Framing "Story Rakyat" in Malaysian Elections: Digital Political Communication and Public Engagement

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Abstract

Digital media has reshaped political communication by shifting news reporting from event-centred coverage towards narrative and audience-oriented storytelling. Within this changing environment, human interest framing has become an important strategy for presenting political issues in relatable and engaging ways. This study examines how human interest framing is constructed and used in digital political reporting, especially in election coverage and the portrayal of political figures. A qualitative research design was adopted, using in-depth semi-structured interviews with nine journalists working at social media desks. Data were analysed using thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's (2021) framework. The findings show that human interest framing is used carefully and selectively. For sensitive political issues such as corruption and misconduct, journalists mainly rely on official sources, including the police, Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) and the Election Commission (SPR), to maintain neutrality and avoid reputational harm. In contrast, political leaders, including the Prime Minister are often portrayed through positive personal narratives and everyday public engagements that humanise them and strengthen audience connection. The findings also highlight the growing use of "story rakyat" in election reporting, reflecting a shift towards more localised and relatable storytelling. Overall, human interest framing functions as a balancing mechanism between journalistic neutrality, institutional influence and audience engagement. The study contributes to understanding the evolving role of human interest framing in digital political communication and highlights its implications for journalistic practice in Malaysian election reporting ahead of GE16.

Keywords: *Media framing, Human interest, Malaysian elections, digital communication, public engagement.*

1.0 Introduction

The rise of digital media has significantly transformed political communication and election reporting, shifting journalistic practices from event-centred reporting towards more narrative-driven and audience-oriented approaches (Hamid et al., 2018). Within this transformation, the human interest frame has emerged as a key editorial strategy that enables political content to be presented in more relatable and emotionally engaging forms. Rather than focusing solely on policy debates and institutional politics, contemporary political reporting increasingly incorporates personal experiences, everyday interactions and culturally resonant narratives to enhance audience engagement.

In the context of political journalism, this shift raises important questions regarding the balance between neutrality, narrative construction and institutional influence. Findings from this study indicate that human interest framing is applied in a cautious and highly controlled manner when reporting on political figures. Coverage of sensitive issues such as corruption and misconduct is primarily guided by official sources, including the police, the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) and the Election Commission (SPR). Journalists tend to avoid independent investigation into allegations instead prioritising verified institutional statements to maintain perceived neutrality and avoid reputational harm to political actors. At the same time, political leaders such as the Prime Minister are frequently represented through positive personal narratives, public engagements and symbolic everyday moments, suggesting that human interest framing also functions as a tool of image construction.

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This dual function highlights a broader tension in digital political reporting where human interest content simultaneously supports journalistic neutrality while contributing to strategic image management. Although Howard et al. (2018) examined media framing in political communication, limited attention has been given to how human-interest framing operates within digital news environments in relation to election coverage and the portrayal of political legitimacy. Moreover, the integration of "story rakyat" in election reporting reflects an emerging shift towards more localised, culturally embedded storytelling that extends beyond conventional political narratives.

This study therefore addresses this gap by examining how human interest framing is constructed and operationalised in digital political reporting. It specifically investigates how journalists negotiate between official narratives, neutrality and audience engagement; how political figures are humanised through editorial practices and how "story rakyat" is incorporated into election coverage. By doing so, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of evolving journalistic practices in the digital age and the changing dynamics of political communication in Malaysia.

2.0 Literature

2.1 Framing Theory in Political Communication

The early 2000s marked a significant period of standardisation in framing analysis through the development of empirical frameworks applicable across diverse contexts and issues. Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) introduced an influential model comprising five generic frames: conflict, human interest, economic consequences, morality and responsibility. This framework provided researchers with practical tools to understand how news coverage is structured to influence audience interpretation and opinion, becoming fundamental in the analysis of political events and media reporting. The introduction of generic frames represented a major advancement in framing research, offering standardised measures that could be consistently applied across various topics, media platforms and periods. The conflict frame portrays issues as contests between individuals, groups or institutions by emphasising disagreement, competition and political confrontation. Rather than encouraging fundamental discussion of policy issues, this frame often highlights strategic battles, identifying winners and losers in the political process.

In contrast, the human interest frame shifts attention to the personal dimension of events by focusing on individual experiences, emotions and stories, thereby making complex or abstract issues more relatable and engaging for audiences. The economic consequences frame meanwhile directs attention to the financial implications of policies, decisions or events, frequently emphasising measurable economic costs, benefits or impacts. The morality frame interprets issues through ethical, religious or value-based perspectives, appealing to shared societal norms and principles. Finally, the responsibility frame assigns accountability for the causes of problems or the implementation of solutions to specific actors, including individuals, organisations or governments, thereby shaping public perceptions of blame and responsibility.

These generic frames have been valuable for comparative studies, allowing scholars to analyse how different media outlets frame the same event, observe variations across issue types and track shifts in framing patterns over time. This methodological consistency has enabled the accumulation of empirical knowledge that was previously difficult to achieve through ad hoc analytical approaches. Concurrently, Scheufele (2000) contributed to the theoretical development of framing research by proposing a comprehensive model that examined framing processes at both the individual and media levels as in Figure 1. His work was crucial in distinguishing between frames in communication (how issues are presented by media) and frames in thought (how individuals internally structure and interpret issues).

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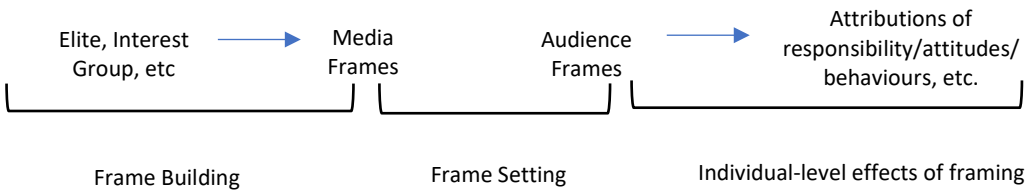


Figure 1. Overview of Framing Research
Source: Scheufele (2000)

Scheufele's (2000) overview of framing research emerged as a crucial intervention in a field that was suffering from theoretical fragmentation and conceptual uncertainty. His work identified that framing research was "characterized by theoretical and empirical vagueness" due to "the lack of a commonly shared theoretical model." The framework provided a systematic structure by distinguishing between frame building (how frames are constructed in media content), frame setting (how media frames influence audience frames) and individual-level effects (how frames shape audience attitudes and behaviours). This linear progression offered researchers a clear roadmap for understanding the framing process from elite influence through media production to audience impact. The theoretical contribution of Scheufele's framework was significant in clarifying the boundaries between framing and related media effects theories like agenda-setting and priming. By providing distinct phases of the framing process, the model helped researchers identify where their work fit within the broader landscape of media effects research. Scheufele and Tewksbury (2003) recommended "redirecting framing research away from confounded emphasis frames toward equivalence frames in the original tradition," suggesting ongoing debates about the precise mechanisms of framing effects that Scheufele's work helped to structure and organize.

However, while Scheufele's linear model provided essential theoretical framework for the field, its assumptions reflect the media landscape of the early 2000s and may not fully capture contemporary communication dynamics. The framework's unidirectional flow from elite groups through media to audiences doesn't account for the fragmented, interactive nature of digital media environments where audiences can create, share, and contest frames independently.

2.2 Public Engagement in Political Communication

Public engagement refers to how institutions, organisations and political actors communicate and interact with the public to encourage dialogue, participation and mutual understanding (Thago, 2024). Rather than treating people as passive recipients of information, public engagement recognises them as active participants who can respond, interpret and contribute to public communication. Kang (2014) further explains that engagement involves cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions, suggesting that meaningful engagement goes beyond simply receiving or reacting to information.

The concept reflects a broader shift from one-way communication towards dialogue and reciprocity. This shift has been strengthened by digital media, which allow people to comment, share, discuss and even produce content alongside institutions and media organisations. However, online interaction does not necessarily constitute meaningful engagement or political participation. As Hoffman (2012) points out, online political communication and political participation are related but distinct, highlighting the difference between discussing politics and actively taking part in political processes.

In political communication, public engagement reflects the changing relationship between political actors, the media and citizens. Social media allow politicians and political institutions to communicate directly with the public, while citizens can respond to, reinterpret and circulate political messages. News organisations also play an important role by deciding which political issues, actors and social experiences receive public attention. Public engagement is therefore shaped not only by how audiences respond, but also by what the media choose to communicate, how issues are framed and whose voices are made visible.

In Malaysia, digital media have become increasingly important to political communication and engagement since the 2008 General Election. Research has linked online media use with political

activism and highlighted the growing role of digital platforms in political communication and participation (Willnat et al., 2013). Their importance became even more evident during GE14 and GE15, as social media provided additional spaces for citizens to access, discuss and circulate political information. At the same time, the digital environment has raised concerns about misinformation, credibility and the quality of political discourse, showing that greater connectivity does not necessarily result in meaningful engagement.

Against this backdrop, public engagement provides a useful lens for understanding contemporary political reporting in Malaysia. News stories that highlight citizens, communities, local places and everyday experiences can broaden political communication beyond political elites and institutional statements. In this context, *story rakyat* can be understood as an engagement-oriented form of political framing that connects electoral events with people's lived experiences. By bringing ordinary voices and experiences into election reporting, such stories give greater visibility to citizens and create opportunities for audiences to identify with, discuss and engage with political issues beyond the actions and statements of political elites.

3.0 Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research design to examine how human-interest framing is constructed in digital political reporting. A qualitative approach is appropriate because it allows for an in-depth exploration of journalists' practices, interpretations and decision-making processes in news production. As Creswell (2022) stated, qualitative research is useful for understanding how individuals make sense of social and professional contexts in their natural settings. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with nine journalists working at the social media desk of a news organisation. The participants, as shown in Table 1.1, were selected through purposive sampling because they were directly involved in producing and managing digital news content, particularly political and election-related reporting. This ensured that the participants had relevant professional experience and knowledge of editorial practices and framing strategies. Data collection continued until the ninth interview, when responses began to repeat previously identified issues and no substantially new themes emerged. This was considered sufficient to achieve data saturation for the study (Esa et al., 2025).

TABLE 1
Editorial Demographic Information

Code	Gender	Organisation	Education	Years of Service
B1	M	Harian Metro	Diploma	9
B2	F	Awani	Degree	9
B3	F	NST	Degree	10
B4	F	Sinar Harian	Degree	8
B5	F	Berita Harian	Degree	7
B6	F	Utusan Malaysia	Diploma	16
B7	F	Bernama	Master (MA)	20
B8	F	RTM	Degree	21
B9	M	Awani	Degree	9

The semi-structured interview format allowed for both structure and flexibility. While core questions guided the discussion around topics such as political reporting practices, handling of sensitive issues and the use of human interest content, journalists were also given space to elaborate on their experiences. This approach helped generate rich and detailed accounts of newsroom practices and editorial decision-making. All interview data were analysed using thematic analysis, following the

approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021). Thematic analysis was selected because it is a systematic yet flexible method for identifying patterns of meaning within qualitative data.

The analysis began with repeated reading of the interview transcripts to gain familiarity with the data. This was followed by initial coding, where meaningful segments related to framing practices and editorial strategies were identified. These codes were then grouped into broader patterns, which were refined into potential themes. The themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data and were distinct from one another. Finally, clear thematic categories were defined and named and supporting quotations were selected to illustrate each theme.

Through this process, key themes such as *Humanising Political Figures* and *Story Rakyat in Election Reporting* were developed, reflecting how journalists incorporate human interest framing within digital political communication. To ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings, the study used careful cross-comparison of responses across participants. Consistency in emerging patterns was examined across all interviews to strengthen interpretive validity. In addition, direct quotations were used to preserve participants' original meanings and to maintain transparency in the

4.0 Findings

4.1 Humanising Political Figures

The findings show that the human interest frame is used cautiously when reporting political figures. The journalists interviewed explained that sensitive issues, especially on corruption, misconduct and scandals are handled carefully. Rather than adding interpretation or making allegations more prominent, journalists generally rely on statements from official and authoritative sources. This approach allows sensitive political issues to be reported while reducing the risk of exaggeration or unnecessary damage to the reputation of political figures.

B1 explains that journalists are more cautious when reporting issues involving political candidates, specifically allegations of corruption or misconduct. According to B1, statements from recognised authorities such as the police, the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) and the Election Commission (SPR) are given priority:

> *"If the issues are related to the candidate, we tend to act more cautiously to avoid escalating those issues. However, if statements are issued by the party leader, the police, MACC (Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission), or SPR (Election Commission), we will highlight them. Our goal is not to discredit the candidate to the public."*

This finding shows that official sources play an important role in the reporting of sensitive political issues. It is also consistent with Malaysian research on journalistic practices, which emphasises the importance of verifying information before it is used in news production (Baharom et al., 2023). In the present study, the use of authoritative sources appears to provide journalists with a basis for reporting sensitive allegations more carefully and accurately.

B2 provides a similar relation. She explains that journalists report corruption and scandal based on information provided by official authorities rather than investigating or exposing the issues themselves:

> *"Ermm… In my opinion, we don't play with the issues. Not too much, la, macam scandal rasuah tu ada, macam contoh Bung Mokhtar apa semua tu. We report what the authorities say, for example, the court's decision. If the court says this or that, we just report that. But we don't investigate or expose corruption or scandals related to individuals. We just report accurately according to the authorities. For example, if SPRM arrests someone, we report that, but we don't hide it or fail to report it because of the person's position in government. We report it but follow the authorities' orders, including SPRM, the court, and the police."*

Together, the justifications of B1 and B2 indicate that sensitive political issues are not necessarily avoided but are reported based on information released by recognised authorities.

The journalists' emphasis is on reporting what has been officially stated rather than adding their own interpretation. This suggests that caution and source attribution are important considerations when reporting issues that could affect the reputation of political figures.

While sensitive issues are reported thoughtfully, the findings also show that political figures can be humanised through positive and relatable aspects of their public lives. According to Parmelee et al. (2023), personalisation allows political figures to be presented beyond their formal political roles and can make them more relatable to audiences. This can include their public activities, religious practices, interactions with citizens and selected family-related moments.

B4 yet explains that the agency covers political leaders through their achievements, public activities and interactions with the public. She gives the following example:

> *"Sometimes, we cover achievements or activities. For example, for PMX, we cover his visits to various places and his Friday prayers at different mosques. We also cover his interactions with the public, among other things."*

This shows that human interest coverage does not necessarily focus on the private lives of political figures. Instead, journalists may use selected aspects of their public and everyday activities to present a more familiar image of political leaders. This finding is consistent with Parmelee et al. (2023) who found that personalisation can help make politicians more relatable to social media audiences. It is also relevant to the Malaysian context, where Rashid and Fernandez (2024) found that social media is increasingly used to construct political images through personal elements such as family relationships and religious identity.

The same pattern can be seen in B5's view of political coverage during sensitive periods, including a hung Parliament. B5 explains that the Prime Minister could be presented through more personal narratives, including a fatherly image. Such coverage moves beyond the leader's formal political role and introduces a more familiar identity. In this sense, human interest stories can make political figures appear more relatable and may also contribute to a more favourable presentation of the figure.

However, the findings suggest that this personalisation is selective. B6 and B7 explain that personal content is not used simply to attract attention. Instead, it is selected when it fits the broader content or narrative. This is important because Malaysian digital journalism operates in an environment where news organisations compete for audience attention. Lim and Wilson (2024) found that clickbait and sensationalised headlines have become part of the competitive dynamics of online journalism. The opinions of B6 and B7 therefore suggest that, despite the wider pressure to attract audience attention, political content is still subject to editorial considerations.

B6 explains that personal moments involving the Prime Minister and his family may sometimes be included in coverage. However, she views such content as part of a broader public relations and image projection effort:

> *"Sometimes, media pick up videos of the PM playing with his grandchildren and so on. This will also be a sub-topic for projection. Actually, it's just PR. For us, it's important for the government, but only for the PM."*

B7 similarly explains that the media does not actively search for information about the private lives of political figures. Instead, personal content is selected when it fits the existing narrative. This suggests that family-related content is not necessarily treated as a separate area of reporting but may be used when it is relevant to the way a political figure is being presented.

The findings also show that the digital media team considers the overall balance and variety of content when deciding what to publish. B8 explains that the team does not repeatedly publish stories about the same political figure or issue when there is little new information. She elaborates:

> *"Honestly, we are just in the digital media team, posting whatever comes out on the website. So, if there are more stories about Bung Mokhtar, for example, that's what you'll see. However, if there are only two or three stories about him and nothing else, and if it's repetitive, we won't post it. For us, it's about not over posting just because of one topic. We want to provide variety in our content. Our approach isn't really*

> *about agenda setting. It's more about avoiding trouble with the content we post on social media. We try to minimize anything contentious or anything that could be misinterpreted as biased towards someone or something. However, if most of the stories are about BN, that's what we have and that's what we post. It's not necessarily about being pro-BN; it's just that we report what the government says. When the government provides information to the PIO, it's presented as what the BN government has done. So, it's not about interpreting our reporting as pro-BN; it's simply reporting what the government communicates."*

B8's response indicates that content selection is influenced by the need to provide variety, avoid repetition and minimise potentially contentious content. This suggests that human interest coverage is not determined solely by the characteristics of individual political figures, but forms part of a wider editorial process in which journalists consider the type, frequency and possible interpretation of content by audiences. This is consistent with Kumar and Ahmad (2025), who found that Malaysian journalists recognise the importance of social media for audience engagement while remaining cautious about issues such as privacy, confirmation bias and ethical considerations in newsroom practice. In the present study, B8's emphasis on avoiding repetitive or potentially biased content similarly shows that social media decisions are shaped by considerations beyond simply whether a story is newsworthy.

B9 further supports this finding by describing the coverage as mainly informational. He explains that the media does not aim to construct a character or encourage audiences to support or oppose a political figure:

> *"We don't build a character or attack or invite support. That's just my opinion; it's just general."*

Overall, the findings show two main ways in which the human interest frame is used in political reporting. First, sensitive issues such as corruption and misconduct are handled cautiously through official and authoritative sources. Second, political figures are humanised through selected public, religious, family and everyday narratives that can make them more relatable to audiences. However, these personal elements are not presented continuously or without editorial consideration. They are selected when they fit the broader content and narrative. Therefore, the human interest frame in this study can be understood as a selective and controlled form of personalisation. The journalists do not completely avoid sensitive political issues, but they rely heavily on official information when reporting allegations. At the same time, they use selected personal and public moments to humanise political figures. This combination of caution in sensitive reporting and selectivity in personalisation reflects the way the digital media team manages political content within its existing editorial practices.

4.2 "Story Rakyat" and Election Reporting

The analysis of interviews reveals a notable shift in reporting strategies, especially the growing inclusion of "story rakyat" within political and election coverage. This development reflects an evolving journalistic approach that moves away from a purely political focus towards a more engaging and audience-centred narrative style.

The data indicate a strategic adjustment in digital media reporting practices, as highlighted by three of the nine informants. B1's emphasis on human-interest content during election-related events, such as the Sungai Bakap by-election, illustrates this shift. Instead of focusing solely on political speeches and campaign activities, coverage also includes lighter and more relatable content. For example, B1 describes how, alongside standard reporting on political figures and events, the agency also covered a football match involving political parties. This broader content strategy aims to present a more holistic and relatable view of the election process, engaging audiences beyond traditional political narratives. She said:

> *"During a series of by-elections, we frame the story rakyat instead of stressing political fights. That's what people call human interest stories, like recently during the elections at Sungai Bakap. There were election stories, the Prime Minister attended and*

> *everything was covered, but at the same time, our reporter went to the football match between PN and PH. That had never happened before, right? So, we did that."*

Additionally, B6 further illustrates the role of human-interest storytelling in election coverage. By highlighting the experience of an elderly voter who continues to practise traditional voting methods, she shows how individual experiences can add emotional and cultural dimensions to election reporting. Such personal responses can make broader political events more relatable by connecting them to the everyday experiences of citizens. Boukes et al. (2015) similarly found that human-interest framing commonly uses personal exemplars to make political issues more accessible and relatable to audiences. In the Malaysian context, the increasing use of online news as a source of political information also highlights the importance of presenting political issues in ways that are meaningful to audiences (Alivi, 2023). Thus, incorporating individual experiences into election reporting allows political events to be presented not only through political actors and institutional processes, but also through the lived experiences and cultural practices of ordinary citizens. According to B6:

> *"Then there is a story about this makcik who was following the reporter during PRN Sungai Bakap. Following the minister's campaign. She said, "I can't wait to vote and wear my kebaya." After covering the event, the reporter went back and covered the makcik's story. Then we found out that this makcik never missed voting. In the old days, people used to wear beautiful clothes to vote because it was a big event. Stories like that resonate with the people. They respond to that more than any other story. In that area, she visited three places: Kedah, Penang and Perak. So, you sit there, eat at the shop, people are around and it turns into a human-interest story. So, she did that. We focused on those stories. Then there was another story: people there eat prawns like chicken. So, we follow the people's stories. If we find something that needs highlighting, we cover it."*

B7's observations reinforce the strategic importance of human-interest content within the context of social media reporting. The integration of personal and localised stories during the Sarawak State Election (PRN), alongside conventional political coverage, reflects the adaptation of news practices to a digital environment in which audience engagement has become increasingly important. This is consistent with Kumar and Ahmad (2025), who found that Malaysian journalists viewed social media as an important channel for engaging audiences while remaining attentive to ethical and professional considerations. B7's responses also illustrates how media organisations adapted their reporting practices during periods of external constraints, such as the Movement Control Order (MCO), when audiences became increasingly dependent on online news platforms and social-media channels for information (Lim & Loh, 2022). In the Sarawak context, the importance of social media is further evident in the diverse patterns of platform use among voters, with Facebook remaining widely used while younger audiences increasingly use Instagram and TikTok for political information and engagement (Akobiarek & Puyok, 2024). These developments suggest that the use of localised and human-interest content can form part of a broader newsroom strategy to maintain relevance and audience engagement in changing media environments. Rather than replacing conventional political reporting, such content complements it by presenting political events through more contextual and locally relevant narratives.

> *"During PRN Sarawak, for social media, we were talking about Sarawak instead of focusing on politicians; we were talking about Sarawak. What is there? Where is the place? We showed the Batang Ai dam, so indeed, our followers increased by 40% and more than half of them are from Sabah Sarawak. And then, there were many comments saying thank you to the media for showing my village. No one knows everything. So that's how I realized that wow, they want this."*

The incorporation of human-interest stories in political reporting, as highlighted by B1, B6 and B7, reflects a clear shift in journalistic practice. While traditional coverage has largely centred on political events and key figures, the current approach seeks to broaden this focus by including narratives that

capture individual experiences and cultural contexts. This development not only humanises political events but also strengthens the connection between media organisations and their audiences.

The insights from the informants collectively emphasise the effectiveness of combining conventional political reporting with human-interest storytelling. Such integration enhances both the relatability and impact of news content, aligning it more closely with audiences' expectations for engaging and culturally meaningful information. The examples provided by B1 and B6 demonstrate how personal stories can enrich political narratives by adding emotional and social depth, while B7's observations further emphasise the importance of adapting content strategies for social media environments to maximise audience engagement.

Overall, the strategic use of human-interest stories in political reporting signals a broader transformation in journalistic practice. This shift aims to produce more layered and engaging narratives that resonate with audiences, thereby improving the effectiveness and reach of news coverage. It also reflects the ongoing evolution of media in the digital age, where storytelling, audience engagement, and contextual relevance play an increasingly central role in shaping journalistic output.

5.0 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that human interest framing has become an increasingly important feature of digital political reporting in election-related coverage. Rather than functioning merely as a narrative or entertainment device, it operates as a structured journalistic practice through which political events, political figures and citizens are made more relatable to audiences. The findings identify two interconnected forms of framing. First, political figures are represented through cautious reporting of sensitive issues, with reliance on authoritative sources such as the police, the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) and the Election Commission (SPR), alongside selected personal and everyday narratives that humanise political leaders. Second, the use of "story rakyat" expands election reporting beyond political elites by foregrounding citizens, communities, local places and everyday experiences. Together, these practices demonstrate how human interest framing can coexist with responsibility-oriented reporting, producing political narratives that are simultaneously institutionally grounded and audience-oriented.

The findings also extend existing media framing scholarship by demonstrating that framing in digital political communication is not adequately understood as a fixed set of generic frames applied to news content. Semetko and Valkenburg's (2000) human interest and responsibility frames remain useful for identifying the dominant orientations of political reporting; however, the present findings suggest that these frames increasingly operate in combination rather than in isolation. Human interest may be embedded within responsibility-oriented reporting when journalists rely on official sources to explain sensitive political issues, while personalisation and "story rakyat" introduce everyday experiences into electoral narratives. This suggests that generic frames should be understood as flexible and overlapping configurations that can be adapted to the editorial and platform-specific conditions of digital journalism.

More importantly, the findings contribute to Scheufele's (1999) framing process model by highlighting the increasingly interactive and platform-dependent nature of frame building. Scheufele conceptualised framing as a process involving frame building, frame setting, individual-level processing and feedback between audiences and journalists. The present study indicates that, within contemporary digital political communication, frame building is shaped not only by journalistic routines and institutional sources but also by considerations of content variety, audience reactions, platform visibility and the perceived relevance of localised stories. The emergence of "story rakyat" through place-based and community-centred narratives illustrates how journalists respond to audience interests while simultaneously constructing the salience of particular people, places and experiences. In this sense, framing in the digital environment is better understood as a negotiated process involving journalists, institutions, platforms and audiences rather than as a predominantly linear newsroom-to-audience process.

This study therefore proposes that human interest framing in hybrid political communication operates through two complementary movements; personalisation of political actors and localisation of political events. Personalisation brings political figures closer to audiences through selected everyday and humanising narratives, while localisation brings electoral politics closer to citizens by connecting political events to communities, places, cultural practices and lived experiences. The concept of "story

rakyat" is significant in this respect because it demonstrates how election reporting can move beyond elite-centred political narratives without abandoning the political context of an election. The contribution is therefore not that human interest framing has replaced conventional political frames, but that digital journalism enables different frames and narrative practices to intersect, circulate and be reshaped through audience-oriented editorial decisions.

The findings further position public engagement as an important dimension of this transformation. "Story rakyat" creates opportunities for audiences to recognise their communities and everyday experiences within political reporting, while social media platforms enable audiences to respond, share and circulate such narratives. However, audience visibility should not automatically be equated with meaningful engagement. Greater interaction, reach or audience response does not necessarily indicate deeper participation or deliberation. The findings therefore point to the importance of distinguishing between content designed to attract audience attention and journalism that facilitates informed public engagement. This distinction is particularly relevant in election coverage, where personalised and emotionally resonant narratives need to remain connected to substantive political issues, policy debates and electoral accountability.

In preparation for the 16th General Election (GE16), several practical implications follow. First, media organisations should strengthen transparency in editorial decision-making, particularly when political reporting relies heavily on official sources. Verification remains essential, but greater clarity regarding sourcing, framing and editorial context can further strengthen public trust. Second, human interest and "story rakyat" should complement rather than displace substantive reporting on policies, governance and electoral accountability. Third, digital newsrooms should establish clear ethical boundaries between public relations material, political image construction and journalistic storytelling, particularly when reporting personal or lifestyle-related content involving political figures. Fourth, platform-specific strategies should be accompanied by accuracy, context, diversity and inclusive representation, especially when localised stories are used to increase audience visibility and interaction. Finally, journalists should retain sufficient editorial autonomy to investigate issues of public interest while maintaining responsible reporting standards.

Therefore, this study suggests that the theoretical understanding of political framing needs to relate more explicitly to the hybrid and interactive conditions of contemporary digital journalism. The findings do not challenge the explanatory value of existing framing models; rather, they extend them by showing how generic frames are combined with personalisation, localisation and audience-oriented storytelling within platform-dependent news environments. Human interest framing in Malaysian election reporting is therefore best understood not simply as a way of making politics more appealing, but as a dynamic process through which institutions, journalists, political actors, citizens and digital platforms collectively shape what becomes visible and meaningful in political communication. In this environment, effective public engagement depends not only on attracting audiences, but on ensuring that greater relatability and interaction remain anchored in journalistic independence, contextual accuracy and democratic accountability.

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