

MEDIA FRAMING AND SOCIAL COHESION: PEACE JOURNALISM IN MALAYSIAN RELIGIOUS-CULTURAL CONFLICT REPORTING (2013-2025)

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Abstract. This systematic article review critically examines the role and effectiveness of Peace Journalism (PJ) as an alternative framework for mitigating interethnic tension and enhancing national harmony in Malaysia's diverse religious and cultural landscape. Conventional reporting often exacerbates tensions, making PJ, which emphasizes conflict resolution, context, and multi-perspective reporting, crucial. Employing a qualitative, systematic synthesis approach, fifteen peer-reviewed journal articles and academic sources published between 2013 and 2025 were analyzed. This review integrates Galtung's Peace Journalism Theory and Framing Theory to assess the structural and socio-cultural constraints impacting PJ implementation. Findings confirm the prevalence of conflict/war-oriented frames in both international and domestic religious coverage. The limited adoption of PJ is attributed to complex structural constraints (e.g., regulatory frameworks, editorial policies, self-censorship) and a bias towards majority-group and authoritative perspectives, limiting exposure to alternative voices. The study establishes that PJ's theoretical potential is compromised by practical and systemic pressures. It recommends comprehensive institutional reforms, journalist empowerment, and strategic leveraging of citizen journalism to facilitate a proactive media role in social cohesion and peacebuilding.

Keywords: *peace journalism, conflict reporting, religious conflict, cultural conflict, Malaysian media*

Introduction

In a diverse society like Malaysia, where multiple cultures and religions coexist, the manner in which media reports on conflicts significantly shapes public perception, influences social harmony, and impacts national unity. Media coverage can either exacerbate tensions or foster reconciliation depending on whether journalists adopt adversarial, fear-based mindsets, or constructive, solution-oriented perspectives. The cultural and religious diversity of the nation makes it particularly vulnerable to heightened tensions, evident in recurring sensitive issues such as the use of the word "Allah," the debate over Jawi script in schools, and general ethnic friction (Lee, 2025). These issues demonstrate the capacity of religious-cultural topics to rapidly escalate into crises, necessitating cautious but comprehensive media engagement. The concept of Peace Journalism (PJ) emerges as a vital alternative to traditional war-focused reporting. Unlike conventional journalism, often referred to as War Journalism (WJ), which emphasizes violence, polarization, and conflict, PJ seeks to highlight reconciliation, structural causes of disputes, and multi-perspective reporting (Ibrahim, 2010). In the Malaysian context, the relevance of PJ is especially crucial given the potential for conflicts between communities, faiths, or cultural groups to influence public attitudes and long-term social harmony. While mainstream Malaysian media tends to report extensively on conflicts and crises, new media, including citizen journalism, offer alternative platforms for multi-ethnic voices, dialogue, and cultural integration,

illustrating both the challenges and opportunities for PJ. Understanding the state of PJ in Malaysia requires examining not only the frequency of coverage but also the prevailing framing strategies, audience perceptions, and underlying societal contexts. The persistence of religious-cultural sensitivity, as highlighted by incidents like the 2024 controversy over socks bearing the word 'Allah', confirms that these issues retain the potential for national securitization, forcing media outlets to prioritize self-preservation and cautious framing (Lee, 2025). This inherent risk-aversion severely limits the media's willingness to adopt the comprehensive, context-rich reporting required by PJ.

This systematic review, therefore, aims to: (1) synthesize the empirical evidence on the balance between war- and peace-oriented framing in Malaysian media coverage of religious and cultural conflicts; (2) analyze the structural and socio-cultural factors that impede the full adoption of Peace Journalism principles within mainstream Malaysian newsrooms; and (3) propose a conceptual framework for enhancing media contribution to national unity and intercultural dialogue, thereby establishing the necessary theoretical and practical foundation for long-term peacebuilding efforts. The primary contribution of this research is the establishment of a contextualized model of PJ constraints in Malaysia. This model utilizes the Hierarchy of Influences (HoI) framework to demonstrate that the failure of PJ is largely due to the systemic prioritization of political control and regulatory caution over multi-voiced reporting, thereby conceptually extending Galtung's PJ theory within the highly sensitive Asian context.

Theoretical and conceptual foundations: An integrated framework

Peace journalism vs. war journalism: A critical analysis

Peace journalism and war journalism represent two contrasting, outcome-oriented approaches. WJ emphasizes confrontation, adversarial narratives, and visible conflict and elite actors. Conversely, PJ, as developed by Lee (2020), emphasizes solutions, reconciliation, multi-party perspectives, and constructive engagement, seeking to cover the structural causes of disputes and peace initiatives (Ibrahim, 2010).

The critical debate and the paradox of PJ

While the utility of PJ in conflict mitigation is clear, critical scholarship points to its inherent limitations. Critics argue that PJ risks moving into advocacy, potentially compromising journalistic neutrality and objectivity, especially in highly regulated or sensitive political environments like Malaysia. This paradox poses a fundamental challenge: journalists must navigate structural pressures to maintain 'safety' while adhering to the PJ mandate of comprehensive, truth-telling reporting. Studies show that when peace-oriented frames are used, audiences are more likely to perceive possibilities for cooperation and resolution, highlighting the framing's importance in shaping social attitudes. Given the regional focus on peace processes, scholarly work on PJ and peacebuilding is vital and often published in forums such as the SCOPUS-indexed Asian Journal of Peacebuilding.

Media framing and the hierarchy of influences model

Framing Theory suggests that the way journalists select and present certain aspects of reality (frames) significantly influences how audiences interpret, engage with, and

emotionally respond to conflicts (Steele, 2009). Studies in the Malaysian context reveal that media coverage is often influenced by factors beyond the individual journalist's ethics, notably organizational, societal, and regulatory pressures.

Applying the Hierarchy of Influences (HoI) model

HoI model provides a crucial framework for dissecting the complex forces that shape news content, organizing them from the micro (individual) to the macro (social system) level. (1) Organizational Constraints: Resource limitations, organizational routines, and editorial policies often prioritize immediate events and sensationalism over deeper socio-cultural explanations and peace-oriented narratives. (2) Societal and Regulatory Constraints (Extramedia): Legal frameworks, self-censorship, and societal sensitivities regarding interfaith issues compel journalists to adopt "safe" frames that prioritize the majority-group perspective and avoid sensitive discussions, limiting the diversity of perspectives. (3) Ideological Constraints (Social System): At the highest level, the ideological context dictates in whose interests organizational routines ultimately operate. In Malaysia, this ideology often mandates political control and the preservation of ethnic and religious stability (an 'Ideology of Consensus'). Consequently, PJ, which necessitates uncovering structural violence and deep-seated conflicts (Galtung, 1969), is systemically rejected because it conflicts with this prevailing ideological priority. Content analyses of coverage on freedom of religion confirm this imbalance, revealing that reports are dominated by contentious themes (e.g., apostasy, institutional critique), while narratives of interfaith harmony and tolerance remain under-represented.

Citizen journalism as a peace supplement

Citizen journalism has emerged as a critical force, providing alternative, less-restricted platforms for intercultural dialogue and reporting on sensitive issues often avoided by mainstream media (Steele, 2009). These digital environments facilitate the expression of multiple viewpoints and amplify marginalized voices, acting as a crucial complement to traditional media in fostering peace and unity across ethnic and religious boundaries. This highlights the potential of technology to bypass structural filters and promote greater social cohesion in the digital ecosystem.

The scholarly gap

The existing literature confirms the dominance of conflict framing and the profound influence of structural constraints. However, there is a lack of research that systematically synthesizes these findings to establish a contextualized conceptual model of PJ constraints in the highly regulated Malaysian setting. This review fills that gap by analyzing how the intricate interplay between regulatory caution (Extramedia) and organizational routines (Routine/Organizational), catalyzed by economic pressures, acts as the primary impediment to PJ implementation, extending the HoI model specifically for the Southeast Asian context.

Materials and Methods

Source selection and criteria

Fifteen (N=15) peer-reviewed journal articles and academic sources published between 2013 and 2025 were selected. Sources were identified through searches on recognized academic platforms using keywords including "peace journalism," "war journalism," "religious conflict," and "Malaysia." Inclusion Criteria: The sources were required to: (1) be empirical or conceptual studies, (2) specifically address Peace Journalism, War Journalism, or media framing of conflict, (3) focus directly on the Malaysian media context or Malaysian audience perception of conflict reporting, and (4) be published in English or Malay within the specified timeframe (2013–2025). The inclusion of articles published or referenced up to 2025 ensured the incorporation of the latest regulatory and social media dynamics.

Analytical framework and synthesis process

The analysis was guided by Peace Journalism Theory (Lee, 2020) and Framing Theory. Data extraction involved identifying key research elements: objectives, methodology, findings, and conclusions; from each article. The findings were then subjected to a thematic content analysis and coded into four primary analytical themes: (1) Framing strategy dominance (conflict vs. solution); (2) Structural and regulatory constraints; (3) Source diversity and representation; and (4) The role of alternative media (citizen journalism). This process ensured that the review moved beyond simple summarization to an integrated evaluation of patterns and inconsistencies. Crucially, the analysis was augmented by the HoI model, which helped map the influence of macroeconomic factors (e.g., commercial pressures) and sociopolitical systems (e.g., legal constraints) onto the organizational and routine practices of journalists. The inclusion of studies exploring Malaysian audience perceptions enriched the analysis by highlighting how framing influences public attitudes, trust, and interpretations of intergroup relations.

Results and Discussion

Synthesis of empirical evidence (2013–2025)

The synthesis of the reviewed studies reveals several critical patterns concerning the state of peace and war journalism in Malaysia, particularly in the reporting of sensitive religious and cultural conflicts.

Systemic dominance of conflict-centric framing: Contentious focus and framing choices

The reviewed studies consistently highlight the preference for war-oriented frames over peace-oriented narratives in Malaysian media coverage (Ibrahim, 2010). This dominance is evident both in international conflict reporting and in the reporting of domestic political crises and religious issues. Coverage of freedom of religion is often centered on contentious themes such as apostasy, propagation rights, and institutional critique. This strong focus on disputes limits audience exposure to constructive conflict-resolution narratives and positive examples of interfaith dialogue and harmony. An analysis of a domestic crisis related to religious sensitivity, the 'Halal' crisis, found that news coverage primarily utilized frames of attribution of responsibility and human interest (used in 100% and 84% of coverage, respectively). Frames focusing on economic implications were also prominent (51%). Intriguingly, the explicit conflict

frame was used in only 1.2% of coverage. This finding suggests that while outright conflict sensationalism may sometimes be avoided by organizational routines, the framing remains predominantly non-peace-oriented. Instead of promoting PJ frames (e.g., empathy, reconciliation), newsrooms prioritize frames related to managing the crisis's consequences (economic, responsibility), effectively avoiding the deeper socio-cultural explanations required for peacebuilding.

Structural and regulatory impediments to PJ implementation

Legal constraints and self-censorship

The most significant barrier to the full adoption of PJ stems from organizational, legal, and ideological pressures, primarily located at the higher levels of the HoI model. Journalistic decisions are heavily influenced by editorial policies, acute societal sensitivities, and strict government regulations. The Malaysian legal framework, including the Sedition Act, explicitly prohibits public comment on topics defined as sensitive, such as racial and religious matters and criticism of the monarchy. These regulations create a pervasive climate of fear and control. The 2025 report by the Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ) confirms that the Malaysian media landscape remains "heavily constrained by political control, economic instability, and an oppressive legal framework," leading to the exacerbation of self-censorship, particularly in sensitive areas like race and religion. This institutionalized cautiousness means journalists prioritize majority-group perspectives or engage in self-censorship to avoid public backlash or legal complications. Consequently, PJ principles, which demand inclusive sourcing and investigation into structural roots, are severely undermined.

Expanding digital regulation (2024–2025)

Recent regulatory shifts demonstrate an expansion of state control into the digital sphere, further constraining journalistic freedom. Major amendments to Malaysia's Personal Data Protection Act (PDPA) taking effect in June 2025 aim to align data protection with global standards but introduce new compliance burdens. More pertinent to content control, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) introduced a regulatory framework in 2024, requiring large online platforms (with over eight million users, such as TikTok and WeChat) to obtain licenses and adhere to a published Code of Conduct (Best Practice) by January 2025. While framed as promoting a "safe and inclusive online environment," these licensing requirements impose a new layer of regulatory gatekeeping on the most dynamic platforms, potentially restricting the independent nature of citizen journalism that often serves as a vital alternative to mainstream media.

Potential and pitfalls of alternative platforms (Citizen journalism)

Bypassing filters and fostering cohesion

Citizen journalism platforms demonstrate significant potential for promoting peace and cultural integration in Malaysia (Steele, 2009). By creating interactive online spaces, citizen journalists provide multiple cultural perspectives and encourage cross-ethnic dialogue, especially on sensitive topics often avoided by mainstream media (Steele, 2009). These less-restricted environments suggest an avenue for PJ that

complements traditional media, promoting understanding and social cohesion by amplifying marginalized voices and documenting ground-level cooperation, aligning with the "Malaysia MADANI" vision for social development.

The normalization of digital hate speech

Paradoxically, the same digital spaces that foster peace dialogue also serve as vectors for division. Research published in 2025 on digital hate speech reveals that online platforms contribute to the normalization and weaponization of ethnic slurs. This occurs through algorithmic amplification, inconsistent content moderation, and the expression of socio-economic marginalization via discriminatory discourse. This phenomenon represents a form of structural digital violence, actively undermining the social cohesion that PJ seeks to build. This finding reveals a crucial regulatory gap where new state regulations focus on data governance and licensing, but fail to effectively manage the immediate societal impact of algorithmically-driven hate speech, which contradicts the goal of a safe digital environment.

Developing a contextualized model of PJ constraint

Framing effects and social cognition

The empirical findings compel a critical analysis of PJ’s limitations through the HoI model, demonstrating that the barriers are systemic rather than merely operational. The consistent reliance on war-oriented frames, which include sensationalism, conflict focus, or the avoidance of deep context in favor of crisis management themes (like economic impact or responsibility), actively shapes the socio-political reality. News narratives emphasizing contention or fear reinforce adversarial mindsets and can exacerbate intergroup distrust in Malaysia. By framing sensitive religious events primarily through the lens of controversy and institutional critique, the media inadvertently reduces the public's perception of agency for peaceful resolution. Conversely, the minimal application of peace-oriented frames limits the audience's opportunity to perceive collaboration, cooperation, and mutual understanding.

The structural prioritization thesis

The primary contribution of this review is the theoretical extension of the HoI model to establish a contextualized model of PJ constraint in Malaysia, termed the Structural Prioritization Thesis. This thesis posits that the failure to adopt PJ is not a journalistic deficiency but a necessary structural consequence of the state prioritizing political stability over comprehensive, critical reporting. As shown by the HoI model (*Table 1*), the highest level, the Ideological/Social System, dictates the rules of the game. In Malaysia, this means the preservation of ethnic and religious consensus, enforced through regulatory mechanisms (the Extramedia level) such as the Sedition Act. The recent regulatory tightening, including MCMC’s licensing of major social media platforms in 2025, is further evidence that the government is expanding its control mechanisms to ensure that even digital spaces conform to 'best practice' guidelines, which inherently means avoiding politically or religiously sensitive narratives.

Table 1. Contextualizing PJ constraints via the Hierarchy of Influences (HoI) model (2013–2025).

HoI level	Mechanism of	Empirical manifestation in	Impact on Peace Journalism
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	constraint	Malaysia (2023-2025)	(PJ) principles
Social System/Ideological	State ideology and power maintenance (The Structural Prioritization Thesis).	Sedition Act enforcement; restrictions on religious/racial critique; mandate for political stability (Rodarte and Richardson, 2025)	PJ narratives exposing structural violence are ideologically perceived as threats to the political system.
Extramedia/Regulatory	Government oversight, legal frameworks, and industry compliance.	MCMC licensing for major social platforms; PDPA amendments; oppressive legal framework (Onoja et al., 2021).	Creates organizational risk-aversion; expands regulatory gatekeeping into digital spaces, constraining citizen PJ.
Organizational/Routine	Editorial policy, resource allocation, and market competition.	Prioritization of sensationalism/immediate events; reliance on official sources; economic pressure for engagement (Shamsuddin et al., 2015).	Enforces self-censorship; restricts deep context and multi-perspective sourcing critical to PJ effectiveness.
Individual	Journalist personal ethics, skills, and socio-cultural affiliation.	Difficulties shedding tribal/personal affiliations during sensitive coverage; lack of specific CSR training (Loyn, 2007).	Compromises neutrality and objectivity; limits the willingness to pursue reconciliation or root-cause frames.

The economic catalyst for ideological compliance

The analysis indicates a strong interaction between the Organizational/Routine level and the Ideological level. In an era of deep political and economic uncertainty, traditional news media in many regions, including Asia, struggle with declining engagement and the need for new revenue streams. This economic pressure acts as a powerful catalyst for ideological compliance. Faced with resource limitations and the competitive need for engagement, news organizations adopt routines (like sensationalism and reliance on "safe" official sources) that minimize legal and political risk. By doing so, they align their operational practices with the state's ideological preference for stability, effectively making economic pressure a driver for self-censorship against critical PJ reporting.

Peace Journalism as a strategic imperative in a dual digital ecosystem

The rapid digitization of Malaysian society creates a complex, dual challenge for peacebuilding. While digital platforms act as a "peace-supplement," providing crucial space for marginalized voices, they simultaneously normalize and weaponize ethnic slurs, posing a threat to social cohesion (Ramli et al., 2025). For PJ to be effective, it must integrate strategies to manage this paradox. The ongoing challenges highlight the critical importance of training interventions. Experiences from conflict zones, such as the UN-supported ethical reporting workshops for journalists in South Sudan, demonstrate that targeted professional development can reform journalistic practice at the Individual and Routine levels. Training programs that emphasize the "do-no harm" approach, encourage journalists to "shed your personal and tribal affiliations," and enforce rigorous multi-source verification directly counter the biases and risk-aversion routines prevalent in Malaysia. Such initiatives offer a practical pathway to empower journalists to challenge structural constraints and implement PJ principles, even under duress.

Recommendations for institutional reform and peacebuilding media strategy

Reform at the ideological and extra media (Regulatory) levels

To facilitate the transformation of Malaysian media practices and enhance the role of Peace Journalism, the following actionable recommendations are proposed, aligned with the levels of the Hierarchy of Influences model. (1) Legislative Review and Reform: The government must review and amend restrictive legislation, particularly the Sedition Act, which inhibits constructive, critical public discourse on race and religion. Policies must be enacted that explicitly support editorial freedom necessary for thorough PJ implementation without fear of reprisal. (2) Responsible Digital Regulation: Regulatory bodies, such as MCMC, must establish guidelines that address the inherent risks of the dual digital ecosystem. Regulations must shift focus beyond mere licensing and data privacy to actively enforce platform accountability regarding the algorithmic amplification of hate speech and ethnic slurs. This requires mandatory effective content moderation to mitigate digital structural violence.

Requirements for organizational and routine reform

(1) Editorial Policy Mandate for PJ Integration (Institutional Reform): Media organizations must formally mandate the systematic integration of multi-party perspectives and reconciliation-focused frames into editorial guidelines, ensuring a balance between conflict coverage and narratives emphasizing constructive solutions. (2) Structural Source Diversification (SSD): Newsrooms must enforce mandatory policies to require the inclusion of voices from minority and marginalized groups across all beats, particularly conflict reporting. This counters the routine tendency to rely solely on dominant or official sources and ensures PJ's multi-perspective principle is met. (3) Implementation of Do-No Harm Protocol: Integrate the "Do-No Harm" approach into organizational workflow and editorial decision-making processes, ensuring that stories are not published if they are deemed likely to exacerbate tensions or endanger civilians, moving the focus from sensationalism to conflict sensitivity.

Professional development at the individual level

Compulsory, specialized training programs should be established for senior editors and journalists, focusing specifically on ethical framing and conflict sensitivity, using case studies derived from local and regional contexts (Table 2).

Table 2. Recommended journalist training interventions and rationale (Derived from Global CSR Models).

Intervention Focus (Routine/Individual Level)	Specific Action	Rationale (Addressing Specific Constraints)	Source Reference
Ethical/Tribal Neutrality	Training to "shed personal and tribal affiliations" and focus on national interest, upholding objectivity in conflict reporting.	Directly counters individual-level influence and personal bias that often skews reporting in multi-ethnic conflict scenarios.	Loyn (2007)
Conflict-Sensitive Reporting (CSR) & Do-No Harm	Mandatory workshops focusing on analyzing political statements and techniques for multi-perspective reporting, emphasizing consequences.	Reduces organizational risk by professionalizing proactive conflict mitigation, a core principle often missing when avoiding deep context.	Du Toit (2019); Loyn (2007)
Verification & Sourcing	Training stressing rigorous verification of information from "multiple sources, as two sources are never enough" before publication.	Counteracts the organizational routine of speed and reliance on single, authoritative sources, thus enhancing	Loyn (2007)

Strategic support for citizen platforms (Technological leverage)

Policymakers and media organizations should provide structured support and incentives for ethical citizen journalism initiatives and grassroots digital media platforms. By funding training programs focused on digital literacy and ethical posting, these platforms can be fully leveraged as a critical "peace-supplement" mechanism, bypassing traditional structural filters to amplify narratives of peace and understanding across diverse communities. Concurrently, further empirical research is warranted to examine audience reception of peace-oriented frames and the long-term efficacy of citizen journalism in promoting cultural integration in the face of persistent digital polarization.

Conclusion

This systematic review confirms that Peace Journalism in Malaysia remains significantly underdeveloped in the reporting of religious and cultural conflicts. Mainstream media continues to rely heavily on conflict- or war-oriented frames, driven by organizational, regulatory, and socio-cultural influences. This practice risks reinforcing adversarial perceptions and heightening societal tensions. The review's core finding is encapsulated in the Structural Prioritization Thesis: PJ's theoretical potential is fundamentally compromised by an overarching ideological structure that prioritizes political stability and regulatory caution (enforced through legal frameworks and new digital controls) over the multi-voiced, root-cause-focused reporting that PJ demands. However, citizen journalism and digital media platforms offer a vital alternative space for the dissemination of peace-oriented narratives, enabling participation from minority voices and promoting intercultural dialogue (Steele, 2009). The balanced integration of PJ principles, alongside the encouragement of ethical, citizen-driven content, is essential for supporting a more constructive public discourse. For PJ to achieve meaningful impact, media organizations and policymakers must commit to structural reforms that alleviate the pressure for self-censorship and enable journalists to move beyond conflict-centric coverage toward reporting that fosters understanding, dialogue, and social cohesion.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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