

# TRANSNATIONAL COMPARATIVE FRAMING ANALYSIS OF SOUTH CHINA SEA CONFLICT IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN ONLINE MEDIA COVERAGE

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## **Abstract**

The objective of this study is to analyze the framing of the South China Sea conflict. This research focused on forty publications of four online media in Southeast Asia; The Jakarta Post, The Inquirer Philippine, The Star Online, and VietnamPlus as the representatives of the media on the coverage of the South China Sea dispute. The approach used in this study is a framing analysis, specifically with Guo's method of the Transnational Comparative Framing Model. Basing on the theories of peace and war journalism, this study hypothesized that the four online media in Southeast Asia incline toward war journalism.

This result of the framing analysis found that the media in Southeast Asia affirm the main assumption of the research, showing that the media in Southeast Asia opted for the war journalism in covering the news about the South China Sea conflict. There are four main indicators which represent the war journalism which include: elite-oriented, victory-oriented, propaganda-oriented, and partisan coverage. This study also showed that the media in Southeast Asia mostly cover the conflict through the lens of territorial dispute frame. This study affirmed the applicability of the theories and findings previous studies. From a media perspective, this study emphasized the need to take into account the importance of peace journalism practice during a conflict.

**Keywords:** South China Sea conflict, Transnational Comparative Framing Model, Peace Journalism, War Journalism

## **INTRODUCTION**

The South China Sea has caught extensive national and international media attention lately. The significance of the sea is undoubted. In the geographical term, the South China Sea is the most comprehensive sea in the world. It is connected to the Indian Ocean by the Malacca Strait and separated by the islands of the Philippines, Taiwan, and Borneo. It surrounds almost half of ASEAN, with Vietnam and Thailand in the west, the Philippines in the east, Borneo, Brunei, and Malaysia in the South. Along with it, the reefs, islands, and atolls could quickly become one of the potential treasures in its water body. The location of the sea is a vital area of maritime trade routes across the globe.

It is also remarkable that the potential of the South China Sea not only underlie above its water. It contains lucrative fisheries, which are very crucial for food security and livelihood of the people in Southeast Asia, as well as trillion cubic of the natural gas resources under its seabed. According to a report, the South China Sea is estimated to have eleven billion barrels of crude oil and estimated 5.3802 trillion cubic meters of natural gas (AMTI, 2018). According to the US Geological Survey in 2012 estimated that there might be another 4.5307 trillion cubic meters of natural gas and 12 billion barrels of oil that had yet to be discovered in the bed of South China Sea. The area is also rich in manganese, copper, tin, cobalt, nickel, and other minerals, in addition to oil and gas deposits (Snyder, 1996). Thus far, China, The Philippines and Vietnam have dominated the hydrocarbon exploration in the South China Sea.

The tension of the South China Sea dispute itself is seen differently by the media and journalists in the region. Each of the media in four ASEAN member states (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam) set

different framing and give a different portion of attention in portraying the issue. There are various means of how the media try to shape the reality from the subject; some of the media tend to lean on peace reporting while the other tends to lean into the war frame. In the peace context, media is viewed as an opportunity for the search of a new agreement between two conflicted parties by the process that does not have to be developed into a war. While in a war context, media used by the state authorities to enhance the national image and influence global opinions to win greater support. The media differentiate the two parties as 'their' side and 'our' side. Although the idea of how global journalism ethics should be identified is still debatable, journalists agree that the practice of journalism should work against narrow ethnocentrism or patriotism. Under this value, journalism in times of conflict, should not worsen the conflict by using broadly diverse sources and perspective and should not be blinded by silenced criticism. Hence, journalists ought to seek a coherent framework of values and guidelines for journalism in news coverage related to the conflict.

## **RESEARCH PROBLEM**

For the last decades, the South China Sea conflict has been one of the biggest flashpoints in the region. With the powerful military force, China undoubtedly becomes the 'superior' actor in the dispute compared to other Southeast Asian involved parties. The significance of the sea is very crucial that it affects several aspects, such as economy, geopolitical, and maritime security within the region. In recent years, China has put its history and domestic law to occupy the maritime claim over the sea; this act developing an ambiguity in the disputed sea. The fact that China has abused the international law of the territorial

boundaries, has enraged number of countries internationally and put the neighboring countries at disadvantage.

Then again, the media has vast responsibilities to society on the aspect of how they should report the right information for the public. In the context of global journalism, journalists have a vital role in shaping public perception. In conflict situations, reporters should report the news without sparking more conflict. Instead, journalists ought to apply the practice of journalism that reconciling their readers. However, despite all of the idealistic hypothesized traits about how journalists should cover their stories (such as being independent, committed to telling the truth, and balanced in addressing subjects), the media is run to serve the interests of a small group of elites. This also applies to the media outlets in Southeast Asia on how they cover the issue in the region, explicitly that of the South China Sea conflict. These media outlets have their own agenda and interests in reporting the South China Sea dispute.

In response to this problem, this study proposed a framing analysis method as a tool to gain the full understanding of how the media within four ASEAN member states (Indonesia - The Jakarta Post, Malaysia - The Star Online, The Philippines-Philippine Daily Inquirer, Vietnam - VietnamPlus.vn) covering the news regarding the South China Sea conflict. The critical question is what aspect that is emphasized in each of the media and how they give attention to this specific issue. To examine the elements of peace and war journalism, the following research questions are posed:

How the media outlets in Southeast Asian countries construct reality in this issue? What is the dominant frame used in online media outlets in Southeast Asia? How the media in Southeast Asia reflect their story based on war/peace journalism?

## OBJECTIVES

This study aimed to provide an understanding of how the media in Southeast Asia frame the issue related to the South China Sea conflict, which specified as follow:

- a. To analyze which aspect will be highlighted in the media from each of particular countries; Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam regarding the South China Sea conflict.
- b. To understand the dominant framing used by the four media outlets in Southeast Asia based on peace and war journalism.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### The Social Construction of Reality

The social construction of reality assumes that knowledge that lives and develops in society (such as the concept of public awareness and public discourse) is a form of social reality. The social construction of reality stipulated by Berger and Luckmann holds that reality is composed of subjective and objective dimensions. The central thesis of their opinion is that humans and society are dialectical, dynamic, and plural. The dialectical process is composed of three stages, which are *externalization*, *objectivation*, and *internalization*. They also present the idea of institutionalization, which occurs whenever there is the reciprocal typification of habitualized actions by types of actors (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). *Externalization* is an attempt of humans to express them into the outside world, both physically and psychologically. *Objectivation*, on the other hand, is the process through which externalized products of human action are objectivized. Objectivation is resulting in an objective reality which separated from the individual. While *internalization* is the point at which the individual interprets

actual events into subjective consciousness in the course of socialization.

### **Agenda Setting Theory**

Maxwell McCombs and Donald L. Shaw (1972) postulated that there are two levels of agenda setting theory. The first level of the theory argues that media modifies and filters what the media are saying. It creates the general issue that are seen as important [*object agenda setting*]. This theory is commonly utilized by the researchers to examine media usage and its influence on individuals and their immediate thoughts when presented a particular news. The next level, this theory argues that the media focuses on how people should think about the nature of the issue. It assumes that the more attention the media gives, the more likely the public will consider that the issue is significant [*attribute agenda setting*].

The theory of agenda setting function in a three-part process. The first one, the media determine which agenda will be displayed [*media agenda setting*]. Second, the media somehow affects and influence what the public think, which then creates the *public agenda setting*. Finally, both media and public agendas influence what policy maker consider important, which called by the *policy media*.

In this research, the theory is used to examine what are the main issue discussed by the media in the public sphere, as a complimentary to the framing theory as a second-level of agenda setting which also employed in this research. The theory is used to describes the ability of the media to influence and present the importance issue of the public agenda.

### **Global Journalism**

Globalization, which triggered by innovation in information technology, has led to a variety of definitions in various fields, one of which is in the world of mass

media. Adaptation to this change has given rise to a new definition in the field of journalism, namely global journalism. The global journalism argues that international events, such as war, natural disaster, or epidemic disease, as the result of globalization, attract attention from the media around the globe. The term "global journalism" refers to a system of news gathering, editing, and distribution that is not bound by national or regional borders, and in which shared national or community citizenship is not expected to serve as a common ground for newsmakers, journalists, and audiences (Reese, 2008).

In this research, the theory of global journalism is applied to the disciplines of international and transnational communications, with a focus on assessing the role of mass media in globalized society from political, economic, and cultural perspectives.

### **Peace and War journalism**

This research sees that the publication related to the South China Sea dispute is one of the coverages regarding conflict involving several countries. In doing the reportage over the conflict, journalists often use the principle of peace and war journalism. Johan Galtung first proposed the concept as two competing frames in conflict reportage. He compared war journalism to sports journalism, which often sees the object of publications as a zero-sum game in which winning is everything (Fong, 2009). Health journalism, he said, would be a better model. He used the example of a cancer patient to highlight not only the sickness, but also the various contributory causes. This technique would be more effective in conflict reporting than focusing solely on the violence and siding with one specific player. The model highlights four key differences between the two approaches: war journalism is violent, propaganda-oriented, elite-oriented, and victory-oriented. War journalism may contribute to the escalation of wars by

supporting war and reproducing propaganda (Galtung, 2002). Furthermore, war journalism places conflict as an arena for conflicting parties into two different parties (them vs. us).

In contrast, peace journalism provides a fairer way of framing stories. It acknowledges the fact that the media plays a role in the propaganda war. Peace journalism bases on peace/conflict, people, solution, and truth. In this study, the Peace and War journalism concept will be used to see the framework of the practice of journalism in covering the South China Sea dispute.

## **Transnational Comparative Framing**

### **Model**

An approach called Transnational Comparative Framing Model suggested by Guo, Holton, and Jeong (2012) introduces a model for studying transnational issues and transnational news media framing. The theory proposes a combination of inductive and deductive methodologies for investigating the international news media framing. Transnational Comparative Framing Model proposes a three-dimensional framing matrix, which is; *generic frames*, *domestic frames*, and *issue-specific frames*. The same framework has been used in several studies. For instance, Zhang and Hellmueller (2016) who explore what has been termed as global journalism and compares two prominent online news media, Aljazeera English and CNN, regarding the ISIS threat, Sakurai (2015) who used the domestication framework of the Transnational Comparative Framing Model on his research of framing of trade policy on the coverage of Super 301. In short, this approach could be one of the possible alternatives for the researcher to do the same study in the transnational context of framing.

Using the TCFM model, researchers may identify one or two broader frames for each

newspaper article. The researcher then explores the article based on the theme that fall under the frame as defined by framing functions. In this research the theory is used as a tool to analyze the different framing used by the media in Southeast Asian online media.

## **METHOD**

This study applied a framing analysis approach, specifically with Guo's method of the Transnational Comparative Framing Model. The approach was designed to assist the researcher in gathering more data on the global phenomenon and transnational study. Through this framing method, the TCFM laid out a systematic step for a researcher by exploring transnational news coverage and providing a comprehensive research framework applicable to analyzing globalized issues and media platforms (Guo, Holton, & Jeong, 2012).

The main subjects of this research were four online media outlets in Southeast Asia. The news reports on the South China Sea dispute in four online media in the Southeast Asian region, namely The Jakarta Post from Indonesia, The Star Online from Malaysia, The Daily Inquirer from the Philippines, and Vietnamplus.vn of Vietnam, were analyzed. The total sample of the study were 40 articles from the period of April 1 - June 30, 2018 which was selected of which, ten from The Jakarta Post, ten from The Star Online, ten from the Daily Inquirer, and ten from VietnamPlus.

## **RESULTS AND FINDINGS**

On the issue of the South China Sea conflict, the media in Southeast Asia also have differing perspective in constructing the news. This process of selecting, organizing, and presenting event to the general public is called framing.

The following is the mapping of the media construction as analyzed in the research.

No.	Media Construction on the South China Sea Dispute	Media	Summary
1.	South China Sea conflict is a sovereignty conflict	The Jakarta Post, The Star Online, Philippine Daily Inquirer, VietnamPlus	South China Sea conflict is a dispute where the conflicting party try to exercise jurisdiction over the territory by means of administrative control, resource exploration, and military activity.
2.	The South China Sea conflict is an economic conflict.	The Jakarta Post, The Star Online, Philippine Daily Inquirer, VietnamPlus	The ongoing conflict in the South China Sea is based on the economic importance of the sea, such as its strategic location, and lucrative natural resource under its water.
3.	South China Sea conflict affects a nation's political position	The Jakarta Post, The Star Online, Philippine Daily Inquirer, VietnamPlus	South China Sea conflict affects bilateral and multilateral cooperation of several countries in the region, as well as affecting a country's standpoint in the conflict.
4.	South China Sea Conflict has economic consequences to a lot of countries globally	The Jakarta Post, The Star Online, Philippine Daily Inquirer, VietnamPlus	The conflict in the South China Sea is believed to have huge economic consequence to the countries in the region, such as limitation to explore the natural resource, and economic loss.

Based on the results above, the most prominent frame categorization that appear in the four media are territorial dispute frame, economic dispute frame, political position, and economic consequence.

The occurrence of territorial dispute frames ranks first in news framing. The issue of territorial sovereignty conflicts is often raised because it has a great influence on a country. Territorial sovereignty is an essential bases of a nation, where a nation has all the rights to exercise its power over

its territory, which includes exploitation over the resources carried within (Rudolph, 2005). The media has made an apparent distinction when covering the story about the South China Sea dispute. There are several elements which affects how the media contextualize the conflict in the South China Sea into a territorial dispute. First, when the media talks about the territorial dispute, it also strongly linked to strategic geographical location in addition to its abundance resource lay under its water. The disputed territory itself have a huge significancy towards the countries in the region. The media, in this case, convey a geopolitical motive from the government and national interest of one country.

Second, the territorial conflict is often published as the disputing countries have a differing idea on the historical background of the territory, hence it creates further gap in the conflict. China's historical claim to the whole sea is reinforced after the World War II where the nine-dashed line of the South China Sea remarked the national demarcation line, as well as recognized the Nansha, Dongsha, Xisha, and the Zhongsha island as part of China's territory. In 1998, China declared and proclaim all the territories of the PRC and reiterating its EEZ and its historic rights in the South China Sea. On the contrary, the neighboring countries regard that the nine—dashed line proposed by China has not represent its imperialist past and rather see the issue as a territorial and economic interest.

In the news by The Jakarta Post, the Jakarta Post used a descriptive headline, and rather observed the conflict as a third party. The issue was primarily covered through the perspective of an economic standpoint. When it comes to covering regional news, the media tended to side with ASEAN member countries. The example of publication includes '*Philippines demands China stop taking fishermen's catch*', where the Jakarta Post published about the Philippines' request to China to stop the confiscation of Filipino fisherman's catch

in the disputed sea and called the practice unacceptable (2018).

Among the images of China which have dominated the mainstream media during the conflict, there was one refreshing contrast to the oft-repeated suggestion that 'China is the law breaker', and 'the party that always triggers conflict'. On a publication dated May 8, 2018, China's Prime Minister, Li Keqiang with President of Indonesia, Joko Widodo, had a bilateral talk, discussed the strategic partnership and a peaceful settlement of the dispute in the South China Sea. It showed that the Jakarta Post tended to cover the news based on the national interest and refrain from using a direct accusation towards any party in the conflict.

Moving on to the Star Online, the media generally covered the issue in its national context. This research showed that the publication in The Star served to fit the national interest of Malaysia. According to the publication, while Malaysia was trying to be assertive of its territory, the nation also would not sit by and let the tension in the region to get worse. Former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohammad frequently raised concern on the presence of warship in the South China Sea and repeatedly advised non-claimant country to withdraw its military naval near Malaysia's waterway. In regard of Malaysia's effort to assert its territory, the Star repeatedly covered the government's measures to strengthen its military power without provoking war to any other party.

On the other hand, The Star also voiced out its critic towards China's action in the South China Sea dispute. Several publications of The Star showed tendency to side with other ASEAN countries and criticized China's military deployment in the area of the disputed sea. One of the examples including '*Remove missiles on Spratly, Hanoi tells Beijing*', where the publication covered Vietnam Foreign Ministry's request to China to remove its military facilities in the South China Sea. In

addition, the Star also showed support to non-claimant country on their effort to ensure freedom of navigation. This way, the research argued that in covering the news about the South China Sea, The Star applied partisan attitude, where the coverage is less centrist and shows tendency towards a party in the conflict. In this context, the Star showed its support toward the 'victim' country.

Further, the Inquirer tended to accommodate the voice of the Philippines as one of the vocal groups in the South China Sea dispute. In covering the news, the media was using domestic point of view, hence the publication tended to which advantaging the national interest. The results of this study showed that the consensus of news related to this conflict is subjective. The construction built by The Inquirer tends to show China's negative side and show the truth side based on the Philippine point of view. On the formation of reality construction, The Inquirer constructed the Philippines' position as a 'us' group of people, portraying themselves as in-group. The actions of 'us' group is likely considered to be 'correct' and 'peaceful'. While the opponent group, 'them', is associated as the 'wrong', 'enemy' and 'bad' people (Byessonova & Gordienko, 2021). Negative representation of China was shown in an implicit way through the narration and the headline of the news.

This research argued that The Inquirer practice a difference-oriented coverage, where the media reports on areas of difference that could worsen the conflict. There were several publications to support the idea, one of the articles reports that President Duterte, then president of the Philippines, warned that if China continue to claim the disputed territory, the Philippines ready for war (Ramos, 2018). In June 2018, the Philippine accused China of threatening peace after China deployed weapons and aircraft on the contested island in the South China Sea (Mangosing, 2018). After using international laws to

show that China's action was wrong, the Philippines made a resolute call for China to stop any reoccurrence of the violation acts.

On the other hand, VietnamPlus tended to use titles that inclined to be negative and suggest unfavorable judgment when reporting the conflicts. Some examples include '*Vietnam condemns China's illegal activities in Hoang Sa, Truong Sa*', and '*Chinese military actions in East Sea face international criticism*'. Further, the media also chose the exaggerating phrases and promote Vietnam's losses due to the conflict. Vietnam also often blame China for initiating the conflict in the region.

In essence, in relation to the Peace and War Journalism put forward by Galtung (2002), media in Southeast Asia tend to report on the South China Sea conflict through the perspective of War Journalism, where some indicators including:

#### *1. Propaganda oriented.*

Most of the coverage of VietnamPlus, and the Inquirer regarding the conflict focused on exposing 'their' fallacy rather than focus on exposing the truth.

#### *2. Elite oriented*

The coverage emphasis on the able-bodied elites to be the main source of information, and emphasis on the role of elites as the peacemaker of the conflict. This research showed that the communication flows from elites to the publics. Leaders of the county were given more privilege to interpret the ongoing issue in the South China Sea.

#### *3. Victory-oriented*

The media mostly depended on the ability of one party's willingness to resolve the issue, focused on treaty, organization, and the controlled society. The media also often tried to conceal peace initiatives.

#### *4. Partisan*

The publications were biased towards once side in the conflict. The study showed that most of the media in Southeast Asia covered the news only based on the victim's point of view, without regarding China's effort to solve the problem.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The South China Sea is one of the most significant issues in 2018 and it is still an issue now. In this research, a qualitative study was used to investigate the framing process of four online media in Southeast Asia employing the Transnational Comparative Framing Model, and a War and Peace Journalism context in connection to the conflict in the South China Sea. The objective of this study is to explore the dominant framing of the South China Sea dispute in Southeast Asian online media, which elaborated through these research question below:

**RQ1:** How the media outlets in Southeast Asian countries construct reality of the issue? What is the dominant frame used in online media outlets in Southeast Asia?

**RQ2:** How the media in Southeast Asia reflect their story based on war and peace journalism?

As for the first research question, this study suggests that four media in Southeast Asia are not likely to stand neutral in covering the news of South China Sea conflict. The media tended to view the conflict in the South China Sea as a territorial and sovereignty conflict. The findings also showed the online media's orientation to domesticated the news into national context to fits the propaganda of the nation.

The second finding of the study found that the stories in four media outlets in Southeast Asia tended to cover its story based on the war journalism frame. The stories within this research tend to focused



on the elites, where the media often give more opportunities of political leaders, military official, or government officials as the main source of the news. The media in Southeast Asia also rather ignored ordinary people at grassroot level who might be affected directly by the conflict. Other than the previous indicator, the journalists often showed their bias for one side party in the conflict, specifically the affected countries of the dispute (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam). This idea shown through the criticism, nuance, and the quotes which favor 'our' side.

In conclusion, the findings affirm that the media in Southeast Asia employ war journalism in covering the news about the South China Sea dispute. There are four salient indicator which represent war journalism which include; propaganda-oriented, elite-oriented, victory-oriented, and partisan. The findings affirm the research assumption previously stated in the first chapter where the media would likely to practice peace journalism instead of war journalism in reporting the news

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