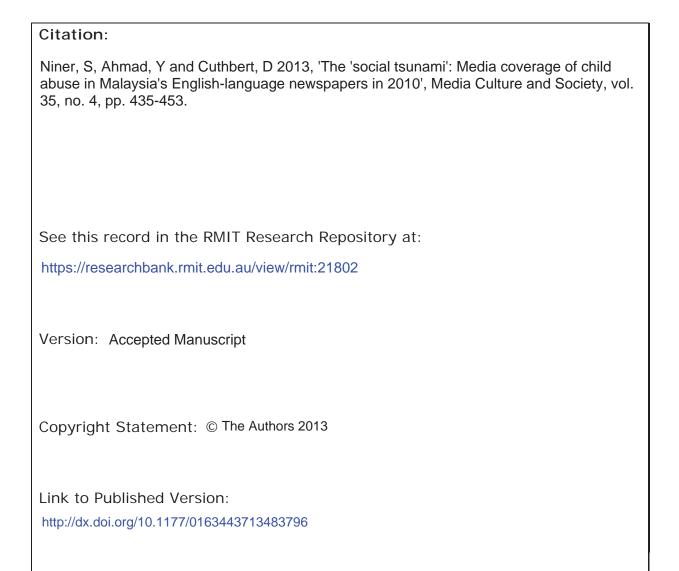RMIT
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The 'social tsunami': media coverage of child abuse in Malaysia's English-language newspapers in 2010

Since the early 1990s, the Malaysian public, government and media have displayed deepening concern over steady increases in reported cases of child abuse in the country. For many Malaysians, knowledge of the issue of child abuse derives from the mainstream media. This research analyses 2010 media coverage of child abuse in two English-language Malaysian newspapers, *TS* and *The New Straits Times*. We focused on the framing of this issue in the Malaysian print media to explore how this issue is understood and responded to by Malaysian society, and also how the media influences and shapes social attitudes and solutions. The paper offers the first sustained analysis of child abuse in the Malaysian media.

Background

Children have been mistreated and subjected to violence throughout history but the naming of this mistreatment as 'abuse' rather than punishment, discipline or cruelty is recent. Kempe first described the Battered Baby Syndrome in 1962 and by the early 1970s increased awareness emphasised protection and treatment (Oates 1993:1). The causes of child abuse and neglect are a complex combination of personal, cultural and social factors which are part of a 'continuum of culturally defined and accepted child rearing practices' of which severe punishments are simply one extreme (Djeddah 2000:90-11). Higher during social transition and conflict, studies also show that sexual abuse is five to seven times higher in girls but that physical abuse is twice as common for boys. The World Health Organisation (WHO) (2011) associates 'rigid gender roles, including definitions of masculinity linked with dominance and hierarchical gender relations' to these disparities. Similarly to violence against women, child abuse is 'a social and collective problem that reflects the unequal gender power relations in patriarchal societies' (Damant et al 2008: 124) coupled with the power relations of most adults over children.

Child abuse in Malaysia

Following Kempe, doctors at Kuala Lumpur Hospital documented the emergence of child abuse in Malaysia (Woon, Chin and Lam, 1974). From the early 1980s, when cases began to be formally registered, child abuse has grown as a public health and social policy issue. During this time, the social and political environment in Malaysia underwent huge transition. Child abuse

was catapulted into mainstream awareness by the tragic abuse and death of two year-old 'Baby' Balasundaram in 1990, highlighting the role of the media in garnering public attention (Kasim 2001) and forcing government action (Ariffin 1995: 367). Along with awareness of child abuse sharp increases in official reporting of cases has occurred (Noordin et al., 2008). State Social Welfare Department reported cases have increased from 93 in 1981, to 970 in 1991; 1242 in 2002; 1 999 in 2006 and 3047 in 2010 (Ariffin 1995:355; Department of Social Welfare 2010). These figures are also highly gendered with approximately two thirds of victims being female. Reported cases are likely to represent only 10% of total cases perpetrated, as most victims and their families remain too ashamed or unable to report violations (UNICEF 2009). The Universal Periodic Review examines human rights in UN member states every four years. In 2009 it noted concern about the persistence in Malaysia 'of patriarchal attitudes and deep-rooted stereotypes' and 'problems faced by the girl child'. The review stated, 'violence against children in the family, remained a serious problem. Owing to strong taboos, victims and witnesses rarely reported these cases', noting also that corporal punishment remained lawful (Child Rights Information Network 2011).

The Malaysian government updated legislation in the form of the *Child Protection Act 1991* (Ariffin 1995: 356) and made it a focus of the national planning process. Strategies to protect children from abuse warranted a separate section of the *Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006-2010* and a National Child Policy and National Child Protection Policy was approved in 2009. However the issue was given less prominence in the *Tenth Malaysia Plan 2011-2015* which was more focused on the economy and achieving developed country status by 2020.

When public awareness of child abuse first emerged in Malaysia it was considered by many to be a western import that had not previously existed in Malaysia's traditional extended families (Nathan and Woon 1981:247; Kassim 1993:6). Initial reports were treated with degrees of skepticism, or considered isolated or aberrant, and not indicative of a national problem. Abuse was attributed to abrupt social changes that had degraded extended families, such as internal migration to industrial centers and urbanization. Smaller nuclear families, often with a working mother, were seen as unable to cope with the full burden of child care (Kasim 2001; Nathan and Woon 1981; Cho 1990; Ariffin 1995). A 'resurgent Islam' has resulted, partially to combat these perceived 'ills of Westoxification, collapsing family values and general social decline' (Stivens 1998b:70-71).

Feminist and media analysis of child abuse

Following Kempe's work child abuse became a media issue internationally (Nelson 1984; Goddard 1996; Scott and Swain 2002). This raised community concern and awareness resulting in increased reporting of child abuse (Mendes 2000:50; 52; Tonmyr and Jack 2010:91) and precipitated government responses. Analysis of media coverage is crucial as the media continues to shape child abuse and child protection policies (Shirk 1997; Mendes 2000: 50-1; 2001: 27-28; Scott and Swain 2002). However, analysis has been primarily concerned with Western countries (Hesketh and Lynch 1996) and none has been previously undertaken in Malaysia (Kasim 2001:142).

Media representation of child abuse has been criticized for its tendency to sensationalize, to focus on individual cases and its failure to consider socio-economic context so that chronic forms of abuse like neglect or emotional abuse are obscured (Ayre 2001). A sensationalist focus on sexual abuse creates the impression that this is prevalent when the incidence is low compared with neglect (Tonmyr and Jack 2010:93) These distortions over-sensitise readers to particular risks fostering moral panic and lead to simplistic solutions for complex and entrenched social problems (Ayre 2001: 889; Mendes 2000:52-4). Abuse within the family is underrepresented and non-familial abuse over-represented which protects the traditional institution and values of the family (Mendes 2000:52-3). Child abuse is attributed to social changes such as 'divorce, homosexuality, sex education, abortion, and working mothers' (Mendes 2001:29). This view supports a social conservative political agenda and narrow child protection systems focused on punishment of perpetrators while the deeper causes and their appropriate reform are neglected.

Feminist media analysis has largely focused on issues of violence against women. Carll's (2005) study of rape coverage found that articles supplied fewer details than those about murder or assault, reinforcing ideas that, 'violence [against women] was an isolated ideology or deviance' denying the 'social roots' of violence against women and absolving the wider society from any responsibility (Carll 2005: 145). Feminists also contend that intra-familial abuse is downplayed by the media, protecting a father's rights and patriarchal family structures (Gordon 2004 141; Goddard and Saunders 2000; Gough 1996: 368). The 1970s feminist reframing of child abuse pointed out that a distorted focus on abduction, sexual abuse and murder of children by strangers

depicted child sexual abuse as a horrible external pathology, when the greatest real danger to children was the 'ordinary' men they already knew (Smart, 1989).

Child protection regimes have also historically policed mothers further protecting patriarchal interests (Smart 1989; Hooper, 1992). Blaming mothers who fail to protect their children or detect abuse is a recurrent moral theme in child welfare discourses which also shifts attention and blame from patriarchal systems (Smart 1989; Hooper 1992). This view of mothering simply reflects the patriarchal context in which it takes place (Damant et al 2008:128). Like the attention given to mothers in child abuse reportage, studies on the media portrayal of rape identify a focus on the role and behavior of the woman reflecting 'cultural myths and patriarchal assumptions about the proper role and behavior of women' (Carll 2005, 145). These insights have yet to make an impact in many non-western societies and this paper offers an application of some of these theoretical insights to situation in Malaysian where they are refracted through the lens of a resurgent Islam and the national government's conservative 'Family Values' policies.

Method and Media Content Analysis

The media is a 'business of finding, constructing and selling "news"' requiring 'immediacy and drama' rather than accuracy (Kitzinger 1996:323). Insight into media coverage of issues requires analysis of this construction via a 'highly interpretive and value-laden process' based on 'socially created collective universals and traditional understandings' that often represent and reinforce stereotypes (Akhavan-Majid and Ramaprasad 1998: 133). The overall framing of media news stories ultimately reflects the ideology of the wider socio-political system (Souza 2010: 478-9).

Akhavan-Majid and Ramaprasad (1998:134) assert that the link between news frames and ideology-has remained largely unexplored in the literature. They document that theorists have identified three types of ideology that influences the framing of media: dominant ideology, elite ideology, and journalistic ideology. We can identify an elite ideology in the Malaysian media as the policy orientation of the government which overlaps with the dominant Islamic ideology which is aligned in Malaysia with a Malay-cantered nationalist ideology. In our case study we also identify a gender ideology as outlined above in the methods section, with further discussion below.

Print media content analysis, both qualitative and quantitative, identifies media characteristics such as: medium, production techniques, messages, sources used and context (Shoemaker and Reese; Macnamara 2006: 5); and the counting of key variables that determine the likely impact of an article including topics or issues covered, their prominence; design, photos and graphics; audience, circulation and frequency.

A lack of detail or context in a media article which focuses exclusively on the event and persons is common in news and is called 'episodic' framing (Iyenger 1991: 2). Both victim and perpetrator are presented as individuals rather than as expressions of broader sociological trends. This makes readers less likely to implicate government, policy or society. Feminist perspectives on media coverage point out that episodic framing obscures issues of power imbalances reinforcing the 'patriarchal status quo' (Bullock 2007:40) and reflects a conservative view of society (Smart 1989). In contrast thematically-framed or feature-style articles tend to present issues in a more complex manner and mention, even critique, policies and solutions.

Two English-language newspapers, TS (hereafter TS) and the *NEW STRAITS TIMES* (hereafter NST) were monitored for coverage of child abuse. Articles with the subject of child abuse and children's issues were manually 'clipped' from the newspapers during 2010 to form a database of 1694 articles. The choice of a single year or a slice of time represents a 'particular historical moment' with which to examine the discourse on child abuse in Malaysia (Anderson 2012). One limitation of this research is that we are not yet in a position to compare coverage with other years. However, we assess the attention given by both English-language papers to the issue of child abuse as significant and sustained throughout 2010.

Our quantitative analysis data on page number, size of articles and graphics were entered into the SPSS (18.0 version) which are presented in the Discussion section (as per Tables). The articles were coded according to basic categorization of the type of abuse they covered such as child-murder, sexual abuse and abandonment or baby-dumping or neglect (see Table 5). The category of Opinion and Comments covered all these issues. Once this was completed, all items were excluded that did not conform to child abuse as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO):

> Child abuse or maltreatment constitutes all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other

exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power. (WHO 2011)

This reduced the number of items to 675 and the number of categories from 37 to 14.

Articles in this study were qualitatively assessed by utilising the media analysis technique of 'framing' (Iyenger 1991). Articles were coded either episodic (specific event-focused much like a short crime report) or thematic (an in-depth article giving context and issue focused). Our analysis conformed to the international literature (Iyenger 1991; Bullock 2007) finding that most articles were episodic as discussed below. Identifying political bias and use of information sources within articles was key to identifying the qualitative frames. Qualitative content analysis follows two approaches: behaviourist which counts effects or the creation of public opinion and second, humanist, or how content reflects the society and the culture producing it (Shoemaker and Reece 1996; Macnamara 2006: 4). In the case of child abuse in Malaysia both these effects will be discussed. Due to the open political bias inherent in the newspapers studied and due to the international language of the papers there is a third effect to be considered in this case and that is how Malaysia portrays itself to an international audience.

The Malaysian media

The nearly 30 million citizens of Malaysia are ethnically diverse and this is reflected in the media. Four Malay-language newspapers reach 28% of the population, six Chinese language papers reach another 18%, and the two English-language dailies monitored here reach 9%. The addition of two Tamil newspapers totals a reach of 54%.[i] Relevant to this, English language newspapers have the benefit of being consumed across the three main ethnic groups: Malays, Chinese and Indian making the content representative of a wider national audience rather than one bounded by ethnicity. Ethnic diversity is not matched by the politics of the newspapers as they are largely controlled by the ruling political alliance and reflect a mainstream government view. As this bias is well-known it can be assessed as open and partisan yet it also includes hidden ideological content such as attitudes toward gender (cf. Shoemaker and Reece 1996:42). These newspapers have a good reputation for quality of content and providing credible information in Malaysia, although well-known to be pro-government and nationalistic in persuasion (Open Source Centre 2009).

In 2009 *TS* was the highest-circulation English-1anguage newspaper (309,181 a day) while the *NST* trailed behind with half that number (139,763). Both are tabloid format and retail for RM$1.20. *TS,* a national business daily, heavily laden with corporate advertisements, is described as having a serious intellectual content providing in-depth reporting on domestic and political news. The readership of the *TS* is approximately half Chinese (46%), one quarter Malays (29%) and one quarter Indian (25%).

The *NST* Press publishes three newspapers in Malaysia and claims a market domination of 63% (600,000 copies sold and 5 million readers daily). The *NST* is the English-language version of the *Berita Harian*, a national Malay paper and the associated *Harian Metro,* local state-based versions. The readership remains mostly Malaysian and content is primarily local. The *Harian Metro* has the highest circulation figures in the country and offers a local and sensational style. Therefore the media impact of a *NST* article is magnified through reproduction.

The *NST* is focused on popular Malaysian culture and local Malaysian human interest stories such as those surrounding family and children—the future nation-builders. Child abuse is a political and controversial topic that raises profoundly moral issues for how modern Muslims should live. While Malaysia is not an Islamic state, Islam is the official religion and the constitution assumes all Malays are Muslim (Stivens 2006: 355). Islamic law is applied to Muslims for which separate *Syariah* courts exist.

Discussion

Overall Media Coverage of Child Abuse

Malaysian society has been made aware of child abuse by extensive coverage by the media (Kasim 2001). Both the *TS* and the *NST* carried sustained reportage, virtually daily, of child abuse throughout 2010. However, the *NST* published more, just over an article per day (369), while *TS* published 306 over the year (see Table 1). Crime-style or 'episodic' articles accounted for 68% (459) of these. The extra 63 articles published by *NST* accounted for an extra 6 060.8 centimeters of column space and can be partially explained by the higher numbers of published items in the particular months of February (+11), March (+19), August (+27) and September (+12) (See Table 2).

Table 1: 2010 Total newspaper articles related to child abuse

It is clear from these figures that the *NST* invests more time and resources to covering these human interest and family issues than TS which has a dryer, corporate focus. We conclude that the *NST* (and its associated Malay-language versions) are more concerned with contemporary Malay social issues such as the ones we are analyzing here. This assumption is supported by the fact that that almost 33 of the 63 extra items were made up of a category labeled 'Opinions and comments'. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that this coverage reflects the political persuasion and audience of the newspaper: nationalistic, Islamic, mainstream, modern, Malay for which this issue is controversial. We can also assume that reporting substantially reflects state-sanctioned attitudes to child abuse.

This discussion also considers the perspectives of those cited in the articles and their status and credibility. Child abuse is most often framed in the newspaper articles as a crime 'story' in simple episodic articles and when deeper analysis is given it is framed in particular ways. Thematic frames were identified by immersion in the data through reading, the analytical processes of exclusion of articles that did not fit WHO definitions, the SPSS data entry and assembling of totals percentages and tables, and the sorting of articles into episodic and thematic. During this time researchers also identified the key child abuse stories of 2010 (discussed below) and spent time contextualizing them culturally and socially. These results were discussed with the research team and in an iterative process key stories and themes were identified. The approximately 20 key thematic articles, including associated graphics, were identified and analyzed to derived the qualitative frames.

The broad framing of these articles was a conservative Malay-Muslim morality easily explained by the dominance of Malays as the largest and indigenous ethnic group and Islam being the official religion. Various perspectives expressed and the position of experts fell along a spectrum of Malay-Muslim morality from a masculine religious conservative perspective which emphasized a strict Islamic morality and punishment of perpetrators at one extreme and the views of educated liberal progressives advocating modern, secular and clinical or social policy solutions at the other. We can assess these two perspectives as the right and left of our qualitative 'frames' and assume that the beliefs of most Malaysians fall somewhere between them. This is born out by Stiven's work on middle-class Malaysian families who embrace fragments of both traditional and modern in their 'post-modern' lives (Stivens 1998a; 1998b).

The 'middle-ground' frame in this spectrum is represented by the human and maternal face of the government through responses by the Minister of Women, Family and Community Development, Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil and the Prime Minister's wife Datin Seri Rosmah Mansor. They are given a large amount of space in the newspapers, their comments are most often presented uncritically with accompanying color photos (a good indicator of what the editors choose to emphasise) which is also not surprising given the pro-government stance of both papers. These women maintain fairly conservative Islamic positions on morality and ethics but, on occasion, the Minister advocates more progressive or 'modern' proposals in the pursuit of pragmatic solutions to the problems faced by Malaysian society, particularly to the controversial abandonment of new-born babies, all the while maintaining a somber and pious tone on moral issues. These two senior women are presented in the media as moral examples of modern Islamic womanhood, their representation is at once highly political and also gendered, clearly indicating that issues pertaining to children are the concern and responsibility of women.

Events and their Reporting over 2010

The number of articles related to child abuse is a key quantitative method in counting and assessing the importance of an issue to media and in society. Table 2 below represents these figures and illustrates the rise in reporting in March to April and July to August when significant spikes in the number of published articles and items occurred, again with more items devoted to these events and issues in the *NST* than *TS*. The variation in their reporting depended very much on events and topical debates as they arose throughout the year. These spikes were driven by the timing of significant events including the bringing to justice of the perpetrators from past cases. An exponential effect on the amount and quality of media coverage was apparent when a several events occurred in a short space of time. At these times more thematic articles appeared. In the months of March to April and July to August the reporting of child abuse in the English-language press in Malaysia reached the level of moral panic, as outlined above (Ayre 2001: 889).

Table 2: Newspaper articles related to child abuse by month

While the most common category of child abuse articles was related to sexual abuse (accounting for 21% of the total of all items analyzed here-see Table 5) these events did not drive the spikes in coverage of child abuse overall. These articles appeared when individual sensational cases occurred yet this was obscured by reporting of court cases that followed crimes several years

later. It is not the quantitative analysis of <u>how many</u> articles are published on this issue but the qualitative analysis of how this issue is framed and skewed by the newspapers that is significant for our study and is discussed in the section below-Media Coverage by Issue. It was instead the tragic cases of the abandonment of newborn babies and their subsequent deaths which are fundamental in explaining the quantitative analysis of volume of articles and explaining some of the spikes in reporting. Three new cases of abandonment were reported in February 2010 following on from several similar cases and a huge debate about this issue at the end of 2009. This tragic problem associated only with the Malay Islamic community, the core constituency of the *NST,* due to the illegality and shame of having a child out of wedlock. Other ethnic communities may also abandon new-borns but this was not covered in media in our study. The renewed public debate in February about abandonment included the solution of 'baby hatches' and sex education. This topic was selected as one of them major issues to analyse qualitatively due to the volume of articles published on the topic (it is the second highest category of child abuse article see Table 5) and a description of the presentation follows, particularly focusing on the thematic style articles the debate generated. These thematic-style articles provided the rich data that provided evidence for the three qualitative frames mentioned above.

'Baby dumping' as this problem is referred to, received sustained media attention throughout 2010 which relied upon on a constant set of 'credible' official sources which dominated other possible sources and points of view (c.f. Souza 2010: 478-9). On 16 February, the *NST* published an feature article graphically describing the condition of the bodies of five dead babies found dumped over the last four months and asserted that 100 babies were abandoned in this way every year in Malaysia. The article conveyed a sense of social crisis that needed to be urgently addressed by the government. A photo of a stern Minister Shahrizat appeared beside the 16 February article emphasizing her calls for 'awareness and religious programmes targeted at youth', and reminding readers that her welfare officers, dubbed 'protectors', were tasked with identifying unwanted pregnancies and providing 'assistance' to the mothers. The Prime Minister's wife Rosmah was also quoted briefly, declaring the act of 'dumping' newborns as 'cruel'.

On the same day, another article in the *NST* featured spiritual leader Datuk Nik Aziz, accompanied by a small photo of the elderly man attributing 'baby dumping' to 'too much freedom', irresponsibility and lack of moral values among youth, and the neglect of religious

obligations in daily life. He advocated punishment and penalties, as well as a return to strict religious morals. Rosmah was quoted as calling for 'stern action' against baby dumpers in a corresponding *Star* article. In the same item *Gerakan* political party President, Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon, was quoted as describing a particular case as 'a heinous and heartless act' and the *Jamaah Islah Malaysia* Vice-President also is recorded as advocating shelters, 'to counsel single pregnant women to lead a meaningful life'.

A much smaller series of articles in February provided a more modern, secular and policy-oriented frame. Significantly, no photos accompanied these articles. Two articles appearing on 17 February, one in *TS* and one in the *NST*, quoted G. Palanivel, the Deputy-President of the Malaysian Indian Congress and a former Deputy-Minister of the Department of Welfare, who advocated empathy and support for the mothers. Presumably due to his Indian constituency Palanivel was not constrained by Islamic beliefs. The *NST* also published another small article toward the end of the month: 'Experts should hold talks in schools', quoting the Chair of the Parent Action Group, Datin Noor Azimah Abdul Rahmin, who advocated sex education in school and parents more closely supervising their teenagers. Other articles presented the opinion of social welfare experts, academics or international consultants, such as the UNICEF representative to Malaysia, who empathized with the plight of the mothers and advocated new systems to cope with these situations (17 February 2010 *NST* 'Help mothers in crisis situations').

Child murder was the third highest category of child abuse articles (see Table 5) and we assess their content, again particularly in the thematic articles. February also saw the abuse and death of three-year old Syafia Humairah Sahari at the hands of her mother's boyfriend (the lawful husband and father was in jail for another murder). The death of the little Malay girl filled 21 separate articles across the two papers. One article describes the visit of Minister Shahrizat to the grieving mother, Nurhamim, accompanied by a large photo of the shameful mother being counseled by a stern Shahrizat who was quoted as stating that Nurhamim would be bought to a welfare home for 'rehabilitation'. No such Ministerial visit was made to the parents of 16-month old Indian boy Hareswarra Karigalam, abused and killed and by his former babysitter's husband, in March, which filled eleven articles across the two papers. The abuse and killing of Chinese girl Jasmine Lee by her step-father and mother in April filled five articles and also did not warrant Ministerial attention. Instead media and the Minister focused on the death of Syafia as an 'early warning' to society: 'If we choose not to care, then a social tsunami will occur and erode

moral values in our society'. Moral responsibility for the abuse was clearly placed upon the mother even though she was not the perpetrator, and this was clearly associated with her illicit relationship with the abuser. The tsunami image conveys the sense of the magnitude of these moral dangers inherent in aberrant Islamic Malay wives and mothers.

In June a large thematic feature article was run in TS on page SM4 titled 'Circle of Love' about OrphanCARE's baby hatch which opened on 25 May in Petaling Jaya (a satellite town 18kms from Kuala Lumpur) by Minister Shahrizat and the efforts to find a 'loving family' for abandoned babies. The Shelter Home Executive Director is reported as having to defend the baby hatch from criticisms that it will 'encourage people to have premarital sex and engage in reckless behaviour'. The article portrays staff attempts to encourage empathy for the mothers and suggest there might be more to their stories than simply loose morals,

> …one should not put the blame solely on the mothers, many of whom hide their pregnancy—out of shame and fear of repercussions from society and family for having a child out of wedlock. Some are victims of rape… For a person to abandon her baby, she must have been in a terrible state of mind. It's difficult to imagine.

There was another spike in incidents and articles about baby dumping in July-August (called the baby-dumping season in a 19 August *Star* article—page N2—due to celebrations held around New Years and Valentines Day) which resulted in the publication of several thematic articles on the issue. Episodic articles accompanied by color photos appeared concerning the first couple to be charged under new laws with intentionally abandoning a child. The baby had been found alive and taken to a local hospital, while a young factory worker, Mohammed Zolhalmi Khamis, 18, and his girlfriend, 17, were sentenced; he to two years in jail and she to detention at a 'school' until her 21st birthday. Her parents stated they would later marry. No mention of the fate of the baby or any account by the young parents was presented. Several thematic articles followed singling out pornography as the main cause of moral laxity leading to baby dumping and also debating a Cabinet initiative to charge parents caught for baby dumping with attempt to murder or murder, if the child subsequently died, rather than abandonment or infanticide. Those charged could face up to 30 years' jail or the death sentence.

A 7 August *NST* thematic article, 'Syariah stand on abandoned children', presented Islamic theological arguments for the care of abandoned infants calling it 'an act of great merit and

service'. While this article holds firm that the death of the babies is the fault of the mother, and to a lesser extent the absent fathers, it does demonstrate an emerging Islamic middle-ground perspective. Within this frame the circumstances and reasons for the abandonment of babies are excluded entirely. The problem was broken down into separate solutions: one for the babies—compassionate and caring as determined by Islamic ethics—and a more punitive one, also based on Islamic beliefs, for the 'sinning' and silent parents.

Media focus and page prominence

A further significant finding came from the quantitative technique of assessing page prominence which provided an indication of issues of media focus. There were only 16 page-one articles about child abuse during the years which were evenly distributed between the two newspapers. This demonstrates a similar editorial policy that the front page is reserved for issues of national importance, particularly relating to politics, both national and international. However, outright sensationalism accounted for five page-one articles about particularly shocking or ghastly child rapes, sexual and physical abuse. The other stories that make the front page were those with political implications such as child trafficking across international borders (five in *TS* and one in *NST*). The hugely controversial subject of 'baby dumping' warranted two page-one articles and child marriage, one. Only two page-one articles about child abuse carried more generalist concerns: one about abduction and one about neglect.

There were a larger number (28) of page-two articles (23 in the *NST* and five in *TS*) and significantly more (43) page-three articles (35 in *TS* and eight in the *NST*). By far the largest theme for page-two articles concerned baby-dumping (9), reflecting the concern of Malays about this issue, as already discussed. Nine page-two articles were devoted to child marriage.[ii] The finding we can garner from this analysis of page prominence is that the media focus reflects issues of controversy and concern to the modernizing Islamic middle-classes.

However, the majority of articles (418 or 61.9%) concerning child abuse are placed on page 11 or higher. The *NST* published 227 of these types of articles to 191 in *TS* and we can attribute this difference to the style of the two newspapers. These are small, mostly episodically-framed articles at the back of the newspaper and accordingly have lower prominence and position; theoretically, they have a lower capacity to shape public opinion. The largest category of articles 'Opinion and comment' (as shown in Table 5) accounts for some of these articles (*TS* published

27 of these items compared to 60 in the *NST*). These items are grouped together in a special section at the back of the newspapers yet they maybe a more solid reflection of community feeling and contemporary culture in Malaysia since they are voices of the readers. The additional 33 items of this kind carried by the *NST* reflects what we have already discussed about the popularist style of this publication as compared with *TS*: the *NST* positions itself in the market as a 'people's paper'. A further finding from this analysis of page prominence is that child abuse is an issue ordinary Malaysians care very deeply about, on which writers often speak from personal experience, or a moral or emotional conviction.

Media Coverage by Issue

Table 3 and 4: 2010 Department of Social Welfare and Royal Malaysian Police Reported Child Abuse and Maltreatment Cases

Table 5 below shows a summary of the articles published sorted into categories of child abuse. If we compare these numbers with the actual incidence of reporting of abuse as in Table 3 and 4 we can gain a rough insight into how the media representation compares to the reality and more clearly identify any bias and explore the social and political interests that may be apparent. We can only make broad generalisations here as the Tables do not include the same categories. Also the DSW figures do not include Police or Hospital cases (which means some cases may be counted in different ways in various statistics). Cases of child murder and death are not included in either DSW or Police figures represented here, as DSW concerns itself with the welfare and care of living children and the Police count murder in other statistics.

Table 5: 2010 newspaper articles related to child abuse by issue

The most significant disparity that we can see here is that child neglect which accounts for the highest category of all DSW cases (40.5%) only accounts for 3% of all media articles. Reporting on emotional child abuse (0.3%) is also underrepresented according to the DSW figures (1.5%). This underrepresentation maybe a result of neglect and emotional abuse being considered a less newsworthy subject; or, perhaps because these less tangible forms of abuse are more difficult to measure and describe in print media which mostly describes child abuse cases in simplistic 'victim and villain' terms in episodic articles. As noted, there is less knowledge and awareness about the more subtle forms of abuse, such as child neglect, and this could also be the reason for

the underreporting (Noordin et al. 2008). This conforms to the international research which found that although neglect was the most commonly reported type of child abuse it was rarely mentioned in the media (Tonmyr and Jack 2010:93) Also, these types of abuse are more likely to be familial and this too conforms to international patterns of under-representation of familial abuse in the media which may be judged too disturbing or confronting for readers.

Physical child abuse accounts for 26% of the DSW reported child abuse cases but only 7% of all the articles and items published in 2010. Those reported were the worst and most sensational of the physical abuse cases. Also of note is overrepresentation in the media of the baby dumping issue, accounting for 15% of media articles but only 3.5% of DSW cases. We can understand this by the cultural significance of the issue in contemporary Malaysian society and the controversial national public debate.

The largest topic of newspaper items related to child abuse was sexual abuse, accounting for 21% of the total of all newspaper items analyzed here which is a significant under-representation of the actual percentage of these type of cases reported to the DSW in 2010 (28.5%) and 77% of all police cases averaging out at around 50% of all cases (see Table 3 and 4 above). This may be accounted for by the fact that most sexual abuse presented in the media is non-familial abuse when in fact most sexual perpetrators are known to the victim, also conforming to international research (Mendes 2000:53; Tonmyr and Jack 2010). This area needs further investigation in Malaysia particularly because most victims are girls.

The 105 newspaper articles relating to child murder and death (15.5%) have no corresponding state figures to compare with as noted. In any case these articles also include accounts of court cases and sentencing of the perpetrators of cases where events being litigated occurred in previous years. Three child murders, as noted, consumed much of the coverage. Here we can observe the international pattern that the minority of horrific abuse cases are given the majority of media attention. The less understood and more 'everyday' incidents of child abuse, physical abuse and neglect, are more problematic to portray and less sensational and although they comprise the majority of reported cases in the DSW statistics they are largely absent in media sample studied here.

Conclusion

Media content analysis of *TS* and *NST* detected these patterns of over-representation of the relatively rare, horrific incidents of child abuse and effects of the use of episodic framing. Both of these patterns distort the reality of child abuse in Malaysia in a number of ways and do little to reveal the underlying causes of abuse. It means a deeply complex situation is reduced and reported in simple good and evil scenarios. In these scenarios it is not grinding poverty, social disadvantage, social isolation, mental illness or discrimination that are at fault but the simple equation of one evil individual taking advantage of a vulnerable child. This produces a lack of understanding, moral outrage or panic which leads to simplistic or inappropriate solutions and yet no doubt sells many newspapers. In addition, by blaming 'strangers' for child abuse (or in extreme cases the pathology of individual parents) no further examination is required of the cultural, political and ethical systems of the broader society and how they are implicated. Child welfare professionals and academics have advised the media internationally to report on the underlying causes of child abuse and neglect (Kitzinger 1996) and these recommendations are relevant to Malaysia.

Yet the reporting of the sensational and high-profile child abuse cases generated a sense of moral panic, a 'social tsunami', which afforded the Minister the necessary authority to introduce a new and modern policy shift. Still, a large part of the problem remained uncovered by the media and unaddressed: the situation for young and vulnerable mothers. Here we can see how social, cultural, ethical and political forces also distort the media representation of child abuse and this can be seen clearly in Malaysia because of the government's direct control of the media. If the missing accounts of the young mothers who abandoned their babies were included in media coverage highlighting the underlying causes of the problem of baby dumping then perhaps a greater understanding of the situation would lead to a more effective, holistic solution. Accounts of events by the mothers of abandoned babies and other mothers like Nurhamim would be a rich topic for future research in Malaysia.

Alongside the techniques of media content analysis we have also employed feminist analysis of child abuse. This highlighted how the representation of child abuse by the media blames mothers disproportionately, obscuring the responsibility of 'ordinary' male perpetrators and also disempowers children. The tendency to blame mothers for child abuse, even when they are not

the perpetrators, was apparent in the portrayal of mothers in the Malaysian media. For women in sexual relationships with men other than the fathers of the abused children, like Nurhamim, the blame and disapprobation on the mother is all the greater as a good mother would never put her own needs above the welfare of her children (Hooper 1992). In these media discourses images of mothers recur: *bad* mothers, unable to protect their children; and *good* mothers, overwhelmingly feminine representatives of a maternalised national government who intercede on behalf of abused children. Mothers implicated in the abuse of children are harshly judged through these maternalist representatives. These findings resonate with feminist analyses of child abuse internationally.

Little academic analysis of media representation of child abuse in non-Western contexts has been undertaken (Hesketh and Lynch 1996; Kasim 2001). This article is a contribution to filling that gap and charting the complexities this issue presents in an Asian, and in this instance an Islamic, context. We can see from the differences in coverage between the two newspapers that child abuse is a significant concern in modern Islamic Malaysian society with unique manifestations such as 'baby dumping' and under-age marriage which are politically sensitive areas for the government to manage. The highlighting of these issues may also serve to break the silence around cultural and ethical practices within which child abuse occurs and the higher incidence of sexual abuse of girls.

The broad politico-social trends of patriarchy and constructions of neo-traditionalist families have been documented in Malaysia since the 1970s have been widely interpreted by theorists as a response to fast-paced and disruptive social change and modernization. Stivens writes, 'The family is presented as a critical site for producing new versions of purer Islam, and parents, especially women, within it carry a large responsibility for securing an Islamic future through the rearing of children' (Stivens 2006: 358). Family values are promoted in authoritarian domestic government campaigns and have been accompanied by international political coalitions with other Muslim countries and ironically, with conservative Christians to 'defend' and 'strengthen' the family and lobby against abortion, homosexuality, liberalism and feminism (Stivens 2006: 357-362).

How the government-controlled press in Malaysia portrays child abuse demonstrates a national politics in Malaysia dominated by conservative and patriarchal values which seeks to blame

child abuse on modern social changes while valorizing traditional families and values. With ever-increasing reported incidents of child abuse a more direct solution to the problem that was suggested over twenty years ago is to simply extend children's rights over their own body, autonomy and privacy, 'a radical concept which would require the transformation of family power relations' (Kitzinger 1988:85). While this is indeed radical, the deep concern for the welfare of children demonstrated by Malaysian people, as apparent in this media analysis, may require it.

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[i] Although newspapers reach 54 percent of the population, compared to the 94 percent reached by television, newspapers are the most popular source of information about politics (Nielsen Media Index Survey 2007-2008, The Neilsen Company 2009)

[ii] As marriage of girls under 16 can be approved by the Syariah court and is considered by many in Malaysia to be culturally acceptable we selected these articles concerning child marriage on the basis of the framing of the stories. That is, where articles on child marriage framed the issue as child abuse – as distinct from traditional practice – they were included in the sample.