

MEDIA REPRESENTATION OF RELIGION, RACE AND ROYALTY (3R) IN MALAYSIAN POLITICAL JOURNALISM PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract. This study explores the perceptions and representations of politically sensitive issues-religion, race, and royalty (3R)-by mainstream journalists in Malaysia based on selected media reportage. Notwithstanding the digital change of newsrooms, 3R framing persists in shaping political narratives and public discourse, mirroring established sociocultural norms. The study addresses an important gap by interpreting how journalistic decision-making is shaped by institutional, cultural, and political elements in reporting on these delicate topics. A qualitative approach was employed, incorporating in-depth interviews with experienced journalists from mainstream media organizations, alongside a critical discourse analysis of selected political news articles published during the 2018–2025 electoral cycle. This period was chosen as it captures a significant shift in Malaysia’s political and media landscape, beginning with the historic 2018 general election that marked a change in government and extending to contemporary developments such as the 2020 political realignment and GE15 in 2022. Covering this cycle allows for a deeper understanding of how 3R narratives evolved amidst heightened political transitions, editorial pressures, and public sensitivities. The research project employed Agenda-setting Theory and Media Priming Theory to interpret how journalists construct 3R narratives while navigating political and editorial constraints. The results indicate that although journalists recognize the necessity for balanced reporting, institutional boundaries, self-censorship, and audience expectations often result in cautious and repetitive framing, particularly in coverage of royalty and religion. Race-related matters are frequently influenced by political disputes and historical conflicts. Notwithstanding the digital transition, conventional narratives endure, and the capacity for transformation is constrained by structural limits. This research enriches understanding of the Malaysian media's handling of sensitive identity politics, offering insights into the intersections of media, politics, and social values. The study highlights the need for reflective journalistic practices and comprehensive media reforms to ensure fairer portrayals of Malaysia's diverse society.

Keywords: *journalism, media framing, ethnicity, gatekeeping, politics, 3R news*

Introduction

The relationship between media, politics, and society today is complex and mutually reinforcing. Even as the world moves toward digital news ecosystems, race, religion, and royalty (3R) discourses remain crucial to political communication and journalism. Race, religion, and royalty (3R) are cultural and political icons in Malaysia, influencing public opinion and elections. Media coverage of 3R issues affects democracy, voter behavior, and social cohesiveness. News framing of sensitive identity-based topics affects diversity, nationalism, and political stability worldwide. Malaysia's colonial past, multi-ethnic population, and hybrid political system of democracy and constitutional monarchy complicate such processes (Raghavan et al., 2022; Milne and Ratnam, 2014). Media representation of race, religion, and royalty reflects societal reality and can spark division and conflict (Welsh, 2023). After the 2008 General Election, media framing

studies identified conflict, morality, and responsibility frames impacting political narratives (Baharin et al., 2020). Comparative evaluations of Southeast Asian political communication show that media channels are fueling religious division and majoritarianism (Carothers and O'Donohue, 2020).

In a delicate balance between state control, audience expectations, and professional standards, journalists must traverse legislative frameworks that forbid public speech on sensitive 3R themes and selective and politically contingent enforcement. The fast growth of digital platforms has also changed Malaysian media. Various websites and social media platforms distribute news swiftly, frequently without fact-checking (Nielsen, 2020). This paradox has raised the stakes of 3R reporting: media may deepen social divisions or promote conversation and understanding. Recent political leaders' race-related or royal prerogative-related comments show how media coverage of 3R problems may spark countrywide discussions, legal action, and voter sentiment (Landau, 2018). The 3R discourse's disputed ground has deeper historical roots. Identity politics have shaped Malaysia's administration and media portrayal since decolonization and nationalism to its post-independence race conflicts and constitutional monarchy. These legacies impact current debates about whether Malaysia is a secular or Islamic state and how media can reflect on religious sensitivities without inflaming differences. This climate makes journalists information gatekeepers and mediators of conflicting meanings.

The agenda-setting theory and Media Priming theory are explored in this study. The Media Priming Theory emphasizes that the media can influence political judgments by drawing attention to certain aspects of issues, thereby setting the criteria by which people evaluate political figures. Agenda-setting research shows how news organizations shape public debate (McCombs and Shaw, 1972), while cultivation and related media effects theories show how repeated exposure to particular narratives shapes attitudes and behaviors. These frameworks emphasize the necessity of assessing 3R reporting's structural circumstances and journalists' perceptions and professional judgments. Accordingly, this study aims to explore how mainstream Malaysian journalists perceive and negotiate the representation of 3R issues in political reporting. Specifically, it seeks to (1) identify journalists' understandings and interpretations of race, religion, and royalty in political discourse; (2) examine the institutional, political, and ethical factors that shape their reporting decisions; and (3) analyze how these perceptions relate to the broader issues of media freedom, public trust, and political communication in Malaysia. This article proceeds as follows: the next section reviews relevant literature on political communication, media representation, and 3R discourse. The following section outlines the theoretical frameworks and methodology employed in the study. Subsequently, the findings from qualitative interviews with mainstream journalists are presented and discussed in relation to agenda-setting and media priming perspectives. The final section concludes with reflections on the implications of 3R reporting for media ethics, journalistic autonomy, and multicultural democracy in Malaysia.

Agenda-setting theory implications towards socio-politics in Malaysia

The agenda-setting theory posits that media influence what people think about by highlighting certain issues and downplaying others (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). In Malaysia, this process shapes the political salience of race, religion, and royalty (3R) discourses, where mainstream media have historically reflected political power

structures. Before the 2013 General Election, for instance, Barisan Nasional benefited from agenda-setting mechanisms that emphasized favorable narratives (Pepinsky, 2013). This shows that Malaysian media are not passive transmitters of information but active agents legitimizing political authority (Idid, 2017). The theory's roots trace back to who warned that media construct "pseudo-environments" influencing public perception. Its empirical development by McCombs and Shaw revealed that issue salience in media directly affects voter priorities. In Malaysia, this is evident in how media highlight 3R-related controversies, influencing public discourse on religion, royal prerogatives, and ethnic relations. The expansion of digital platforms, however, has disrupted traditional agenda-setting power. Social media's speed and anonymity facilitate misinformation and hate narratives (Zamri et al., 2023). Despite government efforts such as the National Unity Blueprint 2021–2030, the persistence of divisive 3R themes reveals journalists' dual challenge: balancing professional gatekeeping in a politically sensitive environment while engaging digital publics that reshape narratives.

Media priming theory and its relevance

Media Priming Theory extends agenda-setting by explaining how repeated exposure to particular issues conditions audiences to evaluate subsequent information through specific frames (Ewoldsen and Rhodes, 2019). It emphasizes that the media not only tells people what to think about but also how to think about it (Arowolo, 2017). In the Malaysian context, priming helps explain how sustained coverage of 3R themes can reinforce perceptions of ethnic and religious hierarchy or loyalty to royal institutions. By integrating Agenda-Setting and Media Priming theories, this study examines how 3R reporting influences public perception and journalist decision-making. These frameworks guide the analysis of how media exposure, editorial judgment, and audience responses interact in shaping the social and political discourse surrounding 3R issues.

Framing and the media's role in political discourse

Beyond agenda-setting and priming, framing theory explores how journalists emphasize certain aspects of reality while omitting others to shape public understanding (Entman, 1993). Malaysian studies show that both politicians and journalists employ frames such as conflict, morality, and responsibility when addressing 3R issues, but their emphases differ (Yahya, 2019). Politicians often use strategic language to advance party narratives, while journalists frame stories through selective citations and thematic focus. International research similarly links framing to public sentiment and crisis communication. Watimin et al. (2023) found that conflict and responsibility frames on Facebook predicted social unrest. In Malaysia's fast-moving online environment, such framing can heighten polarization. Leong (2019) stresses that journalists must balance professional independence with social responsibility while reporting on 3R topics under state regulation and political pressure. These challenges underscore the ethical tension central to this study-how journalists navigate framing decisions in sensitive identity-based reporting.

Framing and the media's role in political discourse

Media ownership concentration further shapes representation of 3R issues. When a few conglomerates dominate, such as Media Prima and the former Utusan Melayu group, the diversity of perspectives narrows and political interests prevail (Othman et

al., 2020; McChesney, 2006). Politically linked owners often adopt cautious approaches, aligning coverage with ruling party narratives (Nain, 1996). Thus, race relations are framed around harmony, religious issues reflect dominant Malay-Muslim perspectives, and royalty is rarely critiqued. Independent outlets like Malaysiakini and The Malaysian Insight have challenged this dominance, offering alternative voices. Yet, restrictive laws such as the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 and frequent defamation suits constrain their autonomy. Calls for media ownership reform-through anti-monopoly regulations and greater support for independent journalism-remain vital for pluralistic political communication. The research methodology and theoretical framework were based on the agenda-Setting Theory and Media Priming Theory, which were extensively explored in the study.

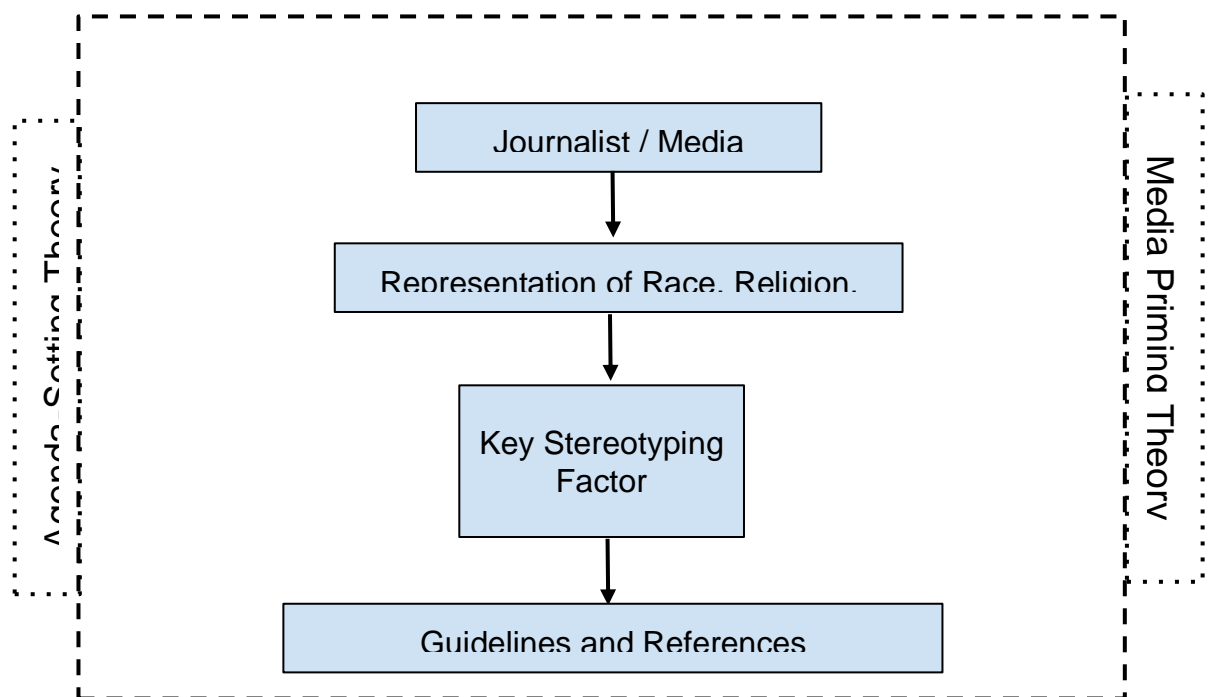


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the 3R Representation in Media Reporting by Malaysian Journalists

Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore how mainstream Malaysian journalists interpret and negotiate the representation of race, religion, and royalty (3R) in political reporting. A semi-structured interview method was chosen to capture the depth of participants' lived experiences and professional reasoning, emphasizing meaning-making rather than numerical patterns. Using purposive sampling, the study involved six experienced journalists from major print, broadcast, and digital outlets who had direct experience covering 3R-related stories. Informants

represented various professional levels to ensure diversity of perspectives. Sampling continued until thematic saturation was reached. Interviews were conducted via Google Meet between January and April 2025, each lasting between 45–90 minutes. Informed consent was obtained, and participants were assured of anonymity through pseudonyms. All sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The study received ethical clearance from the relevant university committee. Confidentiality and voluntary participation were ensured throughout the research process, in line with standard qualitative ethics. Data were analyzed using deductive thematic analysis supported by NVivo software. Codes were developed iteratively and refined into broader themes to reflect recurring patterns across interviews. Reflexivity was maintained to minimize researcher bias, and credibility was reinforced through repeated transcript reviews and validation of emergent themes.

Table 1. Background of the informants based on interview sessions.

Journalist	Organisations	Place of origin	Religion/ belief	Gender	Age	Years of working as journalist
J1	Berita Harian	KL	Islam	Male	38	12
J2		KL	Islam	Male	29	6
J3	Utusan Malaysia	KL	Islam	Male	41	10
J4		KL	Islam	Male	35	9
J5	Sinar Harian	Selangor	Islam	Female	30	6
J6		Selangor	Islam	Male	43	12

Note: J1-J6=Journalist.

Results and Discussion

Findings of this study are categorized into two emerging themes: (i) Potential for political influence on editorial decisions, and (ii) Challenges in coverage due to outside pressure. The informants interviewed came from diverse professional trajectories, reflecting the fluidity of career paths within Malaysia’s mainstream media industry.

Potential for political influence on editorial decisions

Journalists reported that editorial autonomy was constrained by political ownership and commercial dependencies. Many described uncertainty regarding who influenced newsroom decisions, leading to self-censorship and editorial caution. As one journalist explained, “We don’t always know who’s influencing decisions above us-it could be political or commercial.” Informants highlighted that changes in political power directly affect advertising revenue, forcing newsrooms to align content with political or business interests. For example, when Pakatan Harapan took office, several outlets faced budget cuts, indirectly shaping editorial tone. This finding supports Welsh (2023) and McChesney (2006), who observed that media financing and ownership patterns often determine editorial freedom in Malaysia. Ownership-linked influence, such as that of Utusan Malaysia under UMNO, exemplified how partisan interests guided reporting, particularly on sensitive 3R narratives. Consequently, journalists viewed self-censorship as both a survival mechanism and an organizational norm (Table 2).

Table 2. Theme 1 potential for political influence on editorial decisions.

Subtheme	Description	Informants’ insights
Political Gatekeeping	Editorial caution due to political ties	‘It really depends on the company. As reporters, we don’t always know who might be influencing decisions higher up. It could be politicians or parties. But each media house operates differently.’ (Informant 1)

Ownership Pressure	Media ownership linked to party influence	<p>‘In the past, especially during election periods, political parties would talk openly about issues related to Malays, Chinese, Indians, and so on. It wasn’t a big deal for us to published such stories.’ (Informant 3)</p> <p>When Pakatan Harapan (PH) took power, UMNO’s accounts were frozen, and our ad revenues were cut as a form of political payback. So yes, ownership definitely affected our editorial tone..’ (Informant 2)</p>
Financial Dependency	Advertising and client relations affect tone	<p>‘It happened. The old Utusan Malaysia—before it shut down in 2019 was heavily influenced by UMNO, which owned almost 80% of the shares. Before the general election, most of our political coverage favored UMNO..’ (Informant 2)</p> <p>‘In my organization, we’ve never been asked to write “flattering” or biased stories, unless it involves clients. For example, if a ministry is our client, we may tone down a story.’ (Informant 1)</p> <p>‘We might be told to tone it down or to avoid publishing entirely..’ (Informant 2)</p> <p>‘Especially if that ministry is a client, we’ll tone it down..’ (Informant 6)</p>

Challenges in coverage due to outside pressure

Journalists also emphasized external pressures from government actors, audiences, and social media environments. Threats of legal action, public backlash, and editorial briefings constrained reporting freedom. One journalist noted, “We could report facts before, but now social media twists everything.” Another mentioned that lawsuits or state warnings made them more cautious, echoing concerns about Malaysia’s restrictive media climate (Leong, 2019). Informants described how editors often issued pre-publication briefings to minimize tension, assigning sensitive stories to senior reporters familiar with legal boundaries. Some even reported shifts in newsroom roles, where journalists were tasked with monitoring online reactions rather than producing new content. This illustrates how the digital environment reshapes journalistic autonomy—turning reporters into negotiators of both political and public expectations (*Table 3*).

Table 3. Theme 2 challenges in coverage due to outside pressure.

Subtheme	Description	Informants’ insights
State Oversight	Legal or governmental pressure	<p>‘I think the government agency must act professionally. The story was speculative, not accusatory. As media, we’re just asking questions to get readers interested. If you don’t want to answer, just don’t respond.. no need to sue.’ (Informant 5)</p>
Social Media Influence	Online misinterpretation affects credibility	<p>‘..a senior reporter at Malaysiakini was reassigned just to monitor social media comments. That’s not how it should be..’ (Informant 4)</p> <p>‘Before social media, we could report facts without worrying about public discourse. But now, online narratives influence journalists.’ (Informant 4)</p> <p>‘Even if we report the facts carefully, the public might misinterpret it due to toxic comments below the article, especially on platforms like Malaysiakini’ (Informant 3)</p>
Editorial Mediation	Editors pre-brief on sensitive issues	<p>‘It’s not about what we write, it’s the digital environment that shapes how we report.’ (Informant 6)</p> <p>‘Yes, we’re often briefed by our editors—especially when a story has the potential to stir tension.’</p>

(Informant 4)

'Usually, such topics are assigned to senior reporters to avoid legal repercussions..' (Informant 6)

Conclusion

This study set out to analyze how mainstream media journalists in Malaysia perceive the depiction of race, religion, and royalty (3R) within the political scene. Drawing on semi-structured interviews, the findings demonstrate that journalists understand 3R reporting as a highly sensitive and limited realm, molded by overlapping political, institutional, commercial, and societal influences. Informants regularly underlined the problems of negotiating between professional obligations and the risks of external interference, from government agencies, political elites, and advertising to the unexpected dynamics of social media conversation. These constraints typically show in newsroom practices such as self-censorship, editorial briefings, and the outsourcing of sensitive stories to senior reporters, all of which mirror wider techniques of risk management within Malaysian media. The findings also underline the manner in which structural factors, such as media ownership, political patronage, and economic dependencies, continue to impact journalistic autonomy. The heritage of partisan media, epitomized by Utusan Malaysia, and the modern intertwining of economic and political interests highlight how structural limits impact not just what is published, but also how 3R concerns are framed. At the same time, journalists increasingly regard social media and audience reactions as new sources of outside pressure, pushing them to examine not just the truth of their reporting but also its potential to cause public controversy in a volatile digital environment.

Taken together, these observations lead to a fuller understanding of how journalists themselves view the challenges of reporting 3R problems in Malaysia's political environment. Rather than being passive carriers of elite objectives, journalists actively navigate the bounds of permissible discourse, frequently under situations of uncertainty and danger. Their opinions depict a profession trapped between normative goals of watchdog journalism and the practical reality of functioning inside a politically sensitive, economically reliant, and digitally mediated media environment. Future study might build on these findings in numerous ways. First, comparative research across multiple types of media outlets-state-owned, independent, and alternative digital platforms-could give a more comprehensive picture of how institutional context impacts views of 3R representation. Second, audience-focused research would deepen knowledge of how public perceptions of 3R reporting interact with journalists' professional practices. Finally, longitudinal studies might follow how journalists' perspectives vary throughout multiple electoral cycles and political transitions, bringing insight into the durability or alteration of journalistic standards in Malaysia's hybrid media ecosystem. By highlighting the perspectives of journalists, this study exposes both the restrictions and the agency inherent in the practice of political reporting on sensitive identity issues. The findings underscore the continuing relevance of agenda-setting, framing, and political economy theories in understanding Malaysian journalism, while also pointing to the urgent need for institutional reforms that strengthen media independence and protect journalists' capacity to report responsibly on matters of race, religion, and royalty.

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Conflict of interest

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

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