

CRISIS COMMUNICATION IN MALAYSIAN MEDIA: A COMPARISON OF ASTRO AWANI AND MALAYSIA KINI'S COVERAGE OF THE PUTRA HEIGHTS GAS PIPELINE FIRE

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Dihantar/Received: 10 Mac 2026 | *Penambahbaikan/Revised:* 20 Mei 2025

Diterima/Accepted: 10 Mei 2026 | *Terbit/Published:* 1Jun 2025

Abstract: The purpose of this study is to examine the reporting of the April 2025 gas pipeline fire incident in Putra Heights by two Malaysian news outlets, Astro Awani and Malaysiakini. The study aimed to examine headline framing, source types, and thematic patterns in the coverage of both media outlets. A total of 273 news articles published within the first seven days following the incident (174 from Astro Awani and 99 from Malaysiakini) were analysed using a mixed-methods content analysis approach, integrating quantitative analysis of content frequencies and distributions with qualitative thematic examination. Results show that both publications mainly used factual headlines and relied on official sources. However, Malaysiakini offered a wider range of themes, such as conflict and consequences, whereas Astro Awani focused on human interest and responsibility. In conclusion, the two media's different editorial concepts affected how they presented the crisis narratives, even though they both followed the rules of factual and source credibility. This study improves our knowledge of the media's function in crisis communication and emphasizes how crucial fair reporting and public media literacy are in influencing how society reacts to crises.

Keywords: Astro Awani, Malaysiakini, crisis communication, news sources, Putra Heights gas pipeline fire.

INTRODUCTION

In the digital media era, news organisations play a critical role in communicating environmental and technological crises, shaping public understanding, emotional responses, and levels of trust in institutions (Salleh & Ibrahim, 2015). During disasters, crisis communication becomes especially important for informing the public, reducing uncertainty, and facilitating accountability (Seeger, 2006). Media coverage does not merely transmit information; it actively constructs meaning, influencing how audiences interpret risk, responsibility, and institutional performance.

Malaysia's experience with environmental and infrastructural disasters provides an important context for understanding the significance of crisis reporting. Over the past several decades, the country has witnessed a series of landslides and structural failures, many of which were attributed not solely to natural causes but also to human negligence, inadequate maintenance, and weak regulatory enforcement. These incidents have repeatedly raised concerns about environmental governance, urban development practices, and institutional accountability.

Among the most notable cases were the landslides in Bukit Antarabangsa, Ulu Klang, in July 1998 and October 2000, reportedly linked to poorly maintained underground drainage systems. In July 1988, the collapse of the jetty at Pengkalan Sultan Abdul Hamid in Butterworth — then one of the busiest piers in the country — resulted in 32 fatalities and more than 1,600 injuries, exposing serious infrastructural vulnerabilities. The 1993 collapse of a block of the Highland Towers condominium in Hulu Klang, Selangor, which claimed 48 lives following a slope failure, remains one of the most tragic landslide disasters in Malaysia's history.

Subsequent incidents, including the 2002 Taman Hillview landslide and the 2011 tragedy at the Hidayah Madrasah Al-Taqwa orphanage in Hulu Langat, further underscored the recurring nature of slope-related disasters. Even in cases where casualties were avoided, such as the 2012 soil movement in Puncak Setiawangsa, mass evacuations reflected ongoing environmental risk (Ahmad & Lateh, 2016).

The recurrence of such disasters has produced profound physical, psychological, and socio-economic consequences for affected communities. Whether natural or human-induced, disasters disrupt livelihoods, hinder economic development, and undermine socio-political stability (Ahmad et al., 2011). Repeated incidents have also intensified public scrutiny of development practices, regulatory oversight, and crisis management mechanisms in Malaysia.

Against this backdrop of recurring environmental risk, the gas pipeline fire that occurred in Putra Heights on 1 April 2025 represents another significant industrial crisis. The explosion, which took place near residential areas, generated widespread public concern due to its scale and its potential environmental and social implications. In the immediate aftermath, the incident received extensive media coverage, with outlets such as Astro Awani and Malaysiakini providing continuous updates as the situation unfolded.

In reporting such crises, news organisations frame events through headline construction, source selection, and thematic emphasis. These framing choices shape how audiences perceive risk, assign responsibility, and evaluate institutional responses (Entman, 1993). Comparing how different media outlets report the same event therefore offers valuable insight into broader patterns of environmental risk communication and media influence.

This study examines how Astro Awani and Malaysiakini framed the Putra Heights gas pipeline fire, focusing on headlines, sources, and dominant themes. Although both outlets covered the same incident, their editorial orientations and professional cultures may produce differing framing strategies. Understanding these differences contributes to environmental communication scholarship by illustrating how media narratives shape public interpretation of environmental hazards within a media-diverse society.

While previous Malaysian research has examined media framing in political, health, and social contexts, comparatively limited attention has been given to how mainstream and independent media frame sudden environmental or industrial crises in real time. By analysing coverage of the Putra Heights gas pipeline fire, this study addresses this gap and provides empirical insight into crisis communication practices within Malaysia's environmental risk landscape.

This study examines how Astro Awani and Malaysiakini framed the Putra Heights gas pipeline fire, focusing on three key dimensions of media framing: headline construction, source selection, and thematic emphasis. Although both outlets reported on the same incident, their differing editorial orientations may have influenced how the crisis was presented to the public. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions: (RQ1) How did Astro Awani and Malaysiakini frame the Putra Heights gas pipeline fire through their headlines? (RQ2) What types of sources were prioritised by Astro Awani and Malaysiakini in their coverage of the incident? (RQ3) What dominant themes emerged in the reporting, and how did these themes differ between the two news outlets? By addressing these questions, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of media framing practices in environmental and industrial crisis communication within the Malaysian context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Crisis Reporting

Crisis reporting plays a central role in shaping public perception, trust, and public response during environmental and technological emergencies. In the context of environmental communication, the media functions as a key intermediary between authorities, affected communities, and the wider public by translating complex risk information into accessible narratives. In Malaysia, media outlets such as Astro Awani and Malaysiakini operate within different ownership structures and editorial orientations, which influence how environmental crises are framed and reported. Effective crisis reporting requires journalistic competence in navigating uncertainty, scientific and technical information, institutional sources, and public expectations (Rahim & Nazmi, 2016).

However, the Malaysian media landscape does not operate in isolation from broader political and economic forces. Like other social institutions, the media functions within a network of state actors, political elites, corporate entities, and regulatory structures that seek to influence news production (Anuar, 2005). The ownership structure of mainstream media, which is often linked to political interests, has been shown to shape editorial agendas, source selection, and framing strategies. Environmental issues, particularly those connected to state-led development projects, may be underreported, reported superficially, or framed in ways that align with official narratives to preserve political and social stability (Hussein & Siarap, 2006; Norma & Hasan, 2007). Within such a constrained environment, critical perspectives that challenge governmental policy may receive limited space, while self-censorship may emerge due to legal and institutional pressures (Anuar, 2005; Smeltzer, 2008).

Empirical research on environmental disaster reporting in Malaysia reflects these structural dynamics. A comparative content analysis of Utusan Malaysia and The Star covering the 2012 Taman Puncak Setiawangsa landslide found that, despite differences in language and readership, both newspapers demonstrated remarkably similar reporting patterns (J. Ahmad & Lateh, 2016). Coverage was predominantly presented as straight news, heavily reliant on official sources such as government officials and ministers and largely focused on follow-up actions taken by authorities. Critical engagement with structural causes, accountability, or long-term environmental governance was minimal. While The Star incorporated more “humanity” elements by highlighting residents’ experiences, both newspapers framed the disaster primarily through governmental response narratives. These findings suggest that mainstream environmental crisis reporting in Malaysia tends to privilege official accounts and adopt surface-level reporting approaches, reflecting broader institutional and ownership influences.

Existing studies on Malaysian crisis and disaster communication, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic and recurring flood events, further demonstrate that media framing often emphasises risk severity, government intervention, and collective responsibility. Analyses of mainstream outlets such as Berita Harian and The Star show a tendency to align coverage with official narratives, particularly during national emergencies, shaping public understanding and compliance with safety measures (Chan, 2023). While such framing can support risk management and social order, it may also limit critical discussion of environmental accountability and long-term mitigation.

Crisis communication scholarship highlights that environmental and industrial disasters can have lasting implications for institutional credibility and public trust when handled inappropriately (Zafra & Maydell, 2018). Proactive crisis communication strategies, including timely information dissemination, transparency, and agenda management, are essential during the crisis response phase, which is characterised by heightened uncertainty, emotional stress,

and fear, particularly when incidents involve environmental damage, displacement, or loss of life (Sebastião, 2016; Seeger et al., 2003).

Empirical research in Malaysia further demonstrates the growing role of digital and social media in environmental crisis communication. During flood disasters and the COVID-19 outbreak, institutions such as the University of Malaya Medical Centre (UMMC) relied heavily on official social media platforms to reduce uncertainty, provide practical guidance, and reassure the public, frequently amplifying information from authoritative sources such as the Ministry of Health (Ibrahim et al., 2024). These findings highlight the importance of credibility, consistency, and emotional sensitivity in communicating environmental and health risks.

Studies of environmental disaster reporting in Malaysia also reveal differences in audience interpretation and emotional response. Research on flood communication in Sarawak found that disaster victims expressed stronger emotional reactions and greater attribution of blame toward authorities, while non-victims responded more cognitively and sought preventive and preparedness information (Li & Ting, 2025). Comparative analyses between mainstream and alternative media outlets further indicate differences in coverage volume and narrative emphasis, even when framing structures appear similar, suggesting the influence of agenda-setting and editorial positioning in environmental crisis reporting (Ee & Nik Hasan, 2024). Environmental crisis reporting also carries significant societal consequences. Studies indicate that social media is a primary source of information during floods and environmental disasters, enabling rapid dissemination of warnings and updates but also facilitating the spread of misinformation and panic (Mohd Zahari et al., 2022; Yap et al., 2023). While coordinated mass media reporting during national emergencies has been shown to reduce uncertainty and promote compliance with safety measures (Mat Piah, 2020), scholars caution that digital platforms often amplify both credible information and rumours, making institutional trust a key mediating factor in public response (Norazan et al., 2024).

A recent comparative study of Malaysian and Indonesian journalists covering tsunami disasters (Mustafa et al., 2021) highlights several structural and professional constraints that shape environmental crisis reporting. The study found that many journalists assigned to disaster coverage lack specialised training in environmental or disaster journalism, increasing the risk of superficial reporting and factual omissions, particularly in technically complex emergencies. Organisational preparedness was also reported to be uneven, with journalists often required to perform multiple technical roles in fast-paced, breaking news environments, thereby intensifying professional pressures. In addition, newsroom hierarchy, editorial gatekeeping, ownership structures, and perceived audience expectations were found to influence decisions about content selection and framing. These findings suggest that environmental crisis communication is shaped not only by framing choices but also by institutional capacity, professional competence, and internal newsroom power dynamics.

Crucially, the structural tension between mainstream and independent media during industrial and environmental crises is not unique to the Malaysian context but reflects a documented global phenomenon. Research on global communication indicates that sudden technological and environmental emergencies are frequently covered according to a “indexing” model, in which coverage is heavily indexed to official state and corporate sources to sustain institutional order and institutional trust (Bennett, 1990). Conversely, independent and digital-native alternative media outlets around the world tend to reject this top-down reliance by actively introducing divergent interpretive lenses, framing industrial risks through questions of long-term accountability, regulatory gaps, and systemic failures (Nisbet, 2009). By connecting the local dynamics of the Putra Heights pipeline fire to these wider international reporting structures, this study raises its analytical framework from a single-country observation to a cross-contextual validation of global crisis communication practices.

Overall, existing literature underscores the importance of transparent, timely, and accurate media communication in managing environmental and industrial crises. At the same time, structural constraints, ownership patterns, and reliance on official sources continue to shape how environmental disasters are framed within Malaysia's media ecosystem. Despite extensive research on floods, public health emergencies, and political crises, limited studies have conducted direct comparative analyses of how mainstream and independent media frame sudden environmental or industrial disasters. Addressing this gap, the present study examines Astro Awani's and Malaysiakini's coverage of the Putra Heights gas pipeline fire to better understand media framing practices and their implications for environmental communication and public trust.

The Integration of Agenda Setting and Framing in Crisis Communication

To systematically deconstruct the media dynamics of the Putra Heights pipeline fire, this study relies on a dual-theoretical framework consisting of Agenda-Setting and Framing theories. These two theories operate sequentially in this research design. First, Agenda-Setting Theory provides the mechanism to evaluate macro-salience. Second, because an issue's prominence is inherently tied to how it is interpreted, the study transitions into Framing Theory. Framing serves as the micro-level analytical tool required to shifting the focus from what is covered to how the crisis is structurally packaged through specific headlines, institutional sources, and thematic narrative tracks.

Agenda-setting and framing theories are central to understanding how environmental crises are constructed in public discourse. Agenda-setting theory argues that media influence public priorities by determining which issues receive attention and prominence (Mccombs & Shaw, 1972). In environmental communication, scholars have shown that the visibility, frequency, and placement of environmental stories shape public perceptions of risk severity, urgency, and policy importance. When environmental disasters receive sustained coverage, they are elevated to the level of national concern; conversely, limited or episodic coverage may contribute to issue fatigue or marginalisation. Research in environmental journalism has consistently demonstrated that media salience influences not only public awareness but also policy attention and governmental responsiveness, especially during industrial accidents, climate-related disasters, and public health emergencies.

While agenda-setting explains issue prominence, framing theory provides insight into how environmental crises are interpreted. Framing refers to the selection and emphasis of particular aspects of reality in ways that promote specific problem definitions, causal attributions, moral evaluations, and recommended remedies (Entman, 1993). Because of the emergent reporting nature in industrial crises, (Entman, 1993) structural foundation offers the basic mechanism to assess how media outlets diagnose the root cause of the Putra Heights pipeline fire, assign moral blame and justify remedies that may be taken. To operationalize this mechanism in systematic content analysis, this study adopts the multi-dimensional framing matrix by (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000), as the core analytical framework. By using (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000), model to break the text down into individual, measurable levels: the responsibility frame measures who is responsible for the infrastructure failure, the human interest frame reflects the emotional and human effects of the explosion on the local community, the consequence frame tracks the economic, social and environmental damage, and the conflict frame analyzes any institutional friction between authorities, corporate entities and independent watchdogs. Building on the functional definitions of (Entman, 1993), and on the specialized domains of (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000), this research moves beyond surface-level reading, translating abstract theories of communication into an empirical toolkit

that can identify how crisis narrative paths get processed structurally by mainstream and alternative media.

In environmental communication scholarship, framing has been widely used to examine how media narratives construct responsibility—whether crises are attributed to natural causes, technical failure, corporate negligence, regulatory weakness, or broader structural problems. Scholars such as Boykoff (2009) argue that environmental issues are often framed strategically to resonate with public values, for example through newsroom routines, professional norms, organisational hierarchy, ownership influence and journalistic expertise. We can say that environmental communication is shaped by institutional power structures, not just narrative choices.

Environmental crises are particularly sensitive to framing because they involve uncertainty, risk perception, and emotional response. The way a disaster is framed—whether as an isolated incident, a systemic governance failure, or a test of institutional competence—can significantly influence public trust and blame attribution (Zhang & Zhang, 2024). Research in risk communication further suggests that media frames shape how audiences interpret severity, vulnerability, and responsibility, thereby affecting behavioural responses and support for policy change (Happer & Philo, 2013; Smeltzer, 2008; Sofian et al., 2026). In this sense, framing operates not merely at the level of narrative style but as a mechanism that structures public understanding of environmental governance and institutional legitimacy.

Importantly, agenda-setting and framing are interconnected. (Boykoff, 2009) demonstrates that environmental crisis coverage operates at both agenda-setting and framing levels. Media institutions determine not only the prominence of environmental issues but also the interpretive lenses through which such crises are understood. Through selective emphasis on causality, responsibility, and moral evaluation, environmental reporting constructs meaning rather than merely transmitting information. These processes are further shaped by newsroom hierarchy, ownership structures, and professional routines, suggesting that environmental narratives are institutionally mediated rather than neutral reflections of events. Applying both theories therefore allows for a comprehensive analysis of how environmental crises are made visible and how their meanings are constructed, contested, or stabilised within Malaysia's media landscape.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a comparative mixed-methods content analysis to examine how Astro Awani and Malaysiakini framed the Putra Heights gas pipeline fire. Content analysis is widely used in crisis and environmental communication research to identify patterns in media framing, source usage, and thematic emphasis (Entman, 1993; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). The mixed-methods approach allows the study to combine systematic quantitative comparison with qualitative interpretation of media narratives.

The analysis focuses on three dimensions: headline framing, news sources, and thematic content. Drawing on framing theory, the study examines how media highlight certain aspects of an environmental crisis; such as responsibility, consequences, or human impact; while downplaying others, thereby shaping public understanding and emotional responses. Using purposive sampling, the study analyses written news articles published by Astro Awani and Malaysiakini over a specific 7-day data collection window from 1 April 2025 to 7 April 2025, a critical period when dominant crisis frames are typically established (Houston et al., 2012). Only articles that substantively reported on the incident were included, while brief mentions and duplicated reports were excluded. Data were collected from the official online portals of both outlets using the keyword “Putra Heights”. Video and live broadcast content were excluded to ensure consistency in textual analysis. A strict filtering process was applied

to ensure high empirical reliability and conceptual clarity, systematically excluding brief mentions and duplicated reports from the final sample. Brief mentions were operationalized as articles in which the Putra Heights incident was only mentioned in passing, in bulleted crime rounds or weekly event roundups, without independent narrative development. Duplicated reports were identical syndicated wire text or articles duplicated with identical body copy but under slightly different headlines; in these cases, only the earliest version was retained. Thus, only articles with a significant focus on and report of the primary industrial crisis were selected, giving rise to the final consolidated sample of 273 articles.

The population consists of Malaysian news media organisations reporting on national crises. Using purposive sampling, this study focuses on Astro Awani and Malaysiakini due to their contrasting ownership structures, editorial orientations, and audience reach.

A structured coding scheme, adapted from established framing models (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000), was used. To capture the agenda-setting function at the macro-level, the coding scheme initially tracked media salience as a primary variable. This was operationalized by the daily chronological volume, frequency of publication and the duration of coverage during the 7-days cycle. This quantitative tracking served as the basic empirical baseline for the measurement. It ranked the Putra Heights crisis on each outlet's editorial agenda.

Quantitatively, articles were further coded for headline framing (factual or emotional), source type (official or citizen), and thematic frames, including conflict, consequences (environmental, social, or economic), responsibility, moral framing, and human interest. Qualitatively, the coding scheme included a close textual analysis framework to interpret the message tones, in the news copy across both portals. To enrich the empirical depth of these structural categories, the coding approach also looked closely at the "tone" of each news report. By paying attention to tone alongside the main themes, the analysis could capture how each story felt emotionally and how critical or supportive it was. Including tone in the research process helped make sure that the emotional details found later were based on a clear, consistent method so the results were not just a matter of personal opinion. The qualitative track operationalized textual parameters editorial tone, to systematically unpack the micro-level framing patterns. The editorial tone was qualitatively coded to determine how the crisis was felt emotionally, capturing whether the text took on a reassuring, community-centric, and post-crisis recovery tone, or an adversarial, critical, and investigative tone that highlighted institutional friction.

Frequencies and proportions were analysed to compare framing patterns between the two media organisations. Qualitatively, selected articles were examined through close textual analysis to explore how environmental risk, public safety, responsibility, and disaster narratives were constructed. This qualitative component allows for deeper interpretation of language use, narrative emphasis, and contextual framing that cannot be fully captured through numerical analysis alone, particularly in understanding how environmental crises are meaningfully represented to the public.

To ensure reliability, a pilot coding exercise was conducted with a second independent coder. This process helped refine coding categories and reduce interpretive bias prior to full analysis (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).

FINDINGS

A total of 273 news articles were analysed in this study, comprising 174 articles from Astro Awani and 99 articles from Malaysiakini. The substantial volume of coverage reflects the high news value of the Putra Heights gas pipeline fire and its significance as a national infrastructure and environmental crisis. The findings are presented according to three analytical dimensions:

headline framing, source usage, and thematic emphasis, allowing for a direct comparison between the two media outlets.

Both Astro Awani and Malaysiakini demonstrated a strong preference for factual headline framing in their coverage of the incident. Astro Awani recorded 99.4% factual headlines, with only a negligible presence of emotional framing. Similarly, 100% of Malaysiakini's valid headlines were framed factually, with no emotional headlines identified. This consistent reliance on neutral and informational headlines across both outlets suggests a shared editorial approach during crisis reporting, prioritising clarity, accuracy, and public reassurance over sensationalism. Despite differences in ownership structure and editorial positioning, both media organisations exercised editorial restraint in headline construction when reporting on the environmental disaster.

In terms of sourcing, both Astro Awani and Malaysiakini relied predominantly on official sources. Astro Awani cited official voices in 91.4% of its articles, while Malaysiakini recorded a comparable figure of 90.9%. Citizen sources, including eyewitnesses and affected residents, were minimally represented in both outlets.

This heavy dependence on institutional sources reflects a top-down communication pattern, where authorities, government agencies, and experts were positioned as the primary narrators of the crisis. The similarity in sourcing patterns indicates that, regardless of media type, both mainstream and alternative outlets prioritised verified and authoritative information during the early stages of the disaster.

Thematic analysis revealed that responsibility attribution was the dominant frame used by both media outlets. Astro Awani emphasised responsibility in 60.3% of its coverage, while Malaysiakini recorded a similar emphasis at 58.6%. This focus highlights the media's role in scrutinising accountability, particularly in relation to institutional, technical, or governance failures. Malaysiakini's narrative structure often adopted an adversarial tone in attributing responsibility, framing the pipeline explosion not as an isolated technical failure but as a systemic regulatory oversight. The story blueprint in Malaysiakini was built in a way that systematically highlighted institutional friction, often by juxtaposing statements from corporate bodies directly against critical demands from local action committees and environmental watchdogs, thereby intensifying the conflict frame.

Human interest emerged as the second most prominent theme in both outlets, though Astro Awani placed slightly greater emphasis on personal narratives compared to Malaysiakini. Coverage of consequences, including environmental, social, and economic impacts, appeared at comparable levels across both platforms. However, Malaysiakini showed a relatively stronger focus on conflict, reflecting its tendency to highlight institutional tensions and structural issues even during crisis situations. Astro Awani's coverage took a more reassuring, people-focused approach. Their articles often highlighted community spirit and the effectiveness of those in charge, using comforting phrases like "situasi terkawal" (situation under control) and "bantuan segera disalurkan" (immediate aid dispatched). Instead of focusing on who was at fault, Astro Awani's stories followed a clear pattern where they began by sharing the immediate struggles and emotions of those forced to leave their homes, then spotlighted the courageous work of first responders, and finally ended with promises from officials to restore safety. This approach helped reassure the public and showed confidence in how the crisis was being managed.

Overall, the thematic patterns suggest that while both outlets shared common framing priorities, subtle differences existed in narrative emphasis, reflecting their respective editorial orientations.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how two Malaysian news outlets with different editorial orientations, Astro Awani and Malaysiakini, reported the Putra Heights gas pipeline explosion. By analysing headline framing, source selection, thematic emphasis, and message tone, the findings offer insight into how environmental crises are constructed within Malaysia's media landscape and how editorial positioning influences crisis communication practices.

Headline Framing and Professional Norms in Crisis Reporting

The first objective examined how both outlets constructed their headlines when covering the pipeline explosion. The findings indicate a remarkably high level of factual framing in both organisations. Astro Awani recorded 99.4% factually framed headlines, while Malaysiakini demonstrated complete reliance on factual headlines without emotionally charged language. At first glance, the similarity between these outlets may appear surprising, given Malaysiakini's reputation for publishing critical and sometimes provocative content. However, the convergence reflects broader norms of responsible journalism during crisis situations. In emergencies involving public safety and potential fatalities, journalists often prioritise accuracy, caution, and verification over sensationalism. Crisis communication scholarship emphasises that clear and reliable information plays a crucial role in reducing uncertainty and preventing misinformation during high-risk events (Sebastião, 2016; Seeger, 2006).

These findings suggest that professional norms within journalism can temporarily override ideological differences between media organisations. During the early stages of a crisis, both mainstream and alternative media appear to adopt a restrained reporting style that prioritises factual communication and public reassurance.

In the Malaysian context, crisis reporting is heavily influenced by the regulatory environment and the overarching framework of media ownership. Media outlets in Malaysia, such as Astro Awani and Malaysiakini, operate under the guidelines set by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC), which emphasizes responsible reporting. This regulatory oversight promotes a cautious approach in news coverage, particularly during crises that may affect public safety or national interest. The commitment to factual reporting observed in this study reflects an awareness of the potential consequences of misinformation during critical situations, which can exacerbate public anxiety and hinder effective crisis management.

Moreover, cultural considerations also play a crucial role in shaping journalistic practices in Malaysia. The emphasis on maintaining social harmony and avoiding sensationalism aligns with the concept of "*kebahjikan*" (well-being) that pervades Malaysian society. Media organizations are often aware of their responsibility to foster a sense of community trust and cooperation during crises. This perspective reinforces the preference for neutral and factual reporting, as evidenced in the analyzed articles. By prioritizing informative content that offers clear insights into the crisis, Malaysian media serve not only as sources of information but also as facilitators of public understanding, thereby contributing to a more informed citizenry in navigating complex situations.

Source Selection and the Hierarchy of Institutional Credibility

The second objective examined the sources used in reporting the crisis. The results reveal a strong reliance on institutional actors in both outlets, with official sources appearing in 91.4% of Astro Awani articles and 90.9% of Malaysiakini coverage. These sources included

government officials, fire and rescue authorities, law enforcement agencies, and corporate actors such as Petronas and DOSH. Citizen voices appeared far less frequently, accounting for only 8–9% of coverage.

This pattern reflects what communication scholars describe as the hierarchy of credibility, where institutional actors are prioritised as primary sources because they are perceived as authoritative and reliable during emergencies. In fast-moving crisis situations, journalists often depend on official sources to obtain verified information, technical explanations, and real-time updates.

The findings are consistent with earlier research on environmental disaster reporting in Malaysia. For example, Ahmad & Lateh (2016) found that coverage of the Taman Puncak Setiawangsa landslide relied heavily on government officials and ministers, with limited engagement with alternative perspectives or structural explanations of the disaster. Similarly, (Chan, 2023) observed that Malaysian media coverage during national emergencies frequently emphasises official narratives and institutional responses.

This reliance on institutional voices also reflects broader structural characteristics of Malaysia's media environment. Scholars such as Anuar (2005), Nik Norma (2007), and Smeltzer (2008) have argued that political and institutional influences shape editorial practices in Malaysian media, often privileging official accounts while limiting critical or oppositional perspectives. Within such contexts, journalists may depend on authoritative sources not only because of professional norms but also due to institutional expectations and access constraints (Lee et al., 2017).

Interestingly, Astro Awani incorporated slightly more citizen voices than Malaysiakini. Although the difference is marginal, this inclusion may indicate an attempt to incorporate human-interest perspectives that personalise the crisis experience. Such narratives can introduce emotional resonance while still reinforcing broader messages of institutional response and recovery.

In Malaysia, the reliance on official sources in news reporting is shaped by both the media regulatory landscape and the cultural inclination towards respecting authority. The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) enforces guidelines that encourage media outlets to prioritize verified information, particularly during crises where accurate reporting can have significant implications for public safety. This regulatory framework promotes a top-down communication pattern, whereby government officials and experts are often viewed as the most reliable sources of information. Consequently, outlets like Astro Awani and Malaysiakini gravitate toward official narratives, reflecting an institutional trust that aligns with broader societal values.

Additionally, the cultural context in Malaysia, which emphasizes consensus and harmony, further contributes to this sourcing trend. In times of crisis, there is a prevalent ethos that prioritizes statements from authoritative figures and institutions, as these are perceived as more dependable in providing clarity and assurance to the public. The minimal representation of citizen sources, such as eyewitness accounts, can be attributed to this inclination to uphold a narrative structured around institutional expertise. While such an approach can enhance the perceived credibility of reporting, it may also limit the diversity of perspectives presented, particularly those of individuals directly impacted by the crisis.

Thematic Framing and Editorial Identity

The third objective analysed the thematic patterns used by both outlets when reporting the crisis. While both organisations placed strong emphasis on responsibility attribution—appearing in 60.3% of Astro Awani articles and 58.6% of Malaysiakini coverage—clear differences emerged in the range of themes used.

Astro Awani's coverage demonstrated a relatively focused thematic approach. Its reporting emphasised responsibility attribution and human-interest narratives that highlighted victims, community experiences, and institutional responses. These themes were frequently accompanied by official explanations, safety assurances, and recovery efforts. Such reporting reflects the role often associated with mainstream media organisations in Malaysia, which frequently emphasise stability, institutional competence, and national cohesion during periods of disruption.

This pattern aligns with earlier observations by Nik Norma (2007) and Anuar (2005), who argue that mainstream Malaysian media often frame issues in ways that support social order and institutional legitimacy. In crisis contexts, the media may therefore act as an intermediary between authorities and the public, communicating official responses while reinforcing confidence in crisis management efforts.

In contrast, Malaysiakini demonstrated greater thematic diversity in its coverage. In addition to responsibility attribution and human-interest narratives, the outlet included higher proportions of conflict (11.1%) and consequence (12.1%) frames. These themes suggest a broader interpretive scope, where the crisis was not only reported as an immediate emergency but also examined in terms of governance issues, systemic weaknesses, and long-term implications.

From a narrative perspective, these differences illustrate how editorial orientation shapes the construction of crisis reporting. Astro Awani largely presented the incident through narratives of institutional management and stabilisation, emphasising official responses and efforts to restore public safety. Malaysiakini, however, demonstrated a greater tendency to highlight governance issues, systemic implications, and potential long-term consequences of the incident. This pattern is consistent with earlier studies on Malaysian media, which show that Malaysiakini often adopts a more critical stance toward state institutions and government responses as part of its watchdog role in the media ecosystem (Sofian et al., 2025; Sofian et al., 2026).

Within the Malaysian context, the thematic emphasis on responsibility attribution aligns with the media's critical role in holding authorities accountable, particularly in a country where institutional transparency and governance are often scrutinized. The persistent focus on accountability reflects not only a journalistic commitment to informing the public but also a societal expectation for media outlets to serve as watchdogs in crises. This is significant in a landscape where public trust in institutions may be fragile, necessitating a clear narrative on who is responsible for crises and the subsequent actions taken to address them.

Editorial Tone and Strategic Message Construction

Another difference between the two outlets emerged in the tone of reporting. Astro Awani displayed a stronger tendency toward positive messaging, with many articles emphasising reassurance, institutional response, recovery efforts, and community solidarity. This approach aligns with traditional crisis communication strategies, which aim to reduce public anxiety and restore a sense of stability following disruptive events.

Malaysiakini, in contrast, recorded a slightly higher proportion of negative tones in its coverage. These messages often emphasised concerns, criticisms, or the seriousness of the incident. Although the outlet still relied on factual reporting, its tone occasionally reflected a more investigative orientation that highlighted potential weaknesses in crisis management or institutional accountability.

The neutral tone that dominated many Malaysiakini articles also suggests a journalistic strategy focused on presenting information with minimal emotional framing. Such reporting

allows readers to interpret events independently, reinforcing the outlet's reputation for analytical and issue-oriented journalism.

These tonal differences illustrate how editorial values influence crisis communication strategies. While Astro Awani prioritised reassurance and social stability, Malaysiakini appeared more inclined to maintain critical distance and highlight broader governance implications.

CONCLUSION

This study fills the research gap related to media framing of sudden industrial crises in Malaysia's environmental communication field. It adopts an empirical real-time comparative method to analyze coverage of the Putra Heights gas pipeline fire by mainstream digital media Astro Awani and independent media Malaysiakini. The study finds that both outlets used fact-based headlines and relied heavily on official sources, but they differed significantly in editorial focus, tone, and thematic diversity. Most previous literature has centred on long-term public health crises or general natural disasters, and this study confirms that media ownership and editorial orientation shape differentiated risk narratives for rapidly occurring technological emergencies.

Astro Awani's coverage originated in stability, reassurance and institutional authority, reflective of its position in a state-aligned media context where social order and public calm are the dominant issues in environmental crises. On the other hand, Malaysiakini filled the alternative space of this research gap, relying on its editorial independence to expand the interpretive perspectives, including critical watchdog elements to the crisis discourse. By giving greater attention to conflict, accountability, and structural weaknesses, Malaysiakini expanded the environmental crisis narrative beyond immediate technical explanations to include broader questions of governance, responsibility, and risk management. Such framing is significant within environmental communication, as it encourages public reflection on systemic causes of environmental hazards rather than treating disasters as isolated events.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate how shared professional norms of accuracy and factual reporting coexist with divergent editorial cultures, producing distinct crisis narratives even when covering the same environmental disaster. The interaction between institutional alignment, editorial independence, and crisis journalism shapes not only how environmental risks are presented, but also how responsibility, trust, and public understanding are constructed.

These dynamics highlight the necessity for media organizations in Malaysia to navigate the delicate balance between adhering to professional standards and addressing the public's need for comprehensive coverage. As media outlets like Astro Awani and Malaysiakini contribute to the formation of public discourse during crises, their editorial choices and sourcing strategies significantly impact societal perceptions of accountability and trust. By fostering media literacy among the public, there is an opportunity to empower citizens to critically engage with crisis narratives, ultimately enhancing their understanding of environmental issues and the institutional responses to them.

Future research could extend this analysis by incorporating audience reception studies to examine how different environmental framing strategies influence public trust, risk perception, and behavioural responses. Comparative studies across other environmental crises would further enrich understanding of the media's role in shaping environmental awareness and crisis communication in Malaysia.

To ensure empirical transparency and provide a foundational baseline for future research, several explicit limitations of the current study must be acknowledged. First, the data collection framework operates within a strict 7-day chronological window (April 1, 2025, to

April 7, 2025) immediately following the Putra Heights pipeline fire. While this short-term cycle captures the most intense and critical phase of initial crisis framing, it does not account for long-term narrative shifts, follow-up investigative journalism, or the enduring policy discourse that develops months after an industrial disaster.

Second, this study focuses exclusively on text-based online news articles. By excluding multimedia content such as live television broadcasts, video clips, and real-time social media streams from Astro Awani and Malaysiakini the analysis misses out on visual framing, vocal tone, and the sensory elements unique to digital broadcast journalism. Finally, the study comparative framework relies on data from just two media outlets. While these organizations represent distinct editorial models within Malaysia, the findings cannot be generalized to reflect the country's entire media landscape, including mainstream print newspapers, regional vernacular media, or citizen journalism platforms.

Acknowledging these boundaries does not weaken the findings instead, it provides a clear roadmap for future research. Subsequent studies can build on this foundation by expanding the sample size, integrating multimedia datasets, and tracking the coverage over a longer period to fully understand how risk communication evolves after a crisis.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to thank all colleagues, participants, and individuals who contributed their time, insights, and support toward the completion of this research.

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