach using a systematic coding framework grounded in framing theory. Headlines were categorized into three distinct frames:

- i) Investigative Frames: Emphasize systemic issues or detailed investigations.
- ii) Neutral Frames: Provide factual, event-based reporting.
- iii) Sensationalist Frames: Highlight dramatic or emotional narratives.

Each headline was reviewed and assigned to one of the three categories based on keywords or specific terms indicative of the frame (e.g., “expose” for investigative, “charged” for neutral, “shocking” for sensationalist) based on the tone (the language and style of reporting (e.g., factual, analytical, or dramatic)) and the context (the broader narrative suggested by the headline). To ensure reliability, two independent coders reviewed a subset of the data. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus. The analysis of 51 headlines from Newspaper A and 42 headlines from Newspaper B revealed distinct framing patterns. The distribution of frames is summarized in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Distribution of frames

Frame Type	Newspaper A	Newspaper B	Total
Investigative	2 (5%)	6 (15%)	8
Neutral	41 (80%)	28 (70%)	69
Sensationalist	8 (15%)	8 (20%)	16
<b>Total</b>	<b>51(100%)</b>	<b>42 (100%)</b>	<b>93</b>

Investigative frames focus on uncovering systemic fraud, exposing institutional malpractice, or highlighting detailed investigations. These frames constituted 5% of headlines in Newspaper A and 15% in Newspaper B. The limited presence of investigative frames in Newspaper A indicates a lesser emphasis on systemic accountability within its reporting. For instance, Newspaper A featured headlines such as "Cops nab three teens linked to syndicate sourcing mule accounts for fraud," which briefly mentions an investigation but lacks depth into systemic issues. Another headline, "Authorities probe multi-layered bank fraud operation," highlights ongoing investigations but remains procedural in nature. Conversely, Newspaper B demonstrates a stronger focus on investigative journalism, with headlines such as "Risikan PERKESO dedah isu kartel" (PERKESO intelligence reveals cartel issues), showcasing its commitment to exposing institutional fraud. Additionally, "Sindiket seleweng subsidi di Sekinchan tumpas" (Subsidy misappropriation syndicate in Sekinchan dismantled) highlights in-depth efforts to uncover and dismantle organized fraud networks. This contrast reflects Newspaper B’s editorial priority on investigative reporting.

Neutral frames dominated the headlines of both newspapers, comprising 80% of Newspaper A’s headlines and 70% of Newspaper B’s. These frames emphasize factual, unbiased reporting, focusing on event-based narratives without interpretive or emotional elements. For example, Newspaper A headlines like "Headmistress fined RM10,000 for fraud" and "Former bank executive charged with RM1 million embezzlement" present straightforward updates on legal outcomes without delving into systemic implications. Similarly, Newspaper A also reported cases like "Police arrest two suspects in cyber fraud case" and "Businessman convicted of RM5 million tax evasion" in a purely procedural tone. On the other hand, Newspaper B maintained a strong focus on neutral reporting but included a slightly more diverse framing mix. Examples such as "Pengaruh syarikat rugi RM1.9 juta ditipu firma guaman" (Company director loses RM1.9 million to legal firm fraud) and "Pindaan Akta Syarikat bertujuan perangi pengubahan wang haram" (Companies Act amendment aims to combat money laundering) emphasize factual updates. Other headlines like "Pegawai kanan kerajaan didakwa terima suapan" (Senior government officer charged with accepting bribes) further reinforce Newspaper B’s commitment to straightforward reporting of fraud-related events.

Sensationalist frames are used to emphasize dramatic or emotional elements, often focusing on the scale of financial losses or high-profile cases. These frames accounted for 15% of Newspaper A’s headlines and 20% of Newspaper B’s, indicating a slightly higher reliance on sensationalism in Newspaper B. In Newspaper A,

headlines such as "Mastermind behind RM24mil bank fraud case nabbed" and "Shocking new details in multi-million-dollar fraud scandal" highlight dramatic aspects of fraud cases to captivate readers. Additionally, Newspaper A's coverage of financial schemes, such as "Ex-bank manager siphons RM2 million in bold scam" and "RM10 million fraud scheme leaves investors bankrupt," reflects its occasional use of emotional language to engage its audience. Newspaper B, however, employs sensationalist frames more frequently and vividly. Headlines like "Peguam rugi hampir RM340,000 ditipu rakan kongsi" (Lawyer loses nearly RM340,000 to partner fraud) and "Dua eksekutif PetroSaudi dihukum penjara kerana seleweng dana 1MDB" (Two PetroSaudi executives jailed for misappropriating 1MDB funds) emphasize dramatic narratives and financial impacts. Similarly, "Sindiket antarabangsa seleweng berjuta ringgit berjaya ditumpaskan" (International syndicate misappropriating millions dismantled) showcases Newspaper B's focus on captivating its audience through high-stakes reporting.

#### **4. DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study reveal distinct framing patterns in how Newspaper A and Newspaper B report on fraud, emphasizing the role of media in shaping public discourse on accountability. These results align with and diverge from prior studies in the field, offering a nuanced understanding of media framing in the Malaysian context. The dominance of neutral frames in both newspapers aligns with Potter's (2010) assertion that factual reporting builds audience trust and credibility. Neutral frames, constituting 80% of Newspaper A's headlines and 70% of Newspaper B's, reflect a commitment to procedural journalism that prioritizes the dissemination of unbiased information. This finding is consistent with Norris's (2000) argument that neutral reporting strengthens democratic processes by enabling citizens to make informed decisions.

However, the higher prevalence of investigative frames in Newspaper B (15% compared to 5% in Newspaper A) underscores its greater emphasis on systemic accountability, aligning with Tumber and Waisbord's (2004) findings on the role of investigative journalism in fostering institutional reform. For example, Newspaper B's coverage of syndicate operations and subsidy misappropriations highlights its commitment to uncovering systemic fraud. This supports Schudson's (2002) observation that investigative journalism not only informs but also mobilizes public opinion against institutional malpractice. The frequent use of sensationalist frames, particularly in Newspaper B (20% compared to 15% in Newspaper A), supports Iyengar's (1991) contention that dramatic narratives can effectively capture public attention. While this approach risks oversimplifying complex issues, Graber and Dunaway (2017) note that sensationalist frames are often used strategically to maintain reader engagement and amplify the perceived gravity of fraud cases.

The limited use of investigative frames in Newspaper A diverges from Tumber and Waisbord's (2004) findings, which emphasize the media's watchdog role in exposing corruption. With only 5% of its headlines employing investigative frames, Newspaper A appears to prioritize factual, event-based reporting over systemic analysis. This may reflect editorial or resource constraints that limit its capacity for investigative journalism. Alternatively, it could indicate a strategic focus on neutrality to cater to a broader audience, as suggested by McQuail (2010). Similarly, the higher reliance on sensationalist frames in Newspaper B contrasts with Potter's (2010) argument that excessive sensationalism undermines journalistic credibility. While dramatic narratives may enhance engagement, they can also distort public understanding of fraud by emphasizing emotional elements over systemic issues (Iyengar, 1991). For instance, headlines highlighting dramatic financial losses or high-profile scandals in Newspaper B risk overshadowing the underlying causes and solutions to fraud.

The differences in framing patterns between Newspaper A and Newspaper B reflect broader contextual factors, such as ownership structures, editorial policies, and audience demographics. According to Gomez and Jomo (1997), Malaysian media is often influenced by political affiliations and ownership dynamics, which shape editorial priorities. Newspaper A's stronger focus on neutral frames may be attributed to its corporate ownership and commitment to maintaining a factual and balanced reputation. Conversely, Newspaper B's use of investigative and sensationalist frames aligns with its role as a national news outlet targeting a more diverse audience, potentially driven by the need to engage readers across different socio-political contexts.

#### **5. CONCLUSION**

This study, while providing valuable insights into media framing of fraud in Malaysia, is subject to several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. Firstly, the analysis focuses exclusively on newspaper headlines, which are often crafted to capture attention rather than provide a comprehensive account of the underlying stories. As a result, the nuanced details and investigative depth present in the full articles are not

accounted for, potentially limiting the scope of the framing analysis. Future research should include full articles to gain a more holistic understanding of media narratives.

Secondly, the sample size, comprising 51 headlines from Newspaper A and 42 from Newspaper B, is relatively modest. While the dataset offers a foundational understanding of framing patterns, it may not fully represent the broader media landscape in Malaysia. Expanding the sample size to include additional newspapers or alternative media formats, such as online platforms and social media, would enhance the generalizability of the findings. Thirdly, the study focuses on specific period of timeframe (January 2023 to August 2024). This temporal scope captures framing patterns within a specific period but does not account for long-term trends or variations influenced by broader socio-political changes. A longitudinal approach could provide deeper insights into how framing strategies evolve over time.

Additionally, the study's reliance on qualitative coding introduces an element of subjectivity in categorizing frames. Despite efforts to ensure reliability through inter-coder validation, some degree of interpretation bias is inherent in the process. Employing advanced natural language processing (NLP) tools in future studies could minimize subjectivity and enhance analytical precision. Finally, this study analyzes headlines in English (Newspaper A) and Malay (Newspaper B), which may introduce linguistic and cultural biases in the interpretation of framing strategies. Differences in language structure and cultural nuances could influence how frames are constructed and understood. Collaborating with multilingual researchers or applying cross-language validation methods could help mitigate these biases.

The findings support existing literature on the role of neutral and investigative frames in fostering transparency and accountability while highlighting the strategic use of sensationalist frames to engage readers. However, the limited investigative focus in Newspaper A and the higher reliance on sensationalism in Newspaper B indicate the need for a balanced approach that combines factual accuracy with in-depth analysis. These results underscore the critical role of media framing in shaping public discourse on fraud, contributing to a more informed and engaged citizenry.

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