Malaysian News Report on Muslim Converts' Issues: A Study on *Malaysiakini*[*]

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Abstract

Issues involving the Muslim converts are numerous and complex. Among them are the challenges of understanding Islam as a religion, welfare and psychological pressure from their family, foster family and society as well as psychological pressure to adapt to the new religion (M.Y. Jaafar, 1991, p. 55-56; Lokman Ab. Rahman, 1995, p. 62-66; Nur A'thiroh Masyaa'il Tan Abdullah & Fariza Md. Sham, 2009, p. 84). However, this study focuses on issues concerning the Muslim converts which were published in a Malaysian on-line newspaper. This study reports the findings of content analysis in a quantitative and qualitative aspects where news report and the way of news reporting on Muslim converts' issues were explored in a selected Malaysian newspaper. Newspaper articles on the issues regarding Muslim converts which were published in Malaysiakini from 2007 to 2011 were compiled and analyzed based on a coding protocol (in terms of the category of Muslim converts' issues and tone of articles' headlines). Those newspaper articles were analyzed to evaluate the news category of Muslim converts' issues that have been identified and propose a more effective form of preaching mechanism in dealing with Muslim converts' issues in Malaysia. Results showed a high statistical fact on positively-toned headlines of articles on Muslim converts in Malaysiakini within the five-year period. Thus, the study concluded that Malaysiakini did perform the mentor role of transmitting appropriate information to its readers. Moreover, the Malaysian government and Islamic religious bodies should also play their roles in addressing issues on Muslim converts accordingly.

Keywords: Malaysian news reports; Muslim converts; *Malaysiakini*; content analysis

Introduction

The conversions to Islam among non-Muslims are generally seen as good news by the Muslims. However, looking at it at a bigger picture, issues involving the Muslim converts are actually various and complex. This is because the conversion of non-Muslims to Islam itself is full of challenges and obstacles as Allah, the Almighty God says in the al-Qur'an, Surah al-Ankabut [29]: 1-3:

> Translation: 1. *AlifLâmMîm* [These letters are one of the miracles of the Qur'ân, and none but Allâh (Alone) knows their meanings]. 2. Do people think that they will be left alone because they say: "We believe," and will not be tested. 3. And We indeed tested those who were before them. And Allâh will certainly make (it) known (the truth of) those who are true, and will certainly make (it) known (the falsehood of) those who are liars, (although Allâh knows all that before putting them to test).

Islam newly-converts often face the psychological dilemma which requires a great deal of attention, understanding and support from the society (Nur A'thiroh Masyaa'il Tan Abdullah & Fariza Md. Sham, 2009, p. 83). Psychological challenges faced by the new Muslim brothers and sisters, such as the challenge of understanding Islam as a religion, psychological pressure from their family, foster family and society as well as psychological pressure to adapt to the new religion (M.Y. Jaafar, 1991, p. 55-56; Lokman Ab. Rahman, 1995, p. 62-66; Nur A'thiroh Masyaa'il Tan Abdullah & Fariza Md. Sham, 2009, p. 84).

Meanwhile, in a broader context, issues on Muslim converts involve the aspects of education, law, social, politics, economics, modernization and other current challenges (Mohd. Ridhuan Tee Abdullah, 1995; Mohd. Nizam Sahad & Suhaila Abdullah, 2010). However, this study focuses on Muslim converts' issues which were published in a Malaysian newspaper.

In Malaysia, the cases of Muslims converts who decided to leave the religion of Islam were reported as increasing tremendously. Selangor Mufti, Datuk Tamyes Abdul Wahid states that there were many requests made by the new Muslim converts to leave Islam. However, he did not have details on the exposure. On the 16th of June 2011, *Malaysiakini* reported that the application for apostasy in Malaysia is 686 while the application approved by the Syariah Courts nationwide were 135 people between 2000 and 2010. The report was based on statistics provided by the Minister at the Prime Minister's Department, Datuk Seri Jamil Khir Baharom during the House of Representatives assembly stating that the application to change the status of the Muslim religion is 863 cases and a total of 168 were approved. However, the statistics supplied by the Minister is inconsistent with the amount calculated. Adding the confusion, the Minister was later quoted in *Bernama* as denying his reply to the House of Representatives (*Malaysiakini*, 17 June 2011). Nevertheless, the news report was alarming enough to spur concerns among the Malaysian Muslims into searching for immediate solutions and taking instant actions to overcome the problems. It is also obvious that the media does play their roles as information transmitter by providing messages to the public, and are able to become agents of change by portraying messages in a way that could shape up the public's perception and opinion.

Hence, this study reports on the findings of content analysis in the quantitative and qualitative aspects of which Malaysian newspaper articles on Muslim converts' issues were compiled to identify the coverage of Muslim converts' issues, and later were analyzed by using a frame analysis to identify the common portrayal of issues regarding Muslim converts in the Malaysian newspaper. In order to carry out those procedures, *Malaysiakini*, a Malaysian on-line newspaper was first selected as a sample of this study. Through those analyses, it is hoped that a more effective form of preaching mechanism in dealing with Muslim converts' issues in Malaysia can be proposed. And thus, the problems associated with the Muslim converts in Malaysia could be addressed through the Islamic missionary approach to achieve their well-being.

Islam and current issues

In terms of language, Islam means "submission". Meanwhile, in terms itself, Islam means commitment, obey and submission in full conscious (Ibn Manzur, Abi al-Fadl Jamal al-Din Muhammad ibn Mukram ibn Manzur al-Afriqi al-Misri, 1968, p. 293). According to Abdul Karim Zaidan (2002, p. 9), Islam means *istislam* (self-submission), *khudu'* (bow and obey), *al-Inqiyad lillah* (adhere to Allah) and it happens in full conscious and willingly, not by coercion.   Islam is a universal religion which is embraced by various ethnic groups, including people from the Northeast Asia (Farahwahida Mohd. Yusof et al., 2008, p. 29). In fact, the non-Muslim communities living in Islamic countries are also fairly treated by the Muslim rulers based on their positions. Ever since the time of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him), there has been a list of categories of the non-Muslims which explains the position of each non-Muslims, such as the following:

(1) *Zimmi*: This is a non-Muslim group which bows to Islam rulers. They pay *jizyah* (a per capita tax) to the Islam country. Therefore, it is a compulsory to preserve and protect their rights. It is also a compulsory to treat them fairly.
(2) *Muāhidin*: This is a non-Muslim group which ratified agreement with the Islam rulers. Therefore, they must abide to the agreement. If they violate that agreement, it is considered that the obligation to comply with the agreement is voided.
(3) *Muhāribūn*: This is a non-Muslim group which fought against the Islam people. Punishments on them are different based on the reasons and situation of war.
(4) *Muhādanūn*: This is a non-Muslim group which made agreement to stop the hostility for the time being (cease-fire). Therefore, it is a compulsory to comply the conditions of the agreement as agreed.
(5) *Muammanūn*: This group does not tie any agreement with the Islam people. They do not have any grudges and war with the Islam people as well as *zimmah* (wickedness) is not imposed on them. They came to the Islam country due to certain needs. Therefore, their life, property, dignity and religion have to be protected. Besides that, they are given the condition not to disturb the Islamic society for as long as they are in the Islamic country, and they must also abide to the country's laws (Hasbni T.M. al-Shiddiqi, 1963, p. 187)

Even though Islam has divided the non-Muslims into various categories, Islam still hopes to create an equal society and live as brothers and sisters without judging by their religion, race and skin colour, in particular, when they have chosen Islam as a way of life (Ibrahim Che Noh, 1995, p. 71; Lokman Ab. Rahman, 1995, p. 1). Likewise, Allah, the Almighty God says in the al-Qur'an, Surah al-Hujuraat [49]: 13:

> Translation: 13. O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things).

The contents of the verses shows thatIslam is actually fair to all walks of life and care about living in harmony. However, there are still parties which go against Islam, including the *mualaf* group (a term derived from the Qur'an, *al-Muallafat qulubuhum* which means the person who is tamed) which chose to embrace Islam and later decided to leave Islam (*murtad*).

Murtad in Arabic comes from the word *riddah*. In terms of language, *riddah* means return of something otherwise (Jabran Mas'ud, 1986, pp. 725-726). On the other hand, in *syarak* (Islamic) terms, *murtad* is defined by various definitions. Among them are:

(1) According to al-Husni (1995, p. 493): "renounce Islam and return to *kufur* (disbelief) and liberate themselves from Islam."
(2) According to al-Shaykh Abd. Al-Qadir Awdah (1994, p. 661): "leaving the religion of Islam and getting out from it after conversion."
(3) According to Wahbah al-Zuhaily (1989, p. 183): "Turning away from Islam and return to *kufur*, whether intentionally or unbeliever act or word, and either spoken with joke or resist or *iktiqad* (sanctifying)."
(4) According to Sayyid Sabiq (1990, p. 159): "The return of the Islam people with minds and the adults to being *kafir* (unbeliever) of his own accord without any coercion from others. Whether the return is male or female."
(5) According to Abd. Al-Karim Zaydan (1994, p. 300): "Out from Islam."

According to the Head Director of the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia, Datuk Mustafa Abdul Rahman, women are believed to be the most number of *murtad* in this country (Utusan Malaysia, 8 November 2006). In early 2007, a *mualaf* by the name of Siti Fatimah Abdul Karim (Revathi Massosai) attempted to have her religious designation changed at the court. Revathi Massosai was raised as a Hindu by her grandmother though her parents were converts to Islam. She has declared her religion to be Hindu and has petitioned unsuccessfully to have the word "Islam" removed from her identity card. Massosai married a Hindu man, but her marriage is not recognized by the Malaysian government because of the religion issue. Massosai was incarcerated for six months in an Islamic re-education camp because of her attempts to renounce Islam in favour of the Hindu religion. Revathi was denied the guardianship of her new born baby and was not allowed to meet her Hindu husband (BBC News, 6 July 2007).

According to a *Bernama* report, on 10 July 2006, Siti Fatimah Tan Abdullah or the original name of Tan Ean Huang, filed an application for the declaration to leave Islam by naming the Penang Islamic Religious Council as defendants. According to the statement of her claim, Siti Fatimah Tan Abdullah said she was never convinced by the teachings of Islam and embraced it simply to fulfill the requirement in order to marry an Iranian man named Ferdoun Ashanian. She embraced Islam on 25 July 1998 and married Ferdoun on 16 September 2004. Siti Fatimah Tan Abdullah, 39, who had worked as a cook, filed the application after her husband left her and disappeared without any reason. In her claim, Siti Fatimah Tan Abdullah said that during her conversion to Islam, she still worshiped idols Tok Pek Kong, gods and idols Kuang Tin Ne and Ti Kong (god of Sky) in her original religious teachings, Buddhism, and ate pork. On 8 May 2008, the Penang Syariah Court has allowed Siti Fatimah Tan Abdullah to leave Islam (*Malaysiakini*, 8 May 2008).

Based on the above cases, it is clear that apostasy cases sometimes occur due to the factors of life challenges faced by converts and the lack of attention given to them by the parties involved. Besides that, the poor administration system, management and law in dealing with issues involving converts resulted in the widespread of apostasy cases. Perhaps, it is time for the Muslim community to learn to love, appreciate and understand the new converts more.

Mass Media

The mass media have been defined as the publishers, editors, journalists and others who constitute the communications industry and profession, and who disseminate information, largely through newspapers, magazines, televisions, radio and the internet (Boykoff & Roberts, 2007, p. 2). Amat Juhari Moain (1991, p. 30) gives a sharper statement that the mass media is the most effective instrument and very potent in spreading various ideas, thoughts, ideology, besides spreading defamation, false news, accusations, sensationalizing news or minifying them or eliminating them altogether.

More recently, there is growing consensus that in influencing what people think about, the media could also shape how they think (Rogers & Dearing, 1988). And it follows from this that the world looks different to different people, depending not only on their personal interests, but also on the map that is drawn for them by the writers, editors and publishers of the papers they read (Cohen, 1963, p. 13; Stein, 1972). Most often, choices for information can be left to the message senders like government officials, interest group leaders, et cetera, those eager to foster their own agendas, or the choices can be left to the gatekeepers: the print and broadcast journalists, advertisers and media owners. A gatekeeper in the media is inclusive of those individuals that play a major role in deciding what makes news or articles (i.e. newsworthy) (Graber, McQuail & Norris, 1998).

Indeed, media serves as an important information transmitter and agent of change to the public. However, these roles of the media (e.g. newspapers) are often restricted by the lack of freedom in reporting. It occurs due to the existing constraints in the media industry which are pressed upon journalists and editors by the government officials, interest group leaders and media owners.

Even in a democratic country such as Malaysia, total press freedom seems impossible. The history of Malaysian newspaper industry has come a long way since the 17th century and through all those years many important events have taken place which also have in some way or the other slipped different ideologies and philosophies among the newspapers. These differences which existed among the newspapers are reflected through their way of delivering news. That is probably why Aini Maznina (2001) sees the importance of learning about the background of newspaper beginning with its establishment and keeping in track with the stages of its progress timely to actually determine and define about the newspaper. As Aini Maznina (2001, p. 206) states, the newspaper can be viewed by looking upon its history and today's country phenomenon. Syed Arabi (1998) describes three transformation stages of the Malaysian newspapers:

> Malaysian newspaper has to be accounted with the British colonial period, the rise of trade and industry in the region and also with the linkage of Malaysia with the other colonies and the British Empire. It has also to do with the development of the language (either in English, Malay, Chinese or Tamil). In later years, the continued growth of the newspapers in Malaysia has to do with the rise of political development in the region and how parties align themselves with the newspapers to gain for popular support (p. 206).

Currently, there are 42 daily and weekly print newspapers in Malaysia of which 15 are in Malay, 12 in English, 10 in Chinese, four in Tamil and one in Dutch (Wikipedia, 13 July 2012). With the advancement of technology, the public can now access news at anytime and anywhere through the Internet. Currently, there are a total of nine on-line newspapers in Malaysia (Wikipedia, 13 July 2012).

Launched on 20 November 1999, *Malaysiakini* offers daily news and views in English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil, delivering over 40 million page views and 1 million hours of reading time to over 2 million visitors (Google Analytics, January 2012). As of July 2008, *Malaysiakini* became the most read news website and the most popular Malaysian website (Alexa.com). *Malaysiakini*'s editorial position is built on fast, accurate and independent news, and well informed and diverse views. Malaysiakini's Letters section has generated active participation from readers of all races and religions and of various ideological backgrounds, creating an open and well informed arena of public debate unseen in Malaysia since the 1960s. Discussion on taboo subjects such as migrant workers, AIDS, Islam and racial quota systems has generated a new understanding on these issues. Their editorial position is consistently supportive of justice, human rights, democracy, freedom of speech and good governance (*Malaysiakini*, 2012).

Malaysiakini is unique in the sense that it is one of the few independent media organizations in Malaysia. It is not linked to any political party or commercial interest.

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It is owned by founders Steven Gan and Premesh Chandran, investors Media Development Loan Fund and the *Malaysiakini* current and former staff. *Malaysiakini* is a subscription based website where users pay RM150 (US$40) per year to access the daily content and RM450 (US$120) per year for access to the nine years of archived content (*Malaysiakini*, 2012).

Malaysiakini has been recognized through various awards and accolades including from the International Press Institute, Reporters Sans Frontiers, Committee to Protect Journalists, Asiaweek and Businessweek. *Malaysiakini* is also the only media organization in Southeast Asia nominated to the prestigious World Economic Forum's International Media Council. *Malaysiakini* was recognized as one of the country's favourite brand at the inaugural Putra Brand Awards 2010. *Malaysiakini* was picked as one of Malaysia's top six media brands, alongside television stations *Astro*, *TV3*, *8TV*, newspaper *The Star* and global search engine *Google*. According to award host, the Association of Accredited Advertising Agents Malaysia (4As), the Putra Brand Awards is unique as Malaysia consumers themselves are the judges. A consumer research polling system involving 6,000 people helped select Malaysia's most preferred brands across a spectrum of 18 categories with the top three brands in each category being honoured with a gold, silver and bronze ranking. This is the largest consumer research sampling of its kind nationwide covering both East and West Malaysia (*Malaysiakini*, 2012).

Even though several newspapers are in the hands of the politicians, there are still many newspapers in Malaysia which are free from the ruling party, especially the Chinese and tabloid newspapers. These newspapers could write freely, but within the scope of the Malaysian law system (Mohd. Safar Hasim, 1996, p. 354). According to Syed Arabi Idid (1998), a number of Malaysian newspapers are owned by the government political parties, while some other Malaysian newspapers are not attached to any particular political party (Syed Arabi Idid, 1998). Commonly, newspapers that are governed by the political parties are *Berita Harian*, *Utusan Malaysia* and *New Straits Times* which are under the control of the *United Malays National Organization* (UMNO); *The Star*, *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, *Nanyang Siang Pau*, *China Press* and *Guang Ming Daily* are controlled by the *Malaysian Chinese Association* (MCA) and Tamil Nesan is under the control of the *Malaysian Indian Congress* (MIC) (Mohd. Safar Hasim, 1996). Thus, to ensure that human justice is with held in the country, the public should give their support to newspapers which strive for press transparency because they are more reliable in getting the public's rights to be heard without being biased.

News Framing

Watson and Hill (2000, p. 117) define framing as a process by which the media place reality "into frame". These scholars added that framing constitutes a narrative device, whereby, what is not on the page of a newspaper is considered "out of frame".

Tankard et al. (1991) see "a frame [as] a central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration".

Altheide (1976) and Epstein (1973) described news frame as a process of news selection, source selection, news editing, news presentation and news structure. According to Einsiedel (1992, p. 90), the structure, or frame, imposed by journalists – the way a news event is presented in terms of its news sources and the narrative structures employed – becomes the way an event is defined and organized by its audiences.

Boykoff and Roberts (2007, p. 9) and Gitlin (1980) explain that in everyday life, news frames allow audiences to manage and comprehend reality and choose appropriate repertoires of cognition and action. But framing devices are also the ways journalists and editors routinely organize news discourse. These framing devices are "persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis and exclusion" (Gitlin, 1980).

According to Gamson and Modigliani (1989), media framing is important because it relates isolated incidents to public issues; when journalists organize news stories in ways that provide meaning to related events. Meanwhile, media frames, according to Gitlin (1980), also serve as working routines for journalist that allow them to quickly identify and classify information and to package it for efficient relay to their audience.

Lundy and Irani (2002, p. 2) claim that frames can have powerful effects on audience perceptions and ideas about an issue. Nelson (2004) states that frames guide the audience's understanding of a problem's origins and offer implicit suggestions about potential solutions.

Findings from a study conducted by Marks et al. (2007, p. 199) suggest that understanding news frames, and the events that drive them, provides some insight into the long-term formation of public opinion as influenced by news coverage.

Based on the notion of "framing", it stands to reason that the overall impact of a news report on an individual's perception may vary according to whether only problems, disadvantages, weaknesses or failures are described; or successes or beneficial aspects are presented; or when both pluses or minuses are presented. The way a problem is formulated – whether it is presented as a loss (risk) or gain (benefit) – is an important frame that influences perceptions of outcomes (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979).

According to Entman (1993), the framing theory, despite its somewhat scattered conceptualization, has the potential to increase our nascent understanding of the interplay between media coverage of environmental issues and the public's knowledge of, and attitudes toward, these same issues. Therefore, the framing theory represents an important area of study in mass communication (Dudo, 2005, p. 11); in such a way that the framing theory has allowed communication researchers to better understand the media's presentation of environmental issues and continues to offer promise in this endeavour (Dudo, 2005, p. 20).

Framing serves as an important theoretical paradigm in the media studies. It has created concepts on the presentation of issues which at the same time, has enriched the content of news in the media and thus, opening the pathway to a better reporting. Hence, informed by media framing theory, this study explores how *Malaysiakini* presents the Muslim converts' issues in their news headlines.

Method

In this study, *Malaysiakini* were selected as a sample due to its strength as a leading on-line newspaper and its outstanding achievements in striving for press transparency. A census sample was rendered to identify all Muslim converts-related newspaper articles which were published in *Malaysiakini* from 2007 to 2011. Census sampling helps in identifying all articles related to a given subject over a period of time, and is often most valid for researchers wanting to look at a large number of articles related to a particular issue or event (Riffe, Lacy & Fico, 2005, p. 98). This study chose the five-year time frame of 2007 to 2011 for analysis because there was more newspaper articles related to Muslim converts in those years and also due to its relevance with the present situation.

The digital archives of the Malay language version from the *Malaysiakini* web site were used to compile Muslim converts-related newspaper articles within the five-year time frame. By using the keywords '*mualaf*', '*saudara baru*', '*saudara kita*' and '*saudara* Muslim', 50 articles related to Muslim converts' issues were culled for content analysis of *Malaysiakini*'s coverage. These 50 articles of Muslim converts' issues appeared either in the section of *News* or *Column*.

The 50 Muslim converts' articles were later categorized based on a coding protocol of this study. The coding protocol consists of categories on Muslim converts' issues pertaining problems or challenges faced by the Malaysian regulatory bodies involved with the operation of Muslim converts, problems or challenges faced by the Muslim converts upon their conversion to Islam and others. The categories of Muslim converts' issues were derived from sources of the religious bodies in Malaysia such as the Malaysian Islamic Welfare Organization (PERKIM), Department of Islamic Affairs and Islamic Affairs Section at the Prime Minister's Department. The following are the range of categories of Muslim converts' issues:

1. Shortage of competent multi-racial Islamic preachers who are capable of carrying out missionary needs.
2. Shortage of Islamic teachers in teaching new converts contributes to other problems and complexities for new converts to understand Islam.
3. Cases of conducting the bodies of new converts who had died.
4. New converts of under-age youths face difficulties in obtaining consent from their parents or guardians.
5. Problems relating to new converts who converted to Islam motivated by personal interests.
6. Problems in inviting new converts to attend Islamic classes which have been prepared and scheduled for them.
7. Islamic bodies are out of control in ensuring that Muslim converts implement all the pillars of Islam.
8. New converts were driven out from home by their own family.

9. New converts were tortured and persuaded to leave Islam.
10. Hatred towards Islam due to prejudices.
11. Some new converts had problems in getting a job which is compatible with Islamic requirements.
12. New converts lost inheritance or legacy of their parents.
13. Shortage of books which are appropriate to the needs of new converts.
14. Illiteracy among new converts.
15. Certain Malays do not set an example of a good role model to be admired or followed by new converts.
16. Inappropriate preaching methods practiced by some Islamic missionaries, individual Muslim or religious bodies.
17. Prejudices among the Malays toward new converts.
18. Poverty in life faced by some new converts.
19. Others.

The next step of analysis in this study is framing the compilation of newspaper articles on Muslim converts' issues. The framing analysis of this study involves examining the headlines of newspaper articles. The headlines were analyzed in this study due to their ability to attract readers:

> All media use some system of headlines as a means of interpellation to summon their audience. These headlines often work as an enigma, teasing the audience to want to find out more. Hence they become an important hook to capture the audience and persuade them to pay attention to what is to come (Bennett, Slater & Wall, 2006, p. 169).

The headline of articles on Muslim converts' issues were analyzed in terms of the slants or tones to identify the portrayal of Muslim converts' issues. According to Iyengar (1991), tone refers to the disposition – positive or negative – that a news story may convey about the issue it discusses. More specifically, the tone of a newspaper story is represented by the type of language it uses: inflammatory, contentious textual content denotes a negative tone whereas productive, conciliatory language denotes a positive tone.

However, in this study, the neutral tone is also taken into account apart from the positive and negative tone. These tones can be described in the following manner:

(1) Positive tones refer to the presentation of headlines in a calming tone. Positive headlines provide the readers with a glimpse of information which shows that problems regarding Muslim converts can be overcomed through proper decisions and actions taken by related bodies.
(2) Negative tones refer to the presentation of headlines in an alarming tone. Normally, negative headlines make the readers feel uneasy and worried when the headlines concerned with decisions and actions which can negatively affect the future of Islam in Malaysia.
(3) Neutral tones refer to the presentation of headlines in a balanced tone. Neutral headlines contain neither positive nor negative tone.

Finally, all the gathered data were compiled into tables, and were summed up as frequencies and calculated as percentages for clearer view and better comparison. Thus, all the gathered data were analyzed descriptively through tables.

Finding

There were 50 Muslim converts-related articles in *Malaysiakini* from 2007 to 2011. Table 1 shows the percentages among the range of categories of Muslim converts' issues. Most stories on Muslim converts are related to problems or challenges faced by the Malaysian regulatory bodies involved with the operation of Muslim converts (68.0%), such as shortages of Islamic teachers in teaching new converts (26.0%), shortages of competent multi-racial Islamic preachers, and difficulties in handling under age youth converts' cases (12.0%), problems relating to new converts who converted to Islam motivated by personal interests (10.0%) and difficulties in handling cases in terms of conducting the bodies of new converts who had died (8.0%). Meanwhile, 18.0% comprises of stories on Muslim converts regarding to problems or challenges faced by them upon conversion to Islam, such as inappropriate preaching methods practiced by some Islamic missionaries, individual Muslim or religious bodies, and poverty in life faced by some new converts (6.0%), non-Muslims' hatred toward Islam due to prejudices (4.0%) and the inappropriateness in attitude shown by certain Malays toward new converts (2.0%).

The remaining 14.0% consists of other stories on Muslim converts which are not stated in the list of Muslim converts issues categories. They are basically stories involving the sentences of Malaysian High Court, jurisprudence issues and overcoming the rise of Christian missionaries.

Table 1: Percentage of articles on Muslim converts in *Malaysiakini* based on category, 2007 – 2011.

Category	Frequency (*N*)	Percentage (%)
Shortage of competent multi-racial Islamic preachers	6	12.0
Shortage of Islamic teachers in teaching new converts	13	26.0
Cases of conducting bodies of new converts who had died	4	8.0
Under-age youth converts face difficulties in obtaining consent from their parents or guardians	6	12.0
Problems relating to new converts who converted to Islam motivated by personal interests	5	10.0
Problems in inviting new converts to attend Islamic classes	0	0
Islamic bodies are out of control in ensuring that new converts implement all pillars of Islam	0	0
New converts were driven out from home by their own family	0	0
New converts were tortured and persuaded to leave Islam	0	0
Hatred towards Islam due to prejudice	2	4.0
Some new converts had problems in terms of job	0	0
New converts lost inheritance or legacy of their parents	0	0
Shortage of books	0	0
Illiteracy among new converts	0	0
Certain Malays did not set an example of a good role model	1	2.0
Inappropriate preaching methods practiced by certain groups	3	6.0
Prejudices among the Malays toward new converts	0	0
Poverty in life faced by some new converts	3	6.0
Others	7	14.0
Total	50	100.0

Table 2 shows the types of tone, whether positive, negative or neutral, of the articles' headlines of Muslim converts' stories. A majority of the headlines were framed in positive tone (54.0%). Meanwhile, 28.0 percent of the headlines were negatively-toned. The remaining 18.0 percent were neutrally-toned headlines. Positive headlines were mostly presented in the form of solution and giving suggestion. Negative headlines were presented in alarming manner which concerned decisions and actions that can indirectly hamper the future of Islam in Malaysia. Neutral headlines were mostly mere statements and brief information about Muslim converts' issues.

Table 2: Percentage of headlines' of articles on Muslim converts in *Malaysiakini* based on type of tone, 2007 – 2011

Tone	Frequency (*N*)	Percentage (%)
Positive	27	54.0
Negative	14	28.0
Neutral	9	18.0
Total	50	100.0

Table 3, 4 and 5 shows example of the different types of tone in the articles' headline on Muslim converts in *Malaysiakini* within the period of 2007 to 2011. These examples of headlines were taken from the section of *News* and *Column* in the online newspaper. Later, these examples of headlines were translated into English language so that readers worldwide could read and understand them. A majority of the stories on Muslim converts appeared in the *News* section (86.0%), and only 14.0 percent appeared in the *Column* section.

Table 3: Examples of articles on Muslim converts in *Malaysiakini* based on positively-toned headlines, 2007 – 2011.

Headline	Date	Section
JAG urges protect over wife's, children's rights when husband converted Islam	15 February 2007	News
ABIM: Find formula to overcome *murtad* issues	13 May 2008	News
The first al-Quran in Iban language	30 December 2009	News
The ashes of new converts have to be managed following the Islamic law	9 October 2010	News
Dr Asri: Allow only *azan* on loud speakers	15 January 2011	Column

Note: *Azan* means call for prayer.

Table 4: Examples of articles on Muslim converts in *Malaysiakini* based on category negatively-toned headlines, 2007 – 2011.

Headline	Date	Section
Student accused converted Islam due to worries of failure in electrical course	24 May 2007	News
Government were charged as failed in handling Islam affairs	9 May 2008	News
Siti Fatimah's case: MAIPP's appeal rejected	16 March 2009	News
Non-Muslim wife gets the right to take care of three new convert's child	11 March 2010	News
Mufti: Many new converts applied to leave Islam	17 June 2011	News

Table 5: Examples of articles on Muslim converts in *Malaysiakini* based on category neutrally-toned headlines, 2007 – 2011.

Headline	Date	Section
Result on Siti Fatimah's case 8 May	24 April 2008	News
Another case on the fight over corpse	25 June 2008	News
Result on the rights of Indira's child care on 3 February	22 January 2010	News
'Prohibition of loud speakers are not the state's decision'	15 August 2011	News
The dead's religion status provoked confusion	22 September 2011	News

Note: There are no neutrally-toned news story headlines on Muslim converts in 2007 and 2009.

Discussion and Conclusion

The application of positive tone was substantial in the headlines of news stories concerning current challenges faced by the regulatory bodies involved with the operation of new converts (63.0%). Headlines of news stories on the shortage of competent multi-racial Islamic preachers, shortage of Islamic teachers in teaching new converts, and complications in handling under-age youth converts' cases constituted the highest application of positive tone with 18.5 percent respectively.

These statistical facts indicate that there is in fact hope in overcoming problems concerning Muslim converts in Malaysia because these are signs of improvement in handling Muslim converts' issues by the Malaysian regulatory bodies.

Meanwhile, there is also a substantially high amount of negative headlines regarding issues on the shortage of Islamic teachers in teaching new converts (50.0%). This finding indicates that Malaysia urgently needs more Islamic teachers as it is of utmost importance to educate new converts and pay more attention to them because abandoned and unguided new converts contributes to various other problems leading toward de-Islamization. Nevertheless, negatively-toned headlines of Muslim converts' news stories were believed able to increase anxiety among the readers. Framing news stories in such manner is part of the inherent alarmist or sensationalizing tendencies among media players which could project greater importance, urgency or heightened emotion that might be absent had the issue been portrayed in gentler terms (Einsiedel & Coughlan, 1993, p. 147).

On the other hand, neutral tone was less applied in the headlines of Muslim converts' news stories and when it was applied, it normally appeared in mere statements and brief information about the Muslim converts' issues which neither sounded calming nor alarming.

In summation, the study of selected Malaysian on-line newspaper indicates that *Malaysiakini* played informative and educating roles by highlighting news story headlines in different tones. The media need to continuously play these roles because issues on Muslim converts are still problematic and in dire need of efficient solutions. In addition, it would be appropriate of the media to adhere to journalism ethics. They should avoid reporting news based on personal needs and when it comes to reporting religious issues it is best for them to respect the sensitivities of every religion in order to avoid havoc in the country and around the world. Besides that, it will be wise of the Malaysian government and Islamic religious bodies to build more specialized institutions which enable the training (in-put) and out-put of future Islamic teachers and preachers who are later qualified as apprentices of the Islamic missionary. This is regarded as important to sustain the future to come of Islam in Malaysia. All in all, if Malaysia is recognized as an Islamic country, then the government and religious bodies should also recognize their responsibility in proving that the recognition is indeed more than just words. Otherwise, it would have just been a disgrace to the Islam people. Last but not least, the new converts themselves have to learn to endure pain and obstacles in life because life itself will never be perfect and expecting too much of it is merely a waste of time.

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