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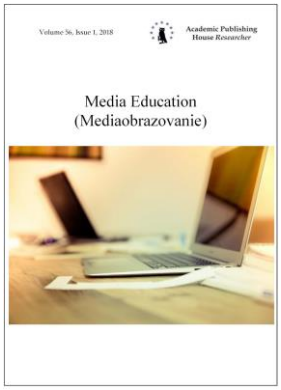

Media Representation of Online Maid Hiring System (SMO): A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

This paper focuses on media representation of Online Maid System (SMO) commonly referred to as direct hiring system in Malaysia. The system was introduced in January 2018. It alters the course of recruitment of foreign domestic helpers from going through recruitment agencies to directly hiring foreign domestic helpers by their employers. The study aims to highlight media representation and to interpret the perspectives and ideologies behind this representation. Several Malaysian newspapers were selected for the analysis of media text for the period between October 2017 – March 2018. To achieve that, the researcher utilizes Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The findings suggest that the Malaysian media represented the new system from the employer's interest perspective as *saving cost*. This representation was the dominant representation where the financial aspect is foregrounded while the foreign domestic helpers, and their countries of origin's reaction were suppressed. This representation uncovers a wider ideology of prioritizing *Self* group's convenience which reflects a self-interest representation.

Furthermore, the direct hiring system also shows a construction of a new social actor's image of the recruitment agencies. Specifically, they were implicitly represented as cheating employers. In the previous literature, the agents were represented as part of the law and an essential part of it.

By examining the rules and regulations between the sending countries and Malaysia in the past decade with regards to foreign domestic helpers, the rules were governed by Memoranda of Understanding between the two governments. These Memoranda of Understanding not only regulate the procedures of recruitments but also serve as a sign of agreement. Yet the new system approached a different path from the past. This could insinuate a more complex future of the bilateral relations between the sending and receiving countries. Accordingly, the media focused on the Malaysian perspective of the issue which marks a major difference to how the previous laws were represented by the media.

Keywords: Online Maid System (SMO), foreign domestic helper, media representation, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

1. Introduction

In the past decade, Malaysia has experienced a significant increase in the demand of foreign domestic helpers (FDH). The increase in demand has driven hundreds of domestic helpers from lower economic Southeast Asian countries to migrate to Malaysia. This came in response to the states' policy of enhancing the level of middle-class educated Malaysian women to participate in empowering the economic competence (Noor, Shaker 2017; Elias, 2010). With the enormous influx

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of foreign domestic helpers (FDH) in Malaysia, they face many challenges that can be succinctly summarized into five major areas. Firstly, hiring a legal domestic helper comes with high charges bore by the employers and the domestic helpers. This is where the middle-class employers end up paying triple their monthly income as the first deposit. While the foreign domestic helpers often pay the recruitment agencies to find them an opportunity in Malaysia. Therefore, hiring an illegal domestic helper is a common and affordable alternative. Consequently, illegal domestic helpers lose all their rights and become vulnerable to abuse and exploitation with no protection.

However, the financial burden on both parties isn't the only problematic aspect. From the legal point of view, legal FDHs are categorized under migrant workers, but they do not enjoy the rights of other migrant workers. In this regard, Tenaganita, a well-kwon Malaysian NGO, confirmed in an interview with the Star newspaper that the foreign domestic helpers are classified as domestic servants under the Employment Act 1955 and were mentioned with reference to contract termination in 265 Employment Act (Employment..., 1955). Therefore, they are denied the rights accorded to the other migrant workers (Nielsen, 2014; Philippine..., 2017). Therefore, these domestic helpers end up experiencing many forms of exploitation such as working for long hours, forced labour, physical and verbal abuse, and sexual harassment (Low, 2020, Noor, Shaker 2017; Khaisunnisa, Anggani, 2020). Fourthly, in the last decade, Malaysia experienced a several banning policies imposed by the domestic helpers' countries of origin. This is when the governments of the countries of origin ban their citizens from working in Malaysia after high profile cases of abuse. Five banning policies were imposed by Indonesia, Philippines and Cambodia between 2009-2017. Then in 2018, after the case of the Indonesian domestic helper Adelina Laos who passed away allegedly due to abuse and deteriorating health, the Indonesian government considered imposing a new banning policy (Hays, 2015; Indonesia..., 2018; Marouani et al., 2017; Indonesia..., 2018).

In 2018, the former Prime Minister of Malaysia Najib Razak introduced a direct hiring system for the foreign domestic helpers which excludes the recruitment agents. So, on 1st January 2018, the Online Maid System (SMO) was first launched and is still active until today. This system allows the option of hiring foreign domestic helpers directly by their employers without the intervention of recruitment agencies. This system covers exclusively those workers who are already in Malaysia on social pass visa or whose work contract has expired and became illegal. It solely aims to cut-off the charges imposed by the recruitment agencies (Andira, 2018). This system encourages employers to source for domestic helpers in their countries of origin, to contact them personally, to register them online and provide their necessary documentation. However, the two countries with the highest population of foreign domestic helpers, Indonesia and the Philippines did not approve this system and found it causing more vulnerability to the domestic workers rather than solving their problems (Khaisunnisa, Anggani 2020; Patinio, 2018; Low, 2020; Employers..., 2017; Maid..., 2018).

This paper aims to examine how the Malaysian media represent the Online Maid System (SMO), from which perspective this topic is approached, and what the underlying ideologies of this representation are. To achieve that, Discourse Historical Approach Framework (Reisigl, Wodak 2001) was used as the tool of analysis as the representation is affected by the historical background of presence of foreign domestic helpers in Malaysia in the last few decades. In addition, computer assisted analysis was used to validate the findings. The available literature does not pay attention to media representation of policies and laws that have great impact on recruitment conditions of foreign domestic helpers in Malaysia.

2. Materials and methods

The current study has employed one of the prominent Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) frameworks: Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) 2001. It is the type of social research that draws a relationship between text and discourse on the one hand and historical background, social processes and social change on the other, aiming at offering a deep and comprehensive analysis of texts. DHA aims to elucidate the persuasive construction- in its analysis of argumentative strategies – that are manipulative social constructions (Wodak, 2009; 2011; Wodak, Meyer, 2012). In addition, ideology is associated with the concept of power and hegemony, which is located and transmitted through language. News by theory should reflect the world events in written or spoken words, as it is considered by many as an unbiased mediator tool. But practically every piece of information that is reported in the news cannot escape being articulated from an ideological position. This means, there are different ways of reporting the same event. The choices of

expressions vocabulary, articulation of information are not accidental or random alternatives. The variety of expressions carry ideological differences and that creates variant representations (Ghannam, 2012). Therefore, ideology is interwoven with discourse therefore studying discourse helps to unveil ideology to raise awareness towards language manipulation (KhosraviNik, 2010).

The five discursive strategies of DHA are the tools of micro analysis: referential, predication, argumentation, intensification/mitigation and perspectivation.

Table 1. DHA discursive strategies (Wodak, Meyer, 2001: 73)

Strategy	Objectives	Devices
Referential/nomination	Construction of in-groups and out-groups	• membership categorization • biological, naturalizing and depersonalizing metaphors and metonymies • synecdoches (pars pro toto, totum pro pars)
Predication	Labelling social actors more or less positively or negatively, deprecatorily or appreciatively	• stereotypical, evaluative attributions of negative or positive traits • implicit and explicit predicates
Argumentation	Justification of positive or negative attributions	• topoi used to justify political inclusion or exclusion, discrimination or preferential treatment
Perspectivation, framing or discourse representation	Expressing involvement Positioning speaker's point of view	• reporting, description, narration or quotation of (discriminatory) events and utterances
Intensification, mitigation	Modifying the epistemic status of a proposition	• intensifying or mitigating the illocutionary force of (discriminatory) utterances

Wodak (Wodak, 2001) defines referential strategies as the strategies that categorize social groups into an in-group and out-group. Predication strategies is associate these groups with positive or negative attributes. As for the argumentation strategies, they are the tools for justifying positive or negative traits. Two important concepts constitute the main parts of argumentations: Topoi and fallacies. "Topoi" or "loci" are as parts of argumentation which belong to the "*obligatory, either explicit or inferable premises*". They are the content-related warrants or 'conclusion rules' which connect the argument or arguments with the conclusion, the claim. As such, they justify the transition from the argument or arguments to the conclusion (Wodak, 2006). As for intensification and mitigation strategies, they refer to tools used to intensify or mitigate certain actions, attributes, or qualities of certain social groups (Wodak, 2012; Wodak, Meyer, 2012).

Moreover, *Perspectivation or Framing* strategies refers to the text producer's involvement or distance and the positioning of the point of view. Perspectivation also includes the notion of '*Strategies* of *Involvement and strategies of Detachment*'. This is concerned with the degree of distance speakers put themselves in with regards to the actions presented whether to declare responsibility of the action or to veil those who are responsible. This is when once, for instance, passive voice is used to detach participants from the action in order to avoid blame or to generalize negative behaviours not to be blamed as individuals and to strengthen the sense of legitimization. This is in addition to metaphors that are used as a metonymy tool to construct a frame. Thus, perspectivation is applied to attain certain goals such as to modify the cognitive status of proposition, modify expressions of the speaker, to persuade audience, to play upon the degree of certainty and the degree of involvement and detachment of speakers among other goals (Reisigl, Wodak, 2001). Evidences of *perspectivation* and *framing* strategies can be found in the way reporting, quotations, descriptions, and narrations take place. It can be measured as the spacious allotment granted to certain participants. That is detected by comparing the pace of expressing opinion given to two participants such as the number of quotations of the '*Us'* group and the '*Other*' group as in (Rasti, Sahragard, 2012). Yet it is also restricted by the rules of different genres and

fields of action (Reisigl, Wodak, 2001). Therefore, journalism is viewed as the practice of filling 'frames' which are mainly conventional patterns, beliefs, assumptions, or interpretations operated by a group or culture. which produce or reflect 'ideologies (He, 2010).

This research has employed qualitative critical discourse analysis. The analysis consists of a few stages. First the data was collected from the websites of the Malaysian newspapers. Then, the analysis was done in two stages. First, the data was saved on NVivo 12 Pro to obtain the word cloud based on the word frequency function to make initial observation on the data. Second, DHA discursive strategies were identified and analysed to obtain the detailed findings. The strategies are: Referential strategy, Predication strategy, Argumentation strategy, Mitigation and Intensification strategies and Perspectivation strategy. The next stage was identifying similar occurrences and highlighting patterns in representation. After that, these patterns were explained contextually and compared to one another.

The data is collected from a number of mainstream newspapers in Malaysia that were concerned with the new program of direct hiring (SOM) such as *The Star, The News Straits Times, and The Sun* and independent newspapers such as *Malaysia Kini, Malaysian Insight*, and *Free Malaysia Today*. Data was collected directly from the newspapers' websites via keywords search for the period between (October 2017-March 2018). This period of time was selected because the news stories on direct hiring system were more frequent than any other time later as it surrounds the event. The data size is 29 news stories. From the mainstream media*: The Sun Daily*: 10, *The Star*: 5, *News Straits Times*: 2 and from the independent online newspapers: *Malaysia Kini*: 7, *Malaysian Insight*: 3 and *Free Malaysia Today*: 2. The average number of words is 160 words.

3. Discussion

The study of media representations has developed and evolved into several phases. Research on the representation of social groups such as races, ethnicities, and marginalized communities has been on the rise (Flowerdew, Richardson, 2017; Sikov, 2020; Weeks, Lane, 2020). The analysis of media representation shows a variety of variables across time and media channels. Several studies covered the production of the media portrayal while other studies focused on the consumption process with emphasis on the beliefs and values transmitted to the public (Anspach, 2017; Besana et al., 2019; Powell, 2018). In the late 1960s, Clark (Clark, 1969) identified four representation labels the media offers to minorities and marginalized groups. Firstly, representation is "non-recognition". This refers to the suppression of social actors from the media text. One of the prominent examples is the rare mention of blacks in the media text. The second label is "ridicule". It refers to the negative stereotyping of social actors in the media text. This is manifested in the portrayal of foreigners and social groups who exhibit different physical features or habits. The third type is "regulation". It refers to representing the minorities in roles that protect the status quo which as the military or police. The fourth type is "respect" which refers to the equal display of positive and negative characteristics of social groups (Feezell, 2018; Lumsden, Morgan, 2017; McInroy, Craig, 2017).

Several studies have discussed the issue of foreign workers from an economic, political, and humanitarian point of view. Recent studies on media analysis suggest that it is necessary to analyse media text in terms of objectivity and biasedness in representation of certain groups or topics with emphasis on the underlying ideologies, perspectives, antecedent conditions and contextual background. In addition, media promote and circulate the ideologies of the powerful agents in the society. This is done professionally using language tools and persuasive arguments to control the minds of the public (Van Dijk, 2001). Hart (Hart, 2012) discussed a specific suite of argumentation strategies that had been identified as constitutive of the discourse. The perlocutionary effects of these arguments were analysed as products of pragmatic processes based on 'common-sense' reasoning schemes known as topoi. In this study, it is shown that a number of argumentation schemes identified as recurrent in anti-immigration discourse relate to two cognitive mechanisms proposed in evolutionary psychology: cheat detection and avoidance mechanism and epistemic vigilance. Therefore, according to the available literature, the representation of foreign workers, domestic foreign workers, and foreigners aren't much different. All can be labelled under the category of '*othering'*.

Several studies on FDHs in Malaysia concluded that the ineffective enforcement of the laws related to FDHs caused negative media representation. An interesting doctrinal study (Ayub et al., 2016), on the condition of foreign workers in Malaysia, the sources were collected from statutes

and decided law cases, and online newspapers among others. The study found that physical discrimination faced by foreign workers often took place because of the ineffective enforcement of the law, human trafficking and abuse of social power. The discrimination comes in the form of violence, lack of access to justice. The study also confirms that there is a perceptive discrimination of foreign workers and negative perception due to of reports associating them with crime. Therefore, the study is evidence of negative perception and discrimination against foreign workers. The International labor Organization found (2016) that the media coverage of migrant workers in Malaysia and Thailand encourage negative perception towards migrants and describe them as illegals and criminals. Un a series of interviews and focused group interviews conducted with the FDHs and employers in Malaysia and Thailand, it was concluded that there is a negative perception and dissatisfaction from the employers towards FDHs. The report concluded that the absence of the proper state policies to protect the FDHs is the main source of the problem.

Furthermore, *Tenaganita* (Tenaganita, 2019), the NGO calls for a tighter law to protect the FDHs, the domestic helpers are excluded from key protections granted under the law (Tenaganita, 2019). On the other hand, many studies have highlighted the limited freedom of expression in the Malaysian Media. Those studies argued that the voices of the elites are maintained in the news. They support the decisions of the government and social elites and find justifications to their judgement (Wong, 2013).

4. Results

Computer-Assisted Analysis and Findings

The first stage of analysis involves computer assisted analysis which enables the researcher to validate the data qualitatively. It also facilitates the process of coding and systematic retrieval of qualitative data (Bloor, Wood, 2006). For this paper, the researcher analysed the newspaper stories using NVivo 12 Plus. This software enables the research to attain and visualize the board findings. One figure was obtained from NVivo 12 Plus. Fig. 1 shows the overall word cloud of the news excerpts produced by NVivo 12 Plus. It shows how the foreign domestic helpers were represented in the media.

Fig. 1. NVivo 12 Plus word cloud

The word cloud shows that the employer is prioritized and received more attention as compared to the foreign domestic helpers. This is based on the frequency of appearance. In addition, this word cloud also shows the prioritization of procedures in terms of application, registration and website. So, the reporting focuses more on the technical part of the system, a message directed to the employers. Therefore, the focus is on the employer's interest.

Textual Analysis and Findings

All the Malaysia newspapers supported rather celebrated the direct hiring system SOM except the independent media that showed some scepticism before the system was launched in January 2018. The mainstream media represented the direct hiring system from the financial point of view while the alternative represented the same system with curious optimism. This generated two main representations of being the affordable alternative and being the doubtful alternative to the conventional ways of hiring.

The first dominant representation is direct hiring system (SMO) is convenient alternative. Various strategies were employed by the mainstream newspapers such as *The Star, The Sun Daily, News Straits Times* to show support to the new system. They employed a wide range of topoi such as topos of number, and topos of convenience. As for topos of number, it mainly refers to the argument used by the media to support the positive representation of direct hiring. To be more specific, a new system cannot be rejected if it offers convivence to the public. The notion of convivence was expressed by emphasizing two appealing aspects of time consumption and cost reduction. The argument of convivence was reinforced with lots comparisons of cost to the conventional methods agencies' intervention as in the following excerpts:

"*This was indeed very good news. "We hope that the policy will be here for the long run. It is a good change."* ("Direct hire of maids cuts cost and saves time, says Mama", The Sun Daily, 27 October 2017).

"*With SMO, the hiring of a foreign maid becomes faster and affordable. The department's aim with this system is to make things convenient for the public".* ("Hiring of foreign maids online takes 8 days", The Star, 30 December 2017).

"*SMO was created to provide a convenient option for employers"* (Maid Online system receives over 700 applications since Jan 1 launch", *The Star Online,* 2 January 2018).

In addition, the employers as social actors were prominent in these excepts often referred to by plural collective "employers", "we", or "bosses". Although the system does not apply to all employers, yet they are presented as one group. On the other hand, the foreign domestic helpers were supressed from the presentation although the system concerns them too. Yet, the domestic helpers as social actors were not present in an active role. Therefore, the theme of convenience applies to the employer and the readers have no indication whether the system appeals to the domestic helpers or not.

"*Bosses can save as much as 50 % in costs when hiring foreign maids next year.*" ("Group: Halve costs by hiring maids directly", *The Star Online*, 28 October 2017).

"*Employers can save more than 90 % of the cost by recruiting foreign housemaids online*" ("Save 90 %, hire maids online: Zahid", *The Sun Daily*, 1 December 2017).

"*By allowing employers to hire maids without going through agents, this would save a lot of time and money. Almost half of the total cost can be saved*" ("Direct hire of maids cuts cost and saves time, says Mama", *The Sun Daily*, 27 October 2017).

"*Direct hiring of maids would save employers up to 50 % of the cost.*" ("Employers can apply for foreign maid permits online beginning Jan 1", *The Sun Daily*, 01 November 2017).

"*The direct recruitment of foreign maids, which would reduce the burden of cost on employers, showed the government's concern in protecting the interests of all parties, especially working couples who were in need of foreign maid services.*" ("Over 19,000 undocumented migrants arrested since June", *The Sun*, 1 Nov 2017).

As can be seen in these excepts, the event or the issue is presented from the perspective of the employer. The foreign domestic helpers' involvement was not represented in this context. Furthermore, the mainstream newspapers showed tendency of the use of topos of number to disseminate support in the new government hiring procedure. Statistics such as 50 %, 90 %, and almost half where employed as a reoccurring strategy. To attain the persuasive goals, the news agencies employed a set of predications such huge cut of cost, allows more options, faster, affordable, optional not compulsory and reduces the burden. In sum, time and finical convivence were the dominant factors in the presentation.

The second dominant representation is direct hiring system (SMO) as doubtful system. The alternative newspapers such as *Malaysia Kini, The Malaysian Insight* and *Free Malaysia Today* represented the new system from a slightly different perspective. As for Malaysia Kini and Free *Malaysia Today*, they expressed a middle way of cautious optimism towards the new system before it was implemented. But later, the same theme of convenience that was present in the

mainstream media became dominant. So, before January 2018, *Free Malaysia Today* quoted an interview with Tenaganita, an NGO that fights for the rights of migrant workers. In that interview, *Tenaganita* representative was quoted expressing doubts towards the new system employing topos of experience "based on our past experience" concerned about human trafficking as in the following except.

"W*e are quite happy about hearing that the cost to hire domestic workers will be reduced… However, based on our past experience, we see that after such statements are made, it ends up that the job is sourced to different people and we don't want that…it also sometimes opens the door for the trafficking of workers*." ("NGO lauds direct hiring of domestic workers in 9 countries", *Free Malaysia Today*, October 27, 2017).

The except shows intensified expression of approval "*we are quite happy*" that was later mitigated with the clause "*however, based on our past experience*" which expressed doubt. To compare the representation to that of the mainstream media, issues of human trafficking were only brought up in *Free Malaysia Today*. Although human trafficking is one of the major issues faced by the foreign domestic helpers as mentioned earlier yet there was no focus on that. As for *Malaysia Kini*, it expressed doubt towards the official's presentation of the new system.

"*Immigration Department's top officials have refused to elaborate on how its new domestic worker recruitment system might be in conflict with Indonesian and Filipino regulations."* ("Officials dodge queries on likely snag in maid hiring system", *Malaysia Kini*, 29 December 2017).

Malaysia Kini employed *topos of conflicting information and ambiguity* in representation. that is, *Malaysia Kini* represented the officials as trying to avoid the inquiries regarding the conflicting laws of the governments involved. Yet, in another news story, *Malaysia Kini* focused on the theme of cutting cost employing the *topos of financial burden* with positive reference to the government as taking "*proactive measure*".

"*Employers can save more than 90 percent of the cost by recruiting foreign housemaids online… This means the government takes proactive measure to reduce the cost of hiring a foreign maid via direct online hiring."* ("Zahid Save RM16,000, hire maids online", *Malaysia Kini,* 15 December 2017).

Therefore, the time factor was especially reflected in *Free Malaysia Today*'s representation of the system but not in Malaysia Kini. Apart from the interview of Tenaganita that was quoted by *Free Malaysia Today*, the representation also became positive after launching the system. In addition, *Free Malaysia Today* represented the agents implicitly as cheating the employers as in the following except:

"*Now that Malaysians could hire foreign domestic helpers directly under the Online Maid System, there were people try to cheat employers*." ("Employers urged to be vigilant when hiring", *Malaysia Insight,* 31 Dec 2017).

In this excerpt, the news agency insinuated that the employers were unaware of the past dangers of recruiting through agencies. The agents were referred to as "*people*" in "*there were people trying to cheat employers*". Therefore, the agents who are the only different factor in the new system were represented negatively.

5. Conclusion

This research focuses on the representation of the new direct hiring system by the Malaysia media and the perspective and underlying ideologies behind the representation. The representation of the online hiring system (SOM) highlighted a number of changes in the conventional representations. First, the data revealed interesting findings with regards to illegality and the representation of illegals. Illegality being permanent issue was not presented with a neutral tone when the illegal workers were referred to as those "whose visa expired". This is because the new system allows illegal foreign domestic workers to continue working in Malaysia. Unlike the previous literature, illegals were represented negatively (International..., 2016; Idrus, Ismail, 2013). This leads to a conclusion that when the system becomes permissible to a group of people, it is likely that the media reduces the negative tone towards that group. This also reflects the influence of state policies on the media representation.

In addition, it is evident from the analysis that the issue of the new system was addressed from mainly an economic point of view with great focus on cost comparison that was apparent in almost every news story. Also, there was a great focus on the technicality and the procedures of the system rather than the effects of the system on the conditions of foreign domestic helpers who have

series of problems long the past decade such as abuse, exploitation, and isolation (Murty, 2009; Nielsen, 2014; Noor, Shaker, 2017; Khaisunnisa, Anggani, 2020). These problems were highly suppressed in the media. So, the discourse embodied the new system as an isolated case from all previous problems and regulations. This emphasized a general tendency of *Self* group convince which confirms the ideological principles by Van Dijk (Van Dijk, 2001) of dominant discourse that was overwhelmingly in favour of the government point of view by emphasizing on solely the positive aspect of the new system and ignore the negative aspect of the system.

Moreover, *Malaysia Kini* and *Free Malaysia Today* were the only two Malaysian newspaper that exhibit different traits. They constructed the system as doubtful and vague; while the other newspapers represented it with support using various argumentation strategies and positive attributes. This could be attributed to the notion of submission to the government policies and decisions by foregrounding its decisions and backgrounding the reaction of the sending countries where the laws conflict. The system was depicted with cautious optimism.

Furthermore, the direct hiring system also shows a construction of a new social actor's image of the recruitment agencies. Specifically, they were implicitly represented as cheating employers. In the previous literature, the agents were represented as part of the law and an essential part of it.

By examining the rules and regulations between the sending countries and Malaysia in the past decade with regards to foreign domestic helpers, the rules were governed by Memoranda of Understanding between the two governments. These Memoranda of Understanding not only regulate the procedures of recruitments but also serve as a sign of agreement. Yet the new system approached a different path from the past. This could insinuate a more complex future of the bilateral relations between the sending and receiving countries. Accordingly, the media focused on the Malaysian perspective of the issue which marks a major difference to how the previous laws were represented by the media.

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