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## **The language of suffering: Media discourse and public attitudes towards the MH17 air tragedy in the Malaysia and the UK contexts**

### **Abstract**

'If it bleeds, it leads', events characterised by fatalities, are likely to attract high levels of media coverage. This study adopts a multidisciplinary approach to investigate public discourses on the MH17 tragedy in Malaysia and the UK. First, corpus-based discourse analysis was employed to explore the construction of the Malaysia Airlines tragedy MH17 in four selected Malaysian and British newspapers. In addition, an attitudinal study examining 50 Malaysian and 50 UK nationals' perceptions of the tragedy was conducted. Keywords analysis revealed an overall tendency for the news media to construct the air tragedy through classifications between 'us' and 'others'. Specifically, important 'Us' (Malaysian elites) and non-important 'Other' (non-Malaysian) in the Malaysian newspapers, versus good 'Us' (the West) and evil 'Others' (Russia) in the British newspapers. The attitudinal analysis shows, for both the Malaysian and UK respondents, the most salient associations with the MH17 tragedy related to '*conflicts*'.

### **Keywords**

corpus, discourse analysis, language attitudes, keyword analysis, MH17,

### **Introduction**

In 2014, there were 20,218 documented civilian deaths in the Iraq war (Statista, 2018a), 7,823 people were killed by natural disasters (Guha-Sapir et al., 2015), and 1,328 people died in the air crashes<sup>1</sup>, including the dramatic loss of life in the Malaysian Airlines flight MH17. These numbers reflect extreme human suffering around the globe. Acknowledging the rise of global suffering, scholars from different disciplines have, in recent years, investigated the relationship between suffering and media (Joye, 2012). This increasing academic attention has resulted in a wide range of research foci, such as the representation of distant suffering (e.g. Joye, 2009; Boltanski, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2011), media witnessing (e.g. Kyriakidou, 2015; Höijer, 2004), recovery discourse (e.g. Cox et al., 2008; Bonanno et al., 2010) and audience reaction towards mediated suffering (e.g. Huiberts & Joye, 2017; Seu, 2015).

Whilst recognising the diversity of research and richness of the ongoing academic research, we currently know little about the representation of air disasters within the media. However, according to a recent report published by Air Transport Action Group<sup>2</sup>, air transport is one of the world's most important industries and offers important social benefits by providing the only transportation means in remote areas. In 2017, commercial airlines carried nearly four billion passengers, equivalent to half the world's population (Statista, 2018b). Thus, the investigation of aircraft accidents is important since it helps to understand human suffering in relation to the world's most important transportation industries. Specifically, the present study aims to determine the ways in which the MH17 tragedy is linguistically defined and constructed in terms of keywords within both the media and the public context.

## Empirical research on news framing and public response

News as a constructed reality can shape public opinion and help form perceptions (van Dijk, 1991). In other words, news framing can influence human attitudes and behaviour (Maier et al., 2016: 1014), including towards crises. As such, there exists a growing body of empirical research investigating audience reactions to suffering. The previous studies can be divided into two flows. First, media-based studies which examine the news frames influencing audiences' responses and attitudes towards suffering. Secondly, audience-based studies which focus on the types of audience responses towards mediated human suffering.

A number of media-based studies have shown that the construction of international disasters is often based on an inherent belief in the superiority of one's own country over others (e.g. Joye, 2009; Yan & Bissell, 2015; Chouliaraki, 2006). Moreover, it has been found that international news is often evaluated according to the customs of one's own culture (e.g. Joye, 2009; Hanusch, 2008). Locating the paradigms in these studies suggests strongly that the 'distance' is not simply physical or geographical. In contrast, 'distance' reflects the gap between classes of people defined according to whether they belong to 'lucky' or 'unfortunate' groups (Boltanski, 1999), 'The West' or 'Others' (Joye, 2009, Hoijer, 2004; Silk, 2000; Washer, 2004), 'safety' or 'danger', 'prosperity' or 'poverty', (Joye, 2009). 'Distance' thus seems to refer not simply to mileage, but to the structure of the world instituted and maintained by power, cultural, wealth and race.

The 'Us' and 'Other' perspective in media discourse is revealed in Joye's (2009) study of Belgian television news reporting of foreign natural disasters. In the study, he observed that distant sufferings were constructed through sociocultural differences between 'Us' and 'Them', based on the world's levels of poverty, prosperity, danger and safety. Similar results were found in Washer's (2004) study examining the UK newspapers presentation of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) as a dangerous threat to the UK public. Analysis revealed the threat was presented principally through 'othering'. Specifically, there was a general tendency to blame China and the Chinese for the potential spread of the disease, mostly through the portrayal of China as an inevitable breeding ground for new infections, and thus creating an impression that they, as 'Other', were different to 'Us' (UK audiences). Another related study was conducted by Potts (2015), who focused on the use of nomination and prediction strategies in an investigation of news reporting on the impact, and aftermath, of Hurricane Katrina within US newspapers. The study revealed that the US media tended to pay greater levels of attention to ethnicity and poverty which, in turn, strongly favoured objectification, segregation and othering. As stated by Fabian (1991: 208) "Other" is never simply given, found or encountered, but made'.

With regards to audience-based research, Kyriakidou (2015) examined Greek audiences' reactions towards distant sufferings that go beyond expressions of compassion or pity. Kyriakidou identified four articulations of the witnessing experience: '*affective*', '*ecstatic*', '*politicised*' and '*detached*' witnessing. Each was articulated through different word choices given by the audience. For instance, in '*affective*' witnessing, the audience was observed to use affective language such as 'shock' and 'touched' to describe their emotional reactions to suffering and the victims. This witnessing included an assumption of sameness connecting the audience to the victims (see Kyriakidou, 2015 for a more detailed discussion). Relatedly, Huiberts & Joye (2017) argued that a sense of shared or overlapping experience is more crucial to invite an audience to engage with distant suffering. In other words, audiences tended to empathise with suffering if the news discursively linked the experience of the foreign event to the home country. This view is broadly compatible with von Engelhardt & Jansz

(2015) who posited that a lack of shared experience, rather than geographical distance and perceived cultural or ethnic dissimilarity, is a greater obstacle to empathetic responses towards distant victims.

The studies detailed above have investigated human suffering from a variety of perspectives and methodological approaches. However, at present, little is known about the extent to which the same tragedy is discursively constructed within both media and public domains. This paper argues that multidisciplinary research can offer some useful pointers.

### **A multidisciplinary study**

The now considerable body of research concerned with representations of human sufferings has shown that mainstream media are the key agents in disseminating contentious representations of human suffering (e.g. Joye, 2010; Thussu, 2004; Ashlin & Ladle, 2007; Washer, 2004; Pasquarè & Pozzetti, 2007). At the same time, a number of empirical studies have been conducted focussing primarily on audience attitudes towards suffering (e.g. Kyriakidou, 2015; Höjjer, 2004; Scott, 2014; Seu, 2015). However, these studies have focussed on one context only (i.e., the media or public perceptions). Thus, the relationship between media discourses and public perceptions has not been investigated fully. In this respect, Jaworska & Themistocleous (2018) identified a few areas warranting further attention.

Firstly, most research on representations of a particular language has tended to draw general conclusions about the language as a societal phenomenon. Nevertheless, each study is conducted within a specific context, and reveals information concerning language practice that might not be applicable to other contexts (e.g. within different cultural backgrounds). Therefore, the present study seeks to examine the ways in which the MH17 Malaysian Airlines tragedy is discursively constructed in two different contexts (Malaysia and UK). Since the MH17 air disaster involved individuals from a range of countries, it seems especially important to investigate this tragedy in different contexts.

Secondly, the majority of prior studies examining mainstream media representations have tended to assume a causal relationship between the media and audiences. However, Jaworska & Themistocleous (ibid.) argued that although mainstream media are in the public domain, they might not necessarily reflect what the public thinks. In fact, a number of studies have shown that the mainstream media often reflect the views of elites (e.g. Don & Lee, 2014; Galtung & Ruge, 1965). According to Breeze (2011), CDA could provide deeper insights of media studies by exploring real responses from the audiences. The contrasting of conclusions from the audience may lead to the development of new theory or concepts in media studies (Breeze, ibid.). Therefore, this study aims to examine the strength of any potential relationship between the news media and public perceptions, by comparing and contrasting news media presentation about the MH17 tragedy with university students' attitudes towards the air disaster. In this way, it is hoped that the results of the study could help determine the extent to which media representations may reflect public understanding. Our study is one of the few examples showing how the views of students can challenge discourses promoted by media elites.

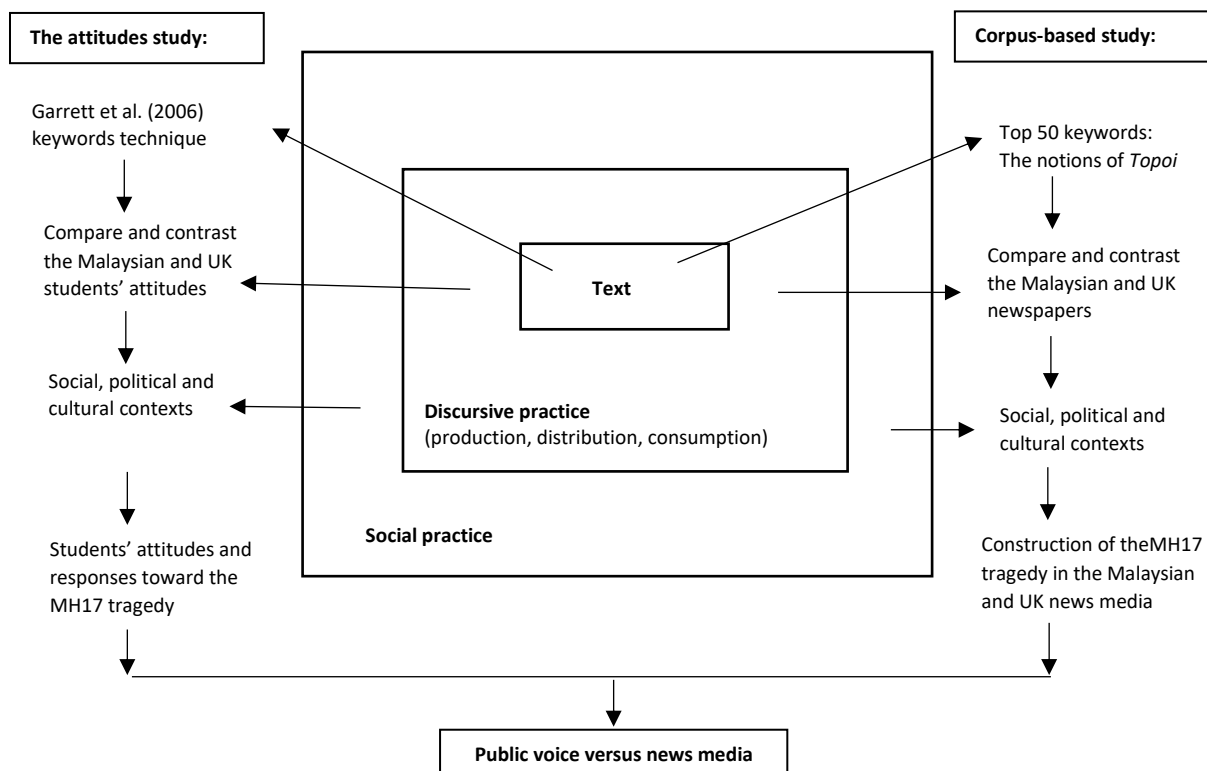
Thirdly, prior studies concerned with media representations have frequently concentrated upon only small quantities of data. Nonetheless, as Fairclough (1989: 54) notes, media effects are largely accumulative and are generally practiced through the repetition of particular ways of presenting information as well as particular ways of positioning the reader. In turn, Jaworska & Themistocleous (2018) proposed corpus-based analysis as a useful analytical tool to uncover patterns of repeated discourses in larger amounts of data. Hence, in the present study, we utilise corpus tools

and methods to determine the most frequent keywords which appeared in the news articles concerning the air tragedy. It should also be clarified that this study is primarily a method-driven exercise that tests out the combination of corpus-based discourse analysis and an attitudes study in relation to the communication of human suffering. It is felt that studying the discourse in two public contexts, i.e. the media and public attitudes, can help to better understand the mediatisation of the discourse and its wider effects.

### Method

Fairclough's (1992) three dimensional model including text analysis (text), contextual analysis (discursive practice) and interpretative analysis (social practice) is used as the fundamental framework for the present study. The framework provides a basis for both the corpus-based analysis and the attitudes study. In the corpus-based analysis, the first dimension (text analysis) is informed mainly by the 50 most frequent keywords obtained from the news corpora. In this study, we adopted Bondi & Scott (2010) and Baker's (2010: 26) definition of a keyword as a statistically significant word frequency (highest or lowest) in a text or corpus when compared to the standards set by a reference corpus. In generating keyword searches in this study, each of the corpora (from Malaysia and the UK) was compared to a general corpus – The British National Corpus (BNC). In addition, computer software, Sketch Engine, was used to generate the data. Subsequently, when the top keywords relating to specific topics or argumentative *topoi* (singular, *topos* - see Reisigl, 2014) were grouped together, we subsequently explored their use in context through concordance analysis to identify discourses of MH17 suffering in the two news media.

**Figure 1.** A summary of the conceptual and methodological framework of this study (adapted from Fairclough's (1992) three dimensional model).



In the second dimension (discursive practice), the *topoi* between the Malaysian and UK newspapers were compared and contrasted. Finally, the third dimension (social practice) involves a wider discussion through the examination of the ways in which the *topoi* are practiced in specific social contexts, particularly in relation to the dichotomy of 'Us' versus 'Others'. In this respect, the present study is largely influenced by the work of Gabrielatos & Baker (2008) and is thus guided by the investigation of the ways in which a specific text in a particular context creates or maintains specific discourse.

With regards to the attitudes study, the first dimension (text) analysed the keywords provided by the Malaysian and UK university students pertaining to the air tragedy. In concordance with Garrett et al.'s (2006) keywords technique, a questionnaire was used to obtain spontaneous emotional and cognitive responses from the participants to the term 'MH17'. The students were asked initially to provide three keywords to describe the tragedy. Subsequently, the keywords provided by the students were grouped into different semantic categories. In the second dimension, comments provided the students were then compared and contrasted. Finally, the social, political and cultural contexts were taken into consideration to help interpret the data obtained. As detailed above, the main purpose of the attitudes study is to investigate the extent to which media constructions of the MH17 tragedy may reflect public understanding. Through the combination of media discourses and public attitudes, our study provides a different, wider approach to communication studies of human sufferings.

### *Corpora building*

Two specialised corpora were built, based on the two different news media (the UK and Malaysia). The UK news corpus consisted of The Daily Telegraph and The Guardian, whereas, the Malaysian news corpus included The New Straits Times and The Malaysian General News. The newspapers were chosen according to very specific criteria: the type of newspapers (quality), circulation, establishment or achievement of the newspapers and, most importantly, the accessibility of the news articles. The corpus data used in the investigation of the tragedy of MH17 comprised 79,485 tokens from the Malaysian news corpus and 153,401 tokens from UK news corpus (see Table 1).

**Table 1:** Distribution of the Malaysian and the UK news corpus by tokens.

<b>MH17 News Corpora</b>	<b>tokens</b>
British	153,401
Malaysia	79,485
<b>Total</b>	<b>232,886</b>

The sample of articles was selected with a date restriction from 17 July 2014 until 31 October 2015. The news corpus reflected the period of time when the tragedy was most reported, covering the date of the incident itself, the investigation and the discovery of the wreckage, the victims' bodies and the black box recorder<sup>3</sup>. The search term employed in the study was 'MH17', referring specifically to both the aircraft and the incident. The results were filtered to exclude duplicates or highly similar items as determined by NexisUK.

## Participants

The population selected for the present study was principally Malaysian and UK nationals currently studying at the university in their respective countries. The data were gathered from 50 UK university students and 50 Malaysian university students (i.e.,  $N=100$ ). The Malaysian participants comprised 28 female students and 22 males aged between 20 to 59 (Mean = 27.16, SD = 10.1). 17 of the students were postgraduates and 43 were undergraduates. In the case of the UK participants, there were 31 female students and 19 male students. The age range of the sample was between 20 to 69 years (Mean = 28.14, SD = 9.57).

## Results and discussion

### *The media language of the MH17 tragedy*

Table 2 below details the 10 most frequent keywords retrieved from each corpus. As can be seen, many of the keywords uncovered were broadly similar in scope, pertaining principally to the countries and nationalities of the passengers involved in the air tragedy. The salience of *MH17* was also very high in both corpora, suggesting that the term was very important to the news reporting of the air tragedy. Given *MH17* referred specifically to the aircraft, it is perhaps not surprising to find that it appeared as the keyword employed most frequently when the target corpora were compared to a general corpus.

**Table 2.** The most frequent keywords of ‘*MH17*’ in the Malaysian and the UK news corpus

Malaysian News Corpus (MNC)			UK News Corpus (UKNC)		
Keywords	Frequency	Keyness	Keywords	Frequency	keyness
MH17	1,191	150.8	MH17	636	42.5
Malaysia	507	61.5	Ukraine	549	34.4
Ukraine	335	40.3	Russia	565	28.5
victims	372	38.6	crash	432	24.2
MAS	268	33.8	Ukrainian	345	22.5
Malaysian	257	32.6	Putin	296	20.3
Flight	243	30.1	Russian	419	19.2
tragedy	255	28.9	missile	292	18.7
Airlines	207	26.2	Malaysia	287	18.7
passengers	242	26.0	sanctions	299	18.4

Following Jaworska & Themistocleous (2018), the top 50 keywords were subsequently grouped into different semantic categories. Fine-grained analysis was then conducted to determine their more specific meanings within context. This analysis was undertaken to ensure that each keyword was grouped into its appropriate category. The Malaysian and the UK news corpus revealed that, the top keywords in both of the corpora were classified into 10 discrete *topoi* (see Table 3).



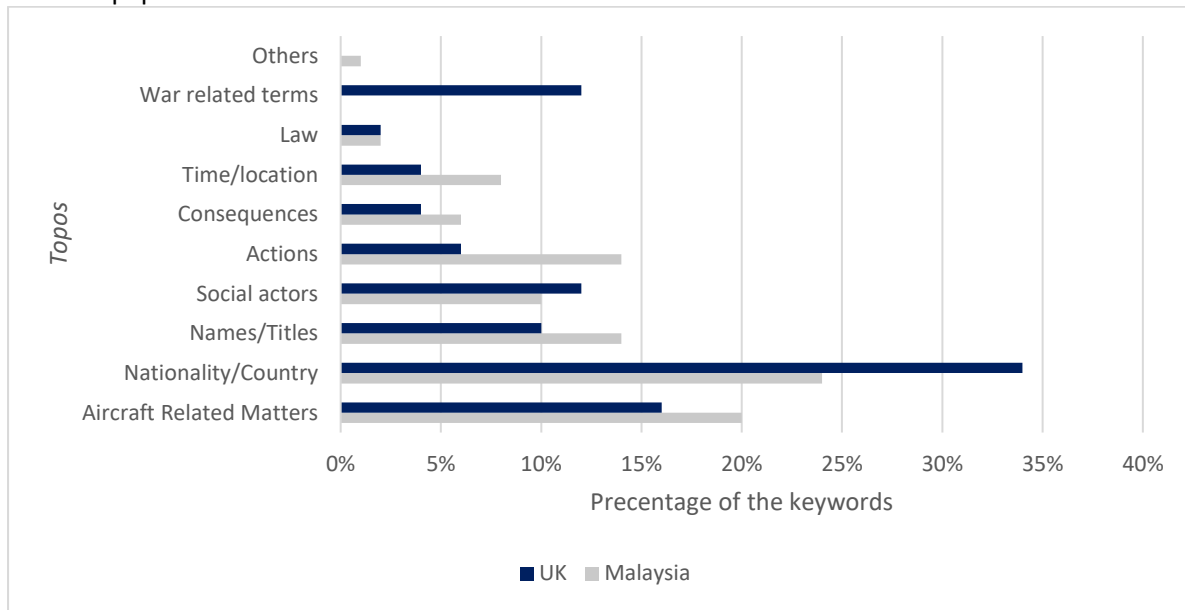
**Table 3.** The 10 discrete *topoi* for the MH17 tragedy

<b>Topoi</b>	<b>MNC</b>	<b>UKNC</b>
Aircraft-related terms	<i>MAS, MH370, MH17, plane, board</i>	<i>MH17, Airlines, aircraft, MH370</i>
Country/Nationality	<i>Malaysia, Ukraine, Kuala Lumpur, Dutch</i>	<i>Ukraine, Russia, Malaysia, Donetsk, Moscow, Kiev</i>
Names/Titles	<i>Datuk, Seri, Najib, Tun</i>	<i>Putin, Cameron, Obama</i>
Social Actors	<i>victims, families, passengers,</i>	<i>separatists, investigators, victims, experts</i>
Actions	<i>crash, flying, downing, investigation, shot</i>	<i>crash, shot, fired</i>
Consequences	<i>tragedy, incident</i>	<i>tragedy, disaster</i>
Time/Location	<i>July, eastern, site</i>	<i>site, eastern</i>
Law	<i>justice</i>	<i>sanctions</i>
War-Related Terms	-	<i>Missile, BUK, rebels, military, rebel, (death) bodies</i>
Other	<i>Ceremony</i>	-

Further analysis involved the calculation of keyword percentages for each *topoi* (see Table 4). Given multiple countries, such as the Netherlands, Ukraine and Russia, were involved in the air disaster, the analysis revealed that many of the keywords employed in the news corpora referred to specific countries, the Government or the nationality of the victims (Malaysia 24%, UK 34%). Aircraft-related matters were found to be the second most frequent category (Malaysia 20%, UK 16%). It is worth noting that whilst war-related matters were salient in the UK newspapers (12%), this was not the case in the Malaysian newspapers (0%). In order to help explain the results, we conducted further fine-grained analysis, focusing on the individual keywords within each semantic category. Based on the concordance analysis, several distinct themes emerged from the categories (see table 5). For reasons of space, it was only possible to discuss the main categories in detail.

In the *topos* of aircraft-related matters, a point worth noting is the frequent use of ‘MH370’ (another scheduled international passenger flight that disappeared on 8 March 2014 with similarly tragic consequences) in the MH17 context. The revisiting of MH370 may point to a strong connection within the media between these two incidents, i.e. both involving Malaysian aircraft tragedies. In the MNC, the employment of ‘MH370’ frequently indicated a strong commitment from the (Malaysian) Government to deal effectively with the two air tragedies. Examples include ‘*It had not neglected efforts to find MH370*’ and ‘*the search for MH370 is ongoing*’. The emphasis on the continuing efforts to manage both crises may enhance the sequestering of suffering, principally through the promotion of the appearance of recovery from ‘sad’ events (see also Cox et al., 2008). Unlike the MNC, the use of ‘MH370’ in the UKNC more frequently expressed criticisms of the disaster management of MH370, pointing to the failure of Malaysian officials to solve the crisis. Examples include ‘*unexplained disappearance of flight MH370*’ and ‘*under heavy criticism for its handling of MH370*’.

**Table 4.** Percentage distribution of semantic categories/*topoi* of MH17 from the Malaysian and the UK newspapers.



Analysis of the MNC data relating to the *topos* of name/social actors and nationality/country revealed a hegemonic political position by privileging the representation of the Malaysian ministers for the audiences. The concordance analysis also revealed that the disaster coverage of the MH17 flight also focused increasingly upon the Malaysian ministers and officials, rather than on the victims of disaster. For example, frequent use of the keywords '*Najib Tun Razak*' (the Malaysian Prime Minister at that time) was surrounded by range of communication verbs, most particularly '*said*', '*stressed*', '*announced*' and '*assured*'. Indeed, the '*victims*' were largely framed with regard to the support and assistance provided by the Malaysian Government. Examples included, '*victims will receive US\$50,000 compensation*' and '*address the needs of the families of the victims*', implying the crucial role of the Government as charitable benefactors to victims who appeared weak and helpless. Hence, the analysis suggests that the suffering discourse of MH17 is more likely to contribute to the empowerment of the Government involved in the disaster; thus demonstrating their power and ability to manage the crisis.

A different scenario was observed within the UKNC. Malaysian politicians were generally absent from the keyword list within the UK news reporting. The absence of Malaysian politicians is felt to reflect an important ideological aspect of the coverage, in particular, since the UK news media commonly categorised Malaysia as the unknown or unfamiliar 'Other'. In fact, the overt framing of western politicians (e.g. '*Obama*' and '*Cameron*') further cultivated the sharp contrast between 'Us' (the West) and 'Other' (Malaysia). Discourses of power and hierarchy were also reflected in the news corpus. This hierarchy was constituted largely through narratives about the superior role which the US and the UK, when compared to Russia, was purported to play in the global economy. The imperative mood surrounding the speakers (*Obama* and *Cameron*) and addresser (*Putin*), for instance, '*warned*', '*threatened*', '*accused*' and '*tells (Putin to stop)*' further confirmed the superior-inferior relationship between the US and the UK on the one hand and Russia on the other. This hierarchy constituted by the media is perhaps a reflection of a reality whereby individuals with power and status are valued more highly than those who are less powerful.

Another interesting finding obtained from the analysis related to the *topos* of war. The deliberate selection of war and military vocabulary to depict the air accident was evident within the

UKNC, e.g., *'Missile', 'BUK' and (dead) 'bodies'*. More specifically, analysis of the UKNC indicates, by connecting the war explicitly with Putin and Russia, that reporters unduly influenced the UK audience to assign responsibility and blame Russia. Examples include, *'missile system supplied by Russia' and 'Russia military who carried out this crime'*. In contrast, as can be seen in Table 4, there were no such keywords employed in the MNC to describe war within the MH17 context. Since war-related issues were absent, it appears that the Malaysian audience were exposed to considerably less information regarding the military context. As stated by Berry et al. (2007), the news media have the power to sway public perceptions more broadly by means of their choice to select what, and what not, to publish. The absence of *topoi* related to war thus implied a distinct political concern of the Malaysian Government in their coverage of stories related to the Russian military.

In the action category, *'shot'* was constructed differently across the Malaysian and the UK newspapers. In the MNC, keywords were frequently linked to unknown actors, such as *'shot down by rebels', 'shot down by unidentified groups', and 'the person who shot down the plane'*. The choice of words can serve to blur the act of agency (that is, who actually performed the action) (Woods, 2006). In contrast, within the UKNC, *'shot'* was generally associated directly with the perpetrator. For instance, in sentences such as *'was shot down by pro-Russian separatists' and 'Russian forces had shot down the plane'*. Hence, by frequently connecting the action verb to the doer, many UK journalists again induced audiences to assign responsibility to Russia.

It is also interesting to observe that legal keywords were presented frequently in both corpora, which helps to reinforce the idea that the MH17 air disaster was a criminal act. These law-related keywords suggest that there was a great deal of emphasis in both corpora upon solving the crime, and to prevent its reoccurrence. Interestingly, the word *'justice'* was more frequent within the MNC, whilst the UK news media tended to favour the word *'sanctions'*. These keywords appear to carry different connotations, thus delivering different messages to the audiences. Specifically, *'justice'* refers to a concern for peace and genuine respect for people<sup>4</sup>, which is likely to focus on the needs of the victims. In contrast, *'sanctions'* could be defined as the penalties enforced for disobeying the law<sup>5</sup>, concentrating more on the criminals themselves. The specific word choices hence provided an insight into the local victims, who were frequently given priority over the criminals in the Malaysian corpus. In contrast, the UKNC was found to be more focused on punishing the perpetrators as opposed to the potential impact upon the victims. A summary of the results is provided in table 5.

**Table 5.** Most frequent *topoi* and discourses in the tragedy of MH17 between the Malaysian and the UK newspapers.

<i>Topos</i> of aircraft-related matters	1. Recovery vs. blame	<p>Malaysian Version:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Local government is committed to solving the air tragedy.</li> </ul> <p>UK Version:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Investigation surrounding the aircraft (including blame attribution) is important to solve the air tragedy.</li> </ul>
<i>Topos</i> of name/social actors	1. 'Us' vs. 'Other'	<p>Malaysian Version:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Local political elites are important in managing the air tragedy.</li> </ul> <p>UK Version:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Western elites are important in managing the air tragedy.</li> </ul>
<i>Topos</i> of nationality/country	1. Local vs. global 2. 'Us' vs. 'Other'	<p>Malaysian Version:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Locals are more important than the distant 'other'</li> </ul> <p>UK Version:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>'The West' is more important than the distant 'other'.</li> </ul>
<i>Topos</i> of actions	1. General vs. crime	<p>Malaysian Version:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Government actions to manage the air tragedy are important to the readers.</li> </ul> <p>UK Version:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Investigation and identifying the criminal are important to solve the air crisis.</li> </ul>
<i>Topos</i> of consequences	1. Incident vs. disaster	<p>Malaysian Version:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The air tragedy is seen as a collective experience in which people shared the grief of the bereaved.</li> </ul> <p>UK Version:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The air tragedy is complicated and destructive.</li> </ul>
<i>Topos</i> of war	1. Absence vs. presence	<p>Malaysian Version:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Flight MH17 was shot down. The perpetrator is unknown.</li> </ul> <p>UK Version:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Russia shot down Flight MH17. The perpetrator is clear.</li> </ul>
<i>Topos</i> of law	1. Justice vs. sanctions	<p>Malaysian Version:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The legal system should prioritise the victims.</li> </ul> <p>UK Version:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Punishments to the criminal should be the priority.</li> </ul>

### *The students' attitudes of the MH17 tragedy*

Before considering the findings for the various categories, levels of overall positivity and negativity for the 50 respondents were calculated (see Table 6). The respondents were asked to provide three keywords associated with the air tragedy. Hence, a total of 150 keywords ( $50 \times 3$ ) were provided. The keywords were subsequently classified into different semantic categories manually. It is worth noting that a number of keyword items, such as 'Netherland' and 'communication', did not exhibit a sufficiently high number of cues, and thus, would not allow sufficient levels of robustness regarding their conveyance of negativity or positivity. In these cases, a decision was taken to categorise words as neutral. Nevertheless, it was felt that a number of keywords could be reasonably assumed to convey negative connotations (i.e., 'danger', 'trauma', 'stupid', 'upset', 'threatening', 'sad', 'cruel') – further examples are provided in the discussion below.

**Table 6** Percentages (and frequencies) of positive and negative comments regarding the MH17 provided by the Malaysian ( $n = 50$ ) and UK respondents ( $n = 50$ )

	Malaysia	UK
Negative	75% (113)	91% (137)
Neutral	25% (37)	9% (13)
Total comments	100% (150)	100% (150)

(Percentages are rounded up or down to the nearest whole number).

Table 6 shows both the Malaysian and the UK respondents expressed largely negative attitudes toward the tragedy. Surprisingly, the UK respondents tended to provide more negative comments when compared to the Malaysian respondents. In order to interpret this finding, further fine-grained analysis was conducted. Following Garrett et al. (2006), the keywords provided by the respondents were grouped into ten semantic categories. Given the small number of keywords requested from each of the respondents (3), keywords which shared broadly similar meanings were clustered into the same semantic category. For example, all keywords related to 'problem-solving oriented discussion', 'verbal confrontation', 'violent/armed conflict', 'issue of damage' and 'death' were grouped into the category of 'conflict' (e.g., 'inhuman', 'attacked', 'missile') In addition, keywords relating to emotions corresponding to 'sadness', 'fear', 'anger' and 'disgust' (e.g. 'worrying', 'devastating', 'disappointed') were grouped together. Percentages for each category across the 2 groups of respondents were then calculated (see Table 7).

**Table 7** Percentages (and frequencies) of total keywords by Malaysian ( $n = 50$ ) and UK respondents ( $n = 50$ ) in each semantic category

	Malaysia	UK
Respondents ( $n=50$ )	Keywords: $n=150$	Keywords: $n = 150$
Conflict	40% (60)	42% (64)
Emotion/Experience	21% (32)	33% (50)
Aircraft related matters	4% (6)	0% (0)
Moral/Religion	5% (7)	0% (0)

Law/Politics	6% (9)	5% (7)
Country/Nationality	13% (19)	5% (7)
Time/Location	1% (2)	1% (1)
Social Actors	3% (4)	2% (4)
Communication	0% (0)	1% (1)
Fate	7% (11)	11% (16)

(Percentages are rounded up or down to the nearest whole number).

Table 7 demonstrated that the semantic categories identified for the MH17 air tragedy were mostly associated with conflict (Malaysia 40%, UK 42%) and emotional effects (Malaysia 21%, UK 33%). The result broadly support the findings of Kyriakidou's (2015) study amongst Greek audiences, which found that the use of politicised and affective language was common in the respondents' comments about three major disasters, namely, the Southeast Asian tsunami of 2004, Hurricane Katrina and the Kashmir earthquake of 2005. A more in-depth discussion of the keywords of MH17 is outlined below.

### *Conflict*

In this category, both the Malaysian and the UK students expressed a clear disapproval of the MH17 tragedy. Further analysis of the subcategories of conflict (see Table 8) indicated that keywords related to terrorism were strongly presented in the Malaysian and the UK comments (Malaysia 60%, UK 63%). This is revealed in the lexical choices such as '*war*', '*murder*', '*crime*' and '*illegal*', indicating that the MH17 tragedy is generally perceived as a terrorist attack. However, many UK students also expressed condemnation (5%) of the acts of terrorism such as '*pointless*', '*thoughtless*' and '*mindless*', suggesting the shooting down of flight MH17 was perceived as somewhat irrational and/or foolish. Arguably, the evaluative tone of the UK respondents in this category was relatively negative, and comprised overt criticisms in particular. This may be because the flight was shot down, and the airplane subsequently crashed over eastern Ukraine, implying a closer geographical distance between the UK students and the suffering.

**Table 8** Percentages (and frequencies) of total keywords by Malaysian ( $n=50$ ) and UK respondents ( $n=50$ ) in the conflict subcategories

	<b>MALAYSIA</b>	<b>UK</b>
	Keywords: $n=60$	Keywords: $n=64$
Enigma	10% (6)	22% (14)
Flaws	12% (7)	3% (2)
Destruction	18% (11)	7% (5)
Terrorism	60% (36)	63% (40)
Condemnation	0% (0)	5% (3)

(Percentages are rounded up or down to the nearest whole number).

Conversely, it seems surprising that condemnation was not mentioned by the Malaysian students with regards to the MH17 tragedy (0%). Indeed, the students were found to be more focused on destruction (18%), flaws (12%) and enigma (10%). Interestingly, one of the Malaysian students made

reference to a specific issue of MH17 as *'save fuel'*. Given that flight MH17 had taken a shortcut across the disputed area of eastern Ukraine, there was some speculation that the pilot was attempting to save fuel (Boyle, 2014). This comment potentially referred to 'pilot error' as the root of the disaster. In addition, keywords such as *'mistake'* and *'careless'* were also found in the comments. Again, indicating that the air crisis was, for some, perceived as potentially the result of human error.

#### *Emotion / experience*

In this category, the UK students, again, utilised more emotional words in contrast to the Malaysian students (UK 21%, Malaysia 33%). Further analysis within this category was conducted to identify the relative salience of each emotion by the two groups of respondent (see Table 9).

**Table 9** Percentages (and frequency) of total keywords by Malaysian ( $n = 50$ ) and UK respondents ( $n = 50$ ) in the emotion/experience subcategories (percentages are rounded up or down to the nearest whole).

	<b>MALAYSIA</b>	<b>UK</b>
	n= 32	n= 50
Sadness	53% (17)	36% (18)
Fear	34 % (11)	38% (19)
Anger	0% (0)	26% (13)
Curiosity	13% (4)	0% (0)

(Percentages are rounded up or down to the nearest whole number).

Table 9 demonstrates that many Malaysian students expressed somewhat high levels of sadness regarding the air crisis (53%). By contrast, the UK students tended to express greater levels of fear (38%), as well as sadness (36%), in relation to the shooting down of flight MH17. In the UK comments, a range of keywords were offered to depict the air tragedy as an unpleasant event filled with threat, danger and harm, for example *'appalling'*, *'threatening'* and *'shocking'*. There also seemed to be a high level of fear of the probability of a future threat. In contrast, keywords such as *'sad'* and *'sorrow'* were frequently mentioned in the Malaysian comments, and these presumably referred to the impact of the air crisis in terms of loss, pain and suffering. The above findings suggest that whilst the UK students were more likely to focus on the attack itself, thus considering the air tragedy as a horrible event, the Malaysian students tended to pay more attention to the human suffering itself, thus displaying greater levels of empathy regarding the suffering of the individuals involved in the air tragedy.

#### *Law / politics*

In the case of the Malaysian comments, *'politics'* was often mentioned, indicating perceived political involvement in the incident. However, these comments appeared to be rather abstract, perhaps referring to activities associated with the governance of the countries involved in the air disaster. In addition, several Malaysian students also mentioned *'innocent'* in their comments. This keyword seemingly highlighted that, whilst the victims were not responsible for the event, they suffered the consequences. In contrast, with regard to the UK comments, keywords such as *'justice'*, *'law'*, *'politics'* and *'responsibility'* were mentioned, perhaps expressing an urgency for legal action to be taken to end

the terrorist attack. According to Chouliaraki (2004), feelings of unfairness and indignation concerning a terrorists' act can, in turn, provoke appeals for justice.

## Conclusion

The findings of the present study indicate that whilst several discourses evident in the selected Malaysian and UK newspapers are also perceived by the students, others are not. In terms of the latter, the analysis suggests, for example, that the discourse of 'Us' (Malaysia) versus 'Other' (non-Malaysia), clearly constructed within the Malaysian MNC corpus, seemed to be refuted by the Malaysian students. Moreover, stories relating to the Malaysian Government were often amplified in the news reports, with very little attention paid to broader international events (e.g. *Russia*) and foreign elites. This finding is in line with the results obtained in equivalent research conducted by Nelson (2006) and Don & Lee (2014) who also found evidence that Malaysian newspapers often reflect the opinions of the ruling group, indicating the role of hegemony in the Malaysian news media. However, in the case of the present study, the majority of the students were generally found to hold negative attitudes towards the MH17 tragedy and, despite a lack of coverage in the Malaysian media, the students often perceived the incident in terms of '*conflict*', most especially with reference to terrorism. This result thus suggests media discourses in Malaysia may not reflect students' opinions more broadly. Relatedly, a survey by Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ)<sup>6</sup> showed that more than half of Malaysians do not trust the news they read and perceived it as heavily under political control.

In contrast, to some extent, the construction of 'Us' and 'Other' in the UK newspapers was generally shared by the UK students. The analysis suggests a tendency for the UK news media to construct a binary classification of the air tragedy between the good 'Us' (US and UK) and the evil 'Other' (Russia). The analysis also demonstrated that there was a general tendency amongst the UK students to express stronger condemnation of the shooting down of the aircraft, most especially as inhuman and/or cruel. Further analysis of the affective responses provided additional insights. Specifically, the analysis revealed that the UK students expressed slightly higher levels of fear and/or anger regarding the air tragedy. According to Kim & Cameron (2011) and Nabi (2002) participants exposed to higher levels of anger-oriented news tend to hold more negative attitudes (e.g. anger) toward the responsible party than those exposed to sadness-oriented news. Arguably, with regards to the results of the present study, story framing concerning terrorism can, in turn, also unduly affect student perceptions of danger about the crisis.

The results of the present study demonstrates how discourse of othering is constructed in the media in conjunction with how it is shared or refuted by university students. According to Yulita (2013: 207), 'othering can take many forms, from direct and overt hatred to more subtle indirect ways, which can be hard to identify, notice or be aware of'. van Dijk (2000: 34) also observed that 'othering' can be expressed, enacted and confirmed by text and talk, such as daily conversations, TV programmes and news reports. Therefore, by identifying the constructions of 'othering' in human suffering, we potentially become more conscious of and sensitive to others around us, and more aware of how (if) we collude in creating and perpetuating the othering process.

It is felt that the adaptation of keywords analysis in this multidisciplinary study helped identify salient linguistic patterns represented in both the media and within the public domain with regards to the MH17 tragedy. Such analysis allowed the representations of human suffering to be categorised robustly. Furthermore, the three dimensional model which takes into account the social, political,



cultural, and historical context of the data, was found to be useful framework to explain the reasons specific keywords occurred within, or were absent from, both the corpus and the students' attitudinal responses. Specifically, the model allowing us to consider the following issues: the social context of the news industry in both Malaysia and the UK (e.g., freedom of the press); social attitudes toward the air tragedy amongst Malaysian and UK university students; and processes of text production, distribution and consumption within Malaysia and the UK. The CDA-based concept of *topoi* offers further insights into the presentation of human suffering, and suggests that the news coverage of MH17 tragedy maintains socio-cultural differences between 'us' and 'other' based on a social hierarchy of status and power. Methodologically, since the present study triangulates two research methods, a corpus-based discourse study and an attitudes study, it is felt to offer a particularly comprehensive and rigorous picture of public discourse surrounding the MH17 air tragedy.

Nevertheless, there is a requirement for further in-depth studies to be conducted investigating specifically the extent to which news stories may influence the personal attitudes of readers towards (air) tragedies. In future studies, it would, for example, be of both theoretical and methodological value to recruit readers of specific newspapers (such as NST or The Guardian) as participants to examine the potential influence of the content of these respective newspapers on their attitudes. Such investigation could help clarify the relationship between the news media content and public attitudes more broadly. In addition, three-dimensional framework is adopted mainly as a structure in this study. We are interested to further develop the framework in our upcoming research to formulate deeper comparative insights about media discourse on disaster news in conjunction with a larger sample size to ensure better the validity and generalisability of the findings. It is also acknowledged that the classification of keywords found in the present study into specific categories was somewhat problematic. For this reason, and to avoid overly subjective classifications, future research should refine categorisation techniques.

## Notes

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