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**DISCOURSE ANALYSIS ON NEWSPAPER  
REPORTS OF APOSTASY CASES**

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to provide insights into the Malaysian newspaper reports on apostasy cases in the country. Being a Muslim country with multi-religions, apostasy is highly sensitive hence any issues related to apostasy need to be carefully managed. Four keywords ('apostasy', 'apostate', 'Ex-Muslim', and 'murtad') were used to identify newspaper reports for the analysis. Two newspaper reports met the selection criteria and were analysed using a discourse analysis approach focusing on Grammatical Analysis, Macrostructures, and Rhetorical Structures. The analysis reveals that the report in New Straits Times, which is the right-wing newspaper, carries the voice of anti-apostate and disapproves the act of renouncing Islam. On the other hand, the report in The Malay Mail, which is the left-wing newspaper, carries the voice of pro-apostate. By deconstructing the newspaper reports, this paper contributes to the understanding of the agendas that have been subtly set in the news. This paper concludes that the two reports have been strategically constructed to serve the interests and promote the ideology of the two competing groups in the country (the pro-apostate and the anti-apostate groups), thus creating a balance in the multi-religious context.

**Key Words:** Agenda, apostasy, anti-apostate, Malaysia, newspaper report, New Straits Times, pro-apostate, The Malay Mail.

## 1. Introduction

Apostasy can no longer be labeled as a rare phenomenon in the context of Malaysia. These days, the rise in apostasy declarations far exceeds the number of cases that were made publicly known years ago. This is supported by Sahad, Chu Abdullah, and Abdullah in their research findings which revealed that “the cases of Muslims converts who decided to leave the religion of Islam are reported as increasing tremendously” (Sahad, Chu Abdullah, and Abdullah 2013, 220). This is largely due to the fact that people are no longer afraid to openly reveal their apostasy declaration. The Internet plays a huge role in the increased coverage of the apostasy cases, making it difficult to hide the reality surrounding this issue. Due to that, over the past few years, reports on apostasy cases have made their way into the headlines of newspapers, especially online newspapers (Mohamad et al 2017). The government has taken precautions by closely monitoring the incoming news on apostasy. For obvious reasons the “content filtering is carried out by the Malaysian government for publications and broadcasts on the grounds of moral and cultural values” (Balaraman et al. 2015, 145). Too many stories on apostasy may affect religious harmony, whereas too little stories will make the filtration very obvious. The agreement has been achieved by the Malaysian media “to stay away from contentious issues of racial and religious sensitivities in order not to create unnecessary tensions and even hatred among the people” (Shaari, Hua, and Raman 2006, 187). Hence, this article will review the available newspaper reports about apostasy cases in Malaysia. The aim is to explore how the language is strategically used in crafting the apostasy news in a multi-cultural and multi-religion nation like Malaysia.

## 2. Tracking Apostasy Cases in Malaysia

There are several apostasy cases, which set the landmark for recent apostasy cases in Malaysia. The cases “became a focal point of tensions between Muslims and religious minorities” (Fong and Ahmad Ishak 2010, 13). Malaysia government uses these cases as a reference in implementing laws and constitution for future apostasy cases. In contrast, apostates in Malaysia use these cases as their guidelines in renouncing Islam.

The most discussed case among all is the case of Lina Joy. Lina Joy was born a Muslim bearing a name of Azlina Jailani. She renounced Islam and embraced Christianity when she was 26 years old. She discovered her first real difficulty when she wanted to marry a Christian man. Legally, the marriage cannot proceed due to the word ‘Islam’ on her National Identity Card (NIC) (Moustafa 2014). Hence, she applied for the word ‘Islam’ to be removed from her NIC and to change her name. The process was not simple. Her application was rejected several times and never got the approval. Malaysia is a country with dual justice systems: Civil Law and

Islamic Law (Hasan 2005; Kirby 2009). Apostates found it very difficult to cope with this system, for their cases are inter-related with both sets of laws. As a result, the case attracted many people from various religions, the law enforcers, and politicians (Setiawan 2013). Newspapers then play an important role in delivering the stories to the public. The reports need to be neutral and news-oriented so that touching on religious sensitivity can be avoided.

In terms of inter-religion marriage, Nor Aishah Bokhari encountered a quite similar experience to Lina Joy's. Aishah renounced Islam at the age of 25 years. She did not get her family's consent for marrying her Christian boyfriend. In Islamic teachings, one of the conditions in marriage is that both the husband and wife must embrace Islam (Shatzmiller 1996). In Aishah's case, her boyfriend did not want to embrace Islam, but instead, Aishah was the one who renounced Islam. Her family held her in their house to prevent her from seeing the boyfriend. Aishah's lawyer then applied to the court for Aishah's freedom from being held against her will (Majlis Agama Islam Selangor 2014). Consequently, Aishah managed to run away with her boyfriend, and no news about her since then. Again, newspapers need to be sensitive in reporting Aishah's case to the public. The tone in delivering the news must not provoke Islam and Christian communities for both religions are affected by the case. The lesson must be learned from the controversial case of Prophet Muhammad's caricature "that insensitivity on the part of the reporter or a media organization may have dire consequences" (Shaari, Hua, and Raman 2006, 186).

The case of Siti Fatimah Abdul Karim is slightly different from the two cases above. She became an apostate and renounced Islam at the age of 20. Her Indian Muslim (Hindu converts to Muslim) parents raised her for 20 years before she left her family to follow her Indian boyfriend (Cohen and Tan 2015). Later, she claimed that she embraced Hinduism, and was raised by her grandmother who is also a Hindu. Her statement totally contradicted her mother's statement that both of Fatimah's grandmothers are Muslim and Christian, not Hindu. In 2001, Fatimah declared her Hinduism and changed her name to Revathi Masoosai without going through the court. She did not make the application to leave Islam through the Sharia law; therefore, her NIC maintained her former name and religion: Siti Fatimah Abdul Karim and Islam (Price 2007). There were several attempts made by her parents to bring her back, but they ended up in jail for the confrontation that happened between the two parties. Eventually, in 2004 she married her Indian boyfriend in Hindu customary marriage ceremony. However, due to the religion differences on their NIC, their marriage could not be legally registered in Malaysia. For the exact same reason, in 2004, Fatimah lost the right of child custody to her parents. This high profile case gets full coverage from the media.

All the apostasy cases reviewed in this section contribute to "the heightening of racial and religious tensions and arousing emotions"

(Shaari, Hua, and Raman 2006, 187). The media bears great responsibility in changing all the negativity brought by news reports (Frunză and Frunză 2011). Therefore, government officials, interest group leaders, and media owners must learn how to deliver the sensitive and controversial news in a subtle yet effective way. The focus should be on the language used, word choices, and sentence constructions which should be strategically constructed as not to disturb the religious harmony in this country.

### 3. Methodology

The newspaper reports in this study were analyzed using Discourse Analysis approach. The analysis focused mostly on the three elements - Grammatical analysis, Macrostructures, and Rhetorical Structures. Exploring these three elements will reveal, from the linguistic perspective, how the news about apostasy is reported in the newspapers in Malaysia.

#### 3.1 Analytic Lenses

##### 3.1.1 Grammatical Analysis

Newspaper reports are usually structured by linguistic grammars, which comprise the words used, sentences formed, and the meanings produced. According to Van Dijk, grammatical analysis of the discourse is like the 'systems of rules' (Van Dijk 1988, 10). One must consider the meaning of the previous sentence in order to understand the next sequence sentences. Van Dijk reiterates that "properties of the sentence form (e.g., word order) or of sentence meaning may depend on properties of other sentences in a discourse" (Van Dijk 1988, 10). News reports are in the category of a formal situation. Readers can expect a disciplined style of writing like formal words, complex sentences, complete articles, and more grammatically correct sentences. Gender, ethnicity, power, and status of the author may also influence the style of writing (Scherer and Giles 1979). Grammatical analysis can also expose the perspective of the author. Sentence syntax allows the researcher to dictate the meanings of subject roles according to the word order like the usage of "relational functions (subject, object), or the use of active or passive forms" (Van Dijk 1988, 10).

##### 3.1.2 Macrostructures

In Macrostructures, the analysis level is beyond the micro level of words, sentences, and the connection between sentences. The focus is not merely on the words or the sequence of sentences, but the news report as a whole. This leads us to this particular function of macrostructures discourse analysis which is to capture the relevant element, and significant aspect of the news reports. According to Van Dijk, macrostructure makes explicit the overall topics or themes of a text and at the same time define "the overall coherence of a text as well as its upshot

or gist” (Van Dijk 1988, 13). Macrostructures are extracted from the news report in the form of linguistic, theory, generalization, and the news report construction. The idea is to enable the readers to extract the topic from a sequence of sentences (Van Dijk and Kintsch 1983). However, this process cannot be implemented if the researcher does not have good knowledge about the topic analyzed. Macrostructure theory allows the author to produce sublime headlines, which is literally the summary of the news report. This explains why the headline is the most remembered phrase for the readers, as it is “the highest level of the macrostructure of a news report” (Van Dijk 1988, 14).

### 3.1.3 Rhetorical Structures

Rhetorical elements in the news report can influence and affect the whole article. Rhetorical structures emphasize on the most important aspect to make the text more persuasive. Van Dijk explains on how to make the article more persuasive by expressing or signaling “what is most important, various special operations at each level” (Van Dijk 1988, 16). In the case of the news report, several techniques can be used to signal the importance of certain aspect such as “hyperboles (overstatements, exaggerations) or understatements, or word and sentence meanings that establish contrast or build a climax” (Van Dijk 1988, 16). The only difference is that the tone of rhetorical elements in the news report is more formal compared to another type of discourse. In that process, readers can better understand the information and at ease in memorizing the news, which leads to a better persuasion.

## 3.2 Sampling

The aim of this study is to explore how pro-government and independent newspapers report apostasy cases, from the linguistic perspective. There is a long list of available online newspapers in Malaysia. However, the focus will only be on the top English newspapers, which are the *New Straits Times (NST)* for pro-government and *The Malay Mail (TMM)* for independent newspapers. As a right wing newspaper, NST “dominates the English-language market with its 290,566 circulations” (Lumsden 2013, 6). As an independent newspaper, TMM is led by two top editors, “the brother and sister team of Leslie Lau and Joan Lau” (Lumsden 2013, 20).

Four keywords were used in the process of sampling the newspaper report for this study: ‘Apostasy’, ‘apostate’, ‘Ex-Muslim’, and ‘*Murtad*’ (Malay word for apostasy). These keywords were entered into the search engine on the newspapers’ website to find the news reports related to the keywords.

Several criteria need to be considered in the filtration process to narrow down the number of news reports from the search results. First, the article must report the apostasy issues that happened in Malaysia.

Second, the news reports must be in the year of 2017 and 2016, so the issues are still not outdated for the readers to digest. Third, the news reports must exclusively report on apostasy case, instead of politics, laws, or any other issues. Finally, in comparing between pro-government and independent newspapers, news reports from both newspapers must report on the same issue. The search deduction is illustrated in Table 1.

<b>Keywords / Criteria</b>	Search results based on the keywords	Search results based on Malaysian context	Search results published in year 2016-2017	Search results that match the selection criteria
Apostasy	NST = 35 TMM = 2	NST = 9 TMM = 1	NST = 3 TMM = 1	NST = 1 TMM = 0
Apostate	NST = 46 TMM = 3	NST = 18 TMM = 2	NST = 9 TMM = 2	NST = 2 TMM = 1
Ex-Muslim	NST = 1 TMM = 0	NT = 1 TMM = 0	NST = 1 TMM = 0	NST = 0 TMM = 0
<i>Murtad</i>	NST = 6 TMM = 0	NST = 6 TMM = 0	NST = 4 TMM = 0	NST = 0 TMM = 0

**Table 1: The search deduction of the news reports**

As can be seen in Table 1, there is a decrease in the number of newspapers reports as it being filtered. A total of four news reports match the criteria mentioned earlier. The four news reports were then compared to identify the news on the same issue, but presented differently in the two newspapers. It comes down to a single newspaper report from each newspaper for the analysis: 'Jakim slams rumors on IFC registration says it's not true at all' (Zulkifli 2016) and 'Jakim says no resurgence of interfaith commission, apostate groups' (The Malay Mail 2016a).

#### **4. Data Analysis**

Discourse analysis was conducted on the two newspaper reports. This section will first present the discourse analysis for the newspaper report in the *New Straits Times* (NST), followed by the newspaper report in *The Malay Mail* (TMM).

##### **4.1 Jakim slams rumors on IFC registration, says it's "not true at all"**

This is the headline for the newspaper report in NST dated on November 7, 2016. Jakim, the Department of Islamic Advancement in Malaysia, is positioned as the subject in the headline. Hence, the readers can expect the newspaper report to focus on Jakim as a focal point including Jakim's action, statement, stance, and opinion. On the other hand, *IFC registration* (IFC stands for Interfaith Commission) is the object

for the headline. Jakim's role as a subject overshadows the importance of the *IFC registration* issue. The headline succeeds in emphasizing the significance of Jakim's jurisdiction on Islamic matters. The word *slams* further emphasizes Jakim's power as the Islamic body in Malaysia. It is a powerful word to express rejection and disagreement. Consequently, the headline manages to highlight the intention of Jakim in stopping the rumors on IFC registration. Jakim is known as the only government body in Malaysia that is in-charge of Islamic issues and the enforcement of Islamic rules and law. With that credibility, the headline quotes the saying from Jakim "it's not true at all" to convince the readers on Jakim's statement. This is one of the rhetoric techniques in the mode of persuasion. *Ethos* is defined as the credibility establishment in an institution to its audience (Murthy and Ghosal 2014). The readers tend to believe in the newspaper report, which uses a direct quote like this, coming from a credible source. Overall, the headline portrays the newspaper as being against the apostasy issues.

Extract 1 below is the first paragraph of the news report.

**Extract 1**

- 1 Jakim's director-general Tan Sri Othman Mustapha said
- 2 the department has checked with the Registrar of Societies
- 3 as well as the Home Ministry,
- 4 following rumors of the registration of these entities going viral on social media.

(Para. 1, NST)

In the first paragraph, another rhetorical structure is used in portraying the credibility of the *director-general of Jakim* (line 1). The newspaper report puts forth a credible figure to convince the readers that Jakim is serious in putting a stop to this issue. The report also includes two government bodies: *Registrar of Societies* (line 2) and *Home Ministry* (line 3) to provide proof and authenticity in Jakim's effort. By using credibility as a mode of persuasion adds to the element of *Ethos* (Murthy and Ghosal 2014). All these are done for one purpose, which is to highlight the government's seriousness in combatting the issue of apostasy in Malaysia. Besides, the phrase *these entities* (line 4) is used in the report to represent the bodies that approved the Interfaith Commission (IFC). Instead of stating the name, the author chose to give them a vague description by using the phrase *these entities*. The phrase gives the impression that IFC is 'a stranger'. The use of this phrase can be seen as the author's strategy to degrade the influence of IFC in the issue.

Extract 2 is the second paragraph of the news report.



**Extract 2**

- 1 Jakim is taking the issue seriously
  - 2 as it could raise concerns and unease among the Muslims
  - 3 as well as threaten the religious harmony of the country
- (Para. 2, NST)

The proposed objective in the formation of the IFC is to manage apostasy cases in Malaysia. Jakim, on the other hand, is totally against the idea. Hence there appears to be three wash back effects that can be caused by IFC: *raise concerns, unease among the Muslims* (line 2), and *threaten the religious harmony*' (line 3). The mentioned effects are all negative and may trigger the readers' precaution towards IFC. The NST allows this newspaper report to be published because NST is a pro-government newspaper, and therefore supports Jakim as a government body. Moreover, Jakim has good intentions in preventing any threat to the religious harmony in Malaysia. In addition, the adverb *seriously* is used in the report to convince the readers that the issue is under control (line 1). The word *seriously* may also tap on the readers' emotion into believing Jakim's capability. The author applied *Pathos* rhetoric element by appealing to the readers' "sense of emotions and their interests" (Murthy and Ghosal 2014, 253).

Extract 3 is the third paragraph of the news report.

**Extract 3**

- 1 Othman said that the department has clarified the issue
  - 2 in their official statement on Oct 9 2014 following the same
  - 3 rumors, which also went viral online.
- (Para. 3, NST)

Extract 3 provides another example of the *Ethos* rhetoric appeal by mentioning the name *Othman* (line 1) who is Jakim's director-general, to highlight his credibility. Apart from *Ethos*, there is also the use of *Logos* element by stating the fact together with the date of the official statement (line 2). *Logos* rhetoric technique "depends on the statements of evidence, through which accurate conclusions can be drawn" (Murthy and Ghosal 2014, 251). All these rhetoric appeals will further convince the readers into believing the newspaper report. NST really shows the effort in supporting Jakim as well as devalue the idea of IFC. As a pro-government newspaper, NST needs to be in line with the government's stance, which is to maintain the religious harmony in the country, hence, against the idea of the IFC.

#### **4.2 Jakim says no resurgence of interfaith commission, apostate groups**

This is the headline for the newspaper report in The Malay Mail dated on November 7, 2016. As an independent newspaper, The Malay Mail plays the "journalistic role as government watchdogs" (Lumsden 2013, 1). The use of the phrase *no resurgence* in the headline makes it obvious that

this is the pro-apostate newspaper report. In comparison to NST's report, the phrase *no resurgence* suggests a light denial and gives no indication of rejection. The phrase seems to acknowledge the existence of the interfaith commission. This is a strong claim made by the headline to give assurance to the apostate groups out there who read this newspaper report. In line with that, the word *apostate* in the headline is the attention grabber. Even though the interfaith commission already includes the apostate groups, the author purposely makes the effort to reinstate the word *apostate* in the headline. The word *apostate* works as a "linguistic device, and it appears to serve as an 'attention grabber', which we might assume to prompt a very high level of attention capture" (Emmott, Sanford, and Morrow 2006, 10). Finally, the rhetoric in the headline is manifested in the word *Jakim*. Similar to the previous headline analysis, the noun *Jakim* contributes to the appeal in credibility of the Islamic body. However, in this headline, *Jakim* is presented negatively so that the readers will sympathize with the apostate groups.

Extract 4 is the first paragraph of the news report.

**Extract 4**

- 1 Malaysia's federal Islamic authority has denied that the Interfaith Commission of Malaysia (IFC)
- 2 previously proposed by Putrajaya has been registered,
- 3 amid Muslim concern over the spread of so-called pluralism in the country.

(Para. 1, TMM)

The author uses the noun phrase *Malaysia's federal Islamic authority* (line 1) instead of *Jakim* as mentioned in the headline. The author attempts to channel the blame to a bigger institution, in this context, from *Jakim* to Malaysia as a whole. The message is that the government of Malaysia is responsible for denying the IFC registration. This message could cause resentment from the pro-apostate groups. The emotion triggered can be associated with the *Pathos* rhetorical element. *Pathos* helps the author to get 'connected emotionally' with the readers (Murthy and Ghosal 2014, 253).

The first paragraph also contains the element of *Ethos*. It states that IFC was proposed by *Putrajaya* (line 2). In Malaysia, *Putrajaya* is known as the center of government ruling. By mentioning that its existence has been proposed by *Putrajaya*, it gives credibility to the Interfaith Commission of Malaysia (IFC) in the sense that IFC is a legit, and not a fringe body. The statement should give confidence and new hope to all apostates in Malaysia. This extract also provides the element of sarcasm in the word *so-called* (line 3). Filatova (2012) suggests that sarcasm can be detected in the verbal irony. The word sarcastically refers to the Muslim perception on pluralism in Malaysia, whereas, the pro-apostate groups suggest otherwise. The fact that this newspaper is the left wing, the author

portrays the disagreement as a misperception by the Muslim groups.

Extract 5 is the second paragraph of the news report.

**Extract 5**

- 1 Minister Tan Sri Joseph Kurup had explained
- 2 in August 2013 that the IFC was not shelved,
- 3 but instead was renamed
- 4 as the Cabinet's Special Committee to Promote Understanding and Harmony Among Religious Adherents (JKMPKA).

(Para. 2, TMM)

The previous newspaper report by the NST did not try to explain further on the IFC. However, newspaper report by The Malay Mail took the effort to explain further on the IFC history and background. Five paragraphs are allocated in the report to elaborate on IFC. This is a strategic use of macrostructure by the author to promote the existence of IFC to the readers as an organization which will support them if they want to renounce the religion. This extract provides the minister's name to enhance the establishment of the IFC (line 1). *Ethos* can give the elements of "honesty, competence, and various other virtues germane to judging the credence" that suits the minister's characteristics (Minozzi et al. 2012, 10). The credibility of the minister can persuade readers regarding the existence of the apostate groups. In fact, people tend to believe the word from a minister rather than rumors from the internet. Besides, the extract also mentions a date as a proof of the IFC's existence, hence acknowledging the apostates (line 2). Again, the evidence given is part of the *Logos* rhetoric structure to remove the doubt from the mind of the readers. *Logos* statement can persuade the readers "with a reasonable claim and offering a proof in support of the statement" (Murthy and Ghosal 2014, 250). Finally, the report mentions the new name of the IFC, which involved the phrases *Promote Understanding* and *Harmony Among Religious Adherents* (line 4). Those are all positive phrases that can evoke positive emotions towards apostasy. The author knows that "emotions are powerful motivators to stimulate the hearts and minds of individuals to accept" the author's claims (Murthy and Ghosal 2014, 253). This extract alone includes several rhetorical techniques to show the intention of the newspaper to persuade the readers in supporting this issue.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

This section discusses several salient points that emerge through the comparison of the two newspaper reports. The first point that can be extracted from the two newspaper reports is that they have the crusade of their own: Pro-government and pro-apostate. In the Malaysian context, it is common for Muslim groups and government bodies which are in-charge of the Islamic rules and law to be against apostasy. Hence, the pro-apostate groups usually gain their support from other members of the

society that do not fall under aforementioned category. In addition to that, because Malaysia is a Muslim majority country, and also known as an Islamic country, apostasy among Muslims in the country is strictly a taboo, and is a deep concern of everyone. A person who wishes to renounce Islam “often faces difficulties in doing so, including having to go through a poorly defined legal process and facing social stigma and prejudice” (Samuri and Quraishi 2014, 507). Furthermore, as a minority group in Malaysia, the non-Muslim groups always feel threatened and pressured by the majority group of people. Hence, it is easier for the minority group to get united in a crusade against the majority.

The second point that emerges from the comparison of the two newspaper reports is that both groups, Muslim and non-Muslim, make full use of the newspapers which are under their control. They know it very well that they can reach out to the people using this platform, and convince the readers to be their supporters. To convince the readers, they need to have strong knowledge in linguistic use and the rhetoric structure which they can apply in the construction of the reports.

Another point that emerges from the analysis is the blaming culture. The NST report tends to blame the apostate groups, while the TMM report constantly blames the Muslim groups. They are aware of the impact caused by the media platforms, hence they utilize it to let know of their dissatisfaction towards each other. Newspaper alone can make an isolated case become something significant to the people. Newspaper can put the spotlight on any issue where it deems appropriate and beneficial. The rhetoric structure in the newspaper report can sometimes influence the readers into believing the report without interpreting it, even though the report can sometimes be misleading. In the world where there is an overflowing distribution of information, newspapers have a massive advantage in term of experience in aggregating information (Mohamed Ariffin and Jaafar 2009).

As reflected in The NST report, the government has monitored and managed the frequency of apostasy news that appears in the newspaper, or media as a whole. The government has taken this precaution to prevent any tensed relationship between races and religions in Malaysia. However, it is impossible to totally stop the news about apostasy because it will be irresponsible for the government to do so. Besides, the government will be accused of concealing the information from the people, which is all the good reason for the non-Muslim and the apostate groups to cast further doubt on the Malaysia government. The non-Muslim and the apostate groups may then exploit this opportunity to their own benefit. Within the tiny space provided by the government which allows them to publish independent newspapers, they utilize it to the fullest, to express their opinions, dissatisfactions, and facts about the apostasy issue. They strategically make use of every word and sentence in the news report to persuade readers into believing their constructed stories and

consequently join them in support of their crusade. The ability to make full use of the limited freedom given by the government manages to create balance in the coverage of apostasy cases in the country thus serving the public interest.

The media is not perfectly neutral in covering the apostasy issues. The news contents represent the journalistic mission to shape the audience's views of the issue. The news reports analysed in this paper are not an isolated case. There are several other reports by the two media outlets which reflect their bias on this issue. For instance, the news "Mais launches module to rehabilitate Muslim apostates" (Bernama 2017) promotes the rehabilitation programme for apostates to rethink of their apostasy. This programme is totally against the wishes of the non-Muslim group who fights for freedom of religion in the country. However, as the pro-government newspaper, it attempts to promote the anti-apostasy programme and show the government's efforts in controlling the apostasy cases. Another example of the pro-government report is the news with the headline "Tabling of bill on unilateral conversion of children deferred" (Fong 2017). Even though the motion is withdrawn, NST manages to highlight the government's initiative in combating the apostasy issue.

On the other hand, TMM constantly shows its bias in supporting the apostates. For example, TMM news on "Apostasy not a right, Muslim lawyer says" (The Malay Mail 2016b) gives the impression that Islam is a rigid religion. The headline suggests that Islam is not a religion that gives its followers the freedom to choose. This kind of news report could create anger among the Muslim group as it portrays the bad image of Islam. The bias in the media reports may lead to the conflict between religions in Malaysia which might disturb the harmony of the country. Another example is the news with the headline "Path to leave Islam simple, but far from easy" (The Malay Mail 2014). The headline highlights the difficulties faced by Malaysian Muslims who want to renounce the religion. It can be seen as an attempt to show that there is no freedom of religion in the country. The legal process, the procedures, and the consequences of renouncing the religion can be unbearable.

For future research, it is recommended that audience responses are included in the analysis in addition to the news report. For online newspapers, the audience responses are available from the Comment section on the website. The analysis of the audience response is useful in understanding their views and opinions of this emerging phenomenon. Their postings in the comment section could also prevail the success of pro-government and pro-apostate newspapers in influencing the readers into taking up the agenda being set.

Since Malaysian use social media to express their opinions on controversial issues (Rashid and Rahman, 2014), it is recommended for future research to also analyse the postings on the site to examine the public's reactions towards apostasy issue.

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