

Trust and politics in risk communication: Discourse analysis on radio frequency (RF) exposure in Malaysia

Prasana Rosaline Fernandez

University of Malaya, Malaysia

Surinderpal Kaur

University of Malaya, Malaysia

Lean Mei Li

Independent researcher

Ng Kwan Hoong

University of Malaya, Malaysia

Abstract

Radio frequency (RF) exposure from the proliferation of telecommunication structures in Malaysia triggers concerns as growing numbers of people claim that RF emission is a health hazard. Effective risk communication is needed to address this misperception but most risk communication programmes fail because of public distrust. This is worrying as trust is a vital ingredient in communicating risk. As such, this study uses critical discourse studies and Candlin and Crichton's focal theme of trust framework to examine how the politician's discourse on RF exposure affects trust. The data is from four (4) face-to-face semi-structured interviews with politicians as they are answerable to their constituents' protests. The findings reveal that politicians use blame avoidance and legitimization tactics to counter or reject the views of the 'other' in order to build trustworthy relationships with the local communities. But the politicians'

contradictory views on RF erode public trust and impede effective risk communication.

Keywords: Risk communication, health discourse, radio frequency, politicians, trust

1. Introduction

Radio frequency (RF) emissions from telecommunication base stations and rooftop antennas are deemed dangerous by several quarters, as there have been no conclusive answers to their long-term health effect to-date (Dohle *et al.*, 2012). This uncertainty is aggravated by the scientific community's conflicting views on RF (Yasui, 2013, p. 937). According to Cousin and Siegrist (2010), consumers generally enjoy the convenience of mobile communication but are opposed to having mobile phone base station sites near their neighbourhood. They affirm that consumers prefer these telecommunication structures to be located far away from living areas. Consequently, the construction of telecommunication structures is a bone of contention in many areas where people live or work.

Nonetheless, there is a global rise in the use of mobile telecommunication devices. In Malaysia the broadband penetration rate increased, from 67.1 percent in 2013 to 70.2 percent in 2014. The cellular telephone penetration rate rose from 143.8 percent in 2013 to 148.5 percent in 2014 (Malaysia Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC), 2014). According to M. Hakim of the MCMC (personal communication, February 22, 2012), the steady rise in the number of users requires an increasing number of telecommunication structures to ensure optimal coverage, especially in developed urban areas. This has resulted in increase of telecommunication structures in the environment, such as antennas on roofs or base station structures placed near public premises.

M. Hakim of MCMC (personal communication, February 22, 2012) also stated that many residents and activist groups in Malaysia are campaigning against the construction of these structures in residential and developed areas like schools.

The telecommunication companies (telcos) on the other hand require the construction of these structures to keep up with public demand as well as to provide good service. Both the MCMC and the telcos have attempted to assure the public that the RF radiation levels are acceptably low and within the international public exposure guidelines; as set by the International Commission on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection (INCIRP) and the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE). However, a sizeable segment of the population is sceptical of those assurances.

There is obviously risk of communication failure as people do not accept the assurances of the authorities. The politicians play a role in this, as the stand they take on RF-related issues suggests there is reproduction of ideologies. van Dijk (1998) claims that ideology is a “self-serving schema for the representation of Us and Them as social groups” (p. 69). The ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ representation impedes trust and openness, because the legitimising and delegitimising of each other’s roles and actions uncovers power struggles and inequalities. Consequently, one of the reasons behind the failure of risk communication initiatives is the public’s scepticism towards the motives of politicians (Petts, Horlick-Jones & Murdock, 2001).

Politicians are an important stakeholder in risk communication programmes related to environmental hazards. As the constituents’ elected representatives, they are entrusted with policy-making and legislative power. Most politicians often take the moral high ground in order to ensure legitimacy for themselves; hence most risk communication programmes fail because of “polarized views, controversy, and overt conflict” (see Slovic, 1999, p. 689).

The purpose of this study therefore is to examine the discourse on RF by politicians in Malaysia and how it influences trust in risk communication initiatives. The research specifically looks at how the politicians represent themselves and their opponents in the discourse on RF emission from telecommunication structures and how this impacts trust in risk communication.

2. Risk, Trust and Mistrust

The basic understanding of risk differs within institutions, societies and among lay people (Hampel, 2006, p. 5). With such uncertainty, risk, specifically health risk, receives overwhelming attention and is often “front-page news” (Renn *et al.*, 2011, p. 2). The perceived risk from RF radiation is multifaceted and mainly comes from the fact that the word ‘radiation’ itself has a negative connotation (see Kleef *et al.*, 2010). The public generally enjoys the convenience of mobile communication but hence are opposed to having base station sites near their neighbourhoods (Cousin & Siegrist, 2010)

Consequently, effective risk communication involves “stimulating interest in environmental health issues, increasing public knowledge, and involving citizens in decision making” (see Trettin & Musham, 2000, p. 410). Trust between various stakeholders is vital, as Trettin and Musham (2000, p. 422) and Leiss (1995, p. 687) highlight that risk communication involves numerous stakeholders; who will frequently have good reason for mistrusting each other because each wants to win. They add that this causes each stakeholder group to promote their own self-interest, in order to weaken the credibility of their opponents. Accordingly, Leiss (1995, p. 686) illustrates risk communication as an anxious game of poker among competing stakeholders, in which each faction guards their own interests by employing “tactics and strategies (including ‘dirty’ ones)”.

In terms of environmental risk communication, the ratings of confidence in the government in general have eroded considerably in the last thirty years; this is a barrier in risk communication efforts (see Riedlinger & Rea, 2015). As a result, most risk messages from government authorities are viewed with suspicion (McComas, 2003, p. 169). Likewise, Markon, Crowe and Lemyre (2013) highlight that the public feels that government authorities have vested interests in risk messages. As such, they generally view risk governance as being politically and economically motivated.

Risk communicators are hence viewed as more trustworthy and credible if they successfully argue for a position against their own self-interest, or otherwise defy a negative stereotype; in this case the negative opinion of politicians. Blame avoidance is planned intentionally in political disputes and persuasive discourses, to create positive self-presentations and negative other-presentations (Hansson, 2015). Politicians also choose to take full responsibility for their actions by “trying to present events or circumstances in question in a more positive light by employing strategies of legitimation” (Hansson, 2015, p. 303). Likewise, Cabrejas-Peñuelas and Díez-Prados (2014) state there is tendency for politicians to criticise the opponent using negative evaluations, while simultaneously presenting a positive self-image of themselves via positive evaluation.

Politicians “establish a voice of authority and power” to appeal to the public (Hendriksen, 2011, p. 186) and their voice is tactfully “crafted” to “promote, protect and legitimate their power” (Boussofara-Omar, 2011, p. 73). Similarly, Reisigl (2008) highlights that politics revolves around strategies to advance political interest like “the dissensual positioning against others” (p. 246). Reisigl maintains that these conflicts between political actors are all in a bid to fight for followers and acquire power.

The role of the politicians in this contestation is significant, as the current political situation in Malaysia has contributed to a situation where anxious politicians are driven by underlying political, social and economic intentions in communicating risk. The political landscape in Malaysia shifted dramatically in the 2008 general election. The Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition which has been in government since Independence in 1957, suffered the worst election result since Independence, losing its two-thirds majority (Ufen, 2009). Subsequently in the 2012 election, the opposition gained control of the two most developed and richest states of Penang and Selangor winning 51 percent of the popular vote; and seven more seats than it did in 2008 (“Tawdry victory,” 2013). This suggests that each faction needs the public’s support for political survival, thus their decisions on RF

emissions may take a more popular stand rather than one based on sound reasoning.

3. Methodology

3.1 Framework

The theoretical framework for this research is based on critical discourse studies (CDS). CDS is relevant to this study as Sarangi and Candlin (2003, p. 116) affirm that studies on risk communication require discourse analytical work to understand the meaning behind the discourse; as well as the accountability, motives, role-relationships and ideologies of the stakeholders. CDS aims at making transparent the influences between discourse practices, social practices and social structures that might be opaque to the layperson (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Similarly, Fairclough, *et al.* (2011, p. 357) attest that CDS is a well-established field in social sciences which is a “problem-oriented interdisciplinary research movement” that incorporates a variety of approaches with different theoretical models, research methods and agenda. As such, this study borrows the concepts of blame avoidance, legitimisation and self-other representations from CDS.

Politicians and government officials use blame-avoiding strategies to evade the backlash from the public (Wenzelburger, 2014). Blame-avoidance strategies are commonly practised to avoid responsibility and liability. As such, Hansson (2015) is of the view that “blaming and denying are strategically planned and serve positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation” (p. 299). Relatedly in studies on discourse analysis, Chilton (2004, p. 46) maintains that policy debates in the mass media see political actors legitimising their action through positive self-representation and delegitimising the other through negative other-representation; using “ideas of difference and boundaries, and speech acts of blaming, accusing, insulting, etc”. Similarly, van Dijk (2006) highlights that “members of in-groups typically emphasise their own good deeds and properties and the bad ones of the out-group” (p. 115) to succeed in the “manipulation” of others (p. 359).

Additionally, the study employs categories from Candlin and Crichton's (2013) focal theme of trust, as the focus of this research centres on how discourse on RF by Malaysian politicians influences trust in risk communication initiatives. Candlin and Crichton (2013) believe that trust can be "categorised and appraised" through "descriptive, interpretative and explanatory analysis of discursive practices" (p. 10) that occur in natural and common encounters. The twelve (12) categories in their focal theme of trust framework are characterisation, expertise, risk, responsibility, purpose, identity, relationships, capacity, credibility, recognition, agency and membership. This framework focuses on trust in relation to the actions of individuals in particular contexts. It is thus relevant to this study, as it provides an avenue to understand the conflicts and contestations of politicians, in their discussion of RF and how it aids or impedes trust. Figure 3.1 illustrates this approach.

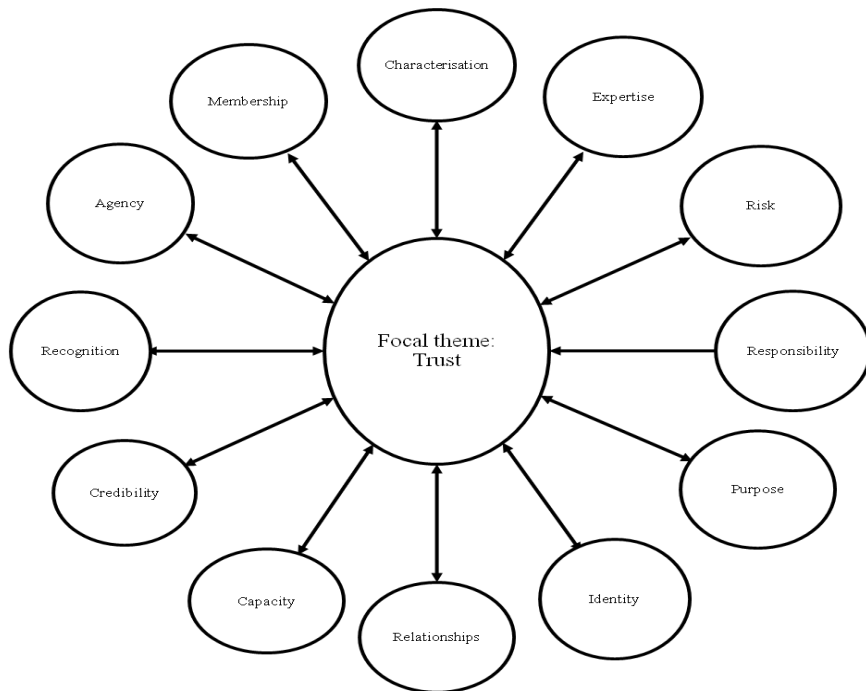


Figure 3.1: Focal theme: Trust. Reprinted from *Discourses of Trust* (p. 11), by C.N. Candlin and J. Crichton, 2013, Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan.

3.2 Analytical Systems and Categories

A content analysis approach is used based on Candlin and Crichton's (2013) conceptual framework on the focal theme of trust. A pilot test was conducted on samples of interviews with politicians. A sample each was taken from the ruling state government and opposition stakeholder groups. The preliminary analysis of the data revealed that the most salient and frequent categories are membership, agency and responsibility; hence these categories are used as the coding categories. These categories are also significant and meaningful when discussing trust and politics, as they provide insights into the actions and discourses of politicians. The categories are briefly described based on Candlin's and Crichton's (2013) explanation:

- Membership looks at the nature of groups and the significance of their inclusion and exclusion into societies of trust, specifically pertaining to risks, costs and benefits and the identities portrayed through such association. Control of self and others is possible through membership, based on proficiency, capability and status of affiliation.
- Agency focuses on personal, institutional and societal influence in gaining or losing trust.
- Responsibility is associated with accountability, liability and obligation involved in the communication of trust.

The examination will not restrict itself to how the agency gains and loses trust but will expand to include how the agency itself can be seen as legitimate or not legitimate within the context of building trust.

3.3 Data

Data was obtained from four (4) face-to-face semi-structured interviews with politicians, from both the ruling state government and opposition. This instrument

is especially applicable to research which involves high-level bureaucrats and members of a community who have time constraints (Bernard, 2006, p. 212). The questions covered values, beliefs, behaviour, formal and informal roles, relationships, emotions and encounters of the interviewee or the political organisations they represented; on the topic of study in order to enable comparability.

A purposive sampling method is used in selecting the sample, based on advice given by the MCMC and experts on who is appropriate to be interviewed and included as part of the sample for this study. The politicians who are members of parliament from the states of Penang and Selangor were chosen, as according to M. Hakim of MCMC (personal communication, February 22, 2012) these geographic locations had the most complaints from the residents on RF-related issues. Of these interviewees, two politicians were from the ruling state governments of Penang and Selangor, while the remaining two were from the opposition. This is to ensure that politicians from both sides of the divide are equally represented. The ruling state governments of Penang and Selangor are the opposition at the Federal level. The profile of each politician is as follows:

Politician A is from the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), a component party of the Barisan Nasional, the ruling coalition at the Federal level but which forms the opposition in the state of Penang. He is the MCA secretary for a constituency where politicians incurred the wrath of residents who are very vocal on the building of telecommunication structures.

Politician B is from Gerakan, a component of Barisan Nasional and like the MCA is the opposition in the state of Penang. He is a medical doctor by profession and advisor to an NGO which campaigns for RF limits to be lowered and for residential areas and schools to be free of telecommunication structures.

Politician C is from the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and a member of parliament in the state government of Penang. He is instrumental for driving the Wireless @ Penang initiative, which is working towards providing free Wi-Fi service to all residents in the state of Penang.

Politician D is from the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and a member of parliament in the state government of Selangor. This politician's constituency is also another cradle of dissent, with numerous protests by residents on the location of telecommunication structures.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section is divided into three (3) sub-sections: membership, agency and responsibility as these classifications are used as analytical categories

4.1 Membership

Membership investigates the nature of groups and the impact such groups have on trust. Politician A ranks his role as being "merely a political worker" rather than an elected member of parliament. This is an attempt to gain trust and membership with the residents by backgrounding his position in the political party. The categorisation of being "merely a political worker" constructs an impression of holding less power in the political party. He demonstrates his commitment by becoming the mouthpiece of the affected residents and pleading to the State Government to tear down illegal towers. The articulation implies that he is trying to create a trustworthy membership with the affected public, by associating himself with the cause and indirectly giving prominence to his political party as a beneficial alliance to help solve their problem.

Politician B describes himself as a medical doctor and he also categorises himself as a concerned parent: "I'm interested in this field because I'm a doctor. I have experienced the impact of RF on human health. It happened to my own daughter". The repeated use of the pronouns 'I' and 'my' shows personalisation and demonstrates his inclusion and connection to communities of trust; such as the medical community and parenthood. However, he backgrounds the fact that he is a politician, saying "...once you tell you're a politician, a common prejudice will arise and your credibility and reliability will be questioned". By

backgrounding his political affiliation, he legitimises his association as a concerned parent.

He affiliates himself as an advisor to an activist organisation concerned about RF emission, but plays down his political membership: “My role in this alliance is simply that of an advisor. I don’t want to politicise everything”. His involvement in this membership is disclosed through his position as an advisor in an attempt to distance himself from his role as a politician. The bond between membership categorisation and trust is established by the politician, through his association with the medical fraternity and his role as a parent. This shows an attempt to construct a credible identity associated with trust within these communities.

Politicians A and B are from the opposition and they disassociate themselves from the policies or decisions made by the state government pertaining to RF. This denotes their membership in the opposition, meaning partisanship in the policies and decisions; and this reflects an ‘us versus them’ dynamics at play. Politician A portrays the state government as being ineffective in curbing the construction of illegal telecommunication towers, by asserting that the “State Local Government and City Council should review the guidelines for construction of telco towers”. The use of proper nouns identifies the specific government departments that are ineffective and the modal ‘should’ implies the inefficiency of the said departments in updating guidelines. He also paints a picture of the State Government as colluding with the telcos: “...we see more and more complaints by the residents especially after 2008 and more telcos are being built near residential areas as well as on the rooftop of commercial buildings ...”. The use of the pronoun ‘we’ is inclusive and denotes the problem as something that affects the general public. The mention of the specific time period “especially after 2008” implies that the current state government is incompetent. Similarly, Politician B suggests that the state government is having “some sort of agenda” behind the free Wi-Fi initiative. This articulation implies there is a hidden motive in the state government’s initiative. He supports this by stating that:

“...in Penang prior to previous general election, the DAP protested a lot by carrying banners but after they gained power, they became the one who are putting up even more towers (sic)”.

The repeated use of the pronoun ‘they’ highlights the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ argument to portray ‘they’, the state government, as untrustworthy for excluding the public from the discourse associated with RF risks. This infers that Politicians A and B are highlighting the lack of integrity in the state government, as prior to 2008 the state was governed by the Barisan Nasional, a political party they are affiliated to.

In contrast, Politician C, who is from the state government, extols the state government’s wireless initiative at a macro level. He looks at the bigger picture by associating with international organisations and progressive countries like Singapore: “...countries that adopt World Health Organisation (WHO)/ICNIRP’s standards...probably all of them are the major economies of the world such as Singapore”. Such associations, which are part of larger memberships inspire trust, as these organisations are identified as experts on RF. He also creates an identity of the ruling government as being independent and fair: “We gave them (telcos) one and half years to go on with a process I called legalisation ... before 2008 it wasn’t done well (sic)”. Such categorisation of the current state government paints them as being trustworthy and responsible.

Politician C cautiously distances himself from the community of scientists who dispute the standards set by the WHO and ICNIRP; as “a group of professors or scientist (sic) who were not credited with recognition by the mainstream science community”. This exclusion indicates distrust, as these scientists are not affiliated to any respected international bodies and yet are questioning the standards set by these world-renowned organisations.

Politician D who is also from the state government is very evasive, distancing herself from the residents as she describes them as the ‘other’; for being “unreasonable” and as people who “speak louder than you...always. They think they know all”. She also labels them as “one whole bunch of retirees who have

nothing better to do but to oppose every development that get (sic) in their area”. Furthermore, she ‘others’ the telcos and the federal government as wrong-doers: “I think the fault of the telcos and also the part of the Ministry where they did not educate the public that this thing doesn’t cause cancer”. Interestingly, she admits to the blame game practised by politicians from her own party: “...those days when we were in opposition we opposed the telco tower. So now *Pakatan Rakyat* (PR) comes to power, BN try to sabotage, protesting against it, yeah, that’s true”. The description of the residents, the telcos, the federal government and her own political party suggest that they are unreliable and untrustworthy.

Politicians D and C, though members of the same party, legitimise that they are trustworthy in different ways. Politician D, though a member of parliament and a representative of the people is more individualistic, avoiding membership associations with the electorate and her own party. Politician C associates himself with organisations or people who are progressive and knowledgeable, to portray that he is trustworthy. The opposition on the other hand align themselves with the affected residents as selfless and concerned elected representatives, affected parents and as a respectable medical doctor to gain trust.

4.2 Agency

Agency stresses the role of personal, institutional and societal influence in gaining or losing trust. The self-other dynamics in highlighting the role of agency in relation to enabling or losing trust is of great significance in the talk of all four politicians. Often self-reference is associated closely with agentiveness in enabling trust, while the ‘other’ reference is associated with the lack of agency, which results in loss of trust.

For instance, while Politician A does acknowledge the agency of local residents in organising protests against illegal towers, significantly he credits himself and his party with equal agency in supporting the residents’ efforts: “we have been standing together with the local residents in different areas to protest on this matter”. The agency that is credited to the ‘self’ (we), is closely connected to the membership of the politician and his party, as part of a legitimate group. It

is this membership that is at play in the highlighting of Politician A and his party's agency, as revealed in the following excerpt:

My personal view is the Penang State Local Government and Traffic Management Committee and Penang City Council should review the guidelines for building the telco towers. Please tear down any towers which are being built illegally. Please listen to the rakyat (public).

While couched as suggestions, the use of the modal 'should', and the request 'please', could indicate a type of obligation that is imposed upon a subject (in this case the local government of Penang). There is inherent implication that although it is a governing institution, the actions of not tearing down illegal towers, not listening to the public and not having adequately acceptable guidelines, constructs the local government of Penang as having a delegitimised and negative agency, thus causing loss of trust.

Politician A's views on agency are closely connected with his membership in the opposition party in the state of Penang. As a member of the opposition, the 'self' is perceived as active in enabling trust while the 'other', the ruling local government of Penang, is framed as lacking the type of agency which ought to enable trust.

Politician B, who is also a member of the opposition party Gerakan in Penang, similarly accords agency to the residents: "People are more aware. They look at the structure and find it fishy, they start making noise.". However, unlike Politician A who highlights the contrast in the agency of himself (and his own party) with that of the ruling party, Politician B's focal emphasis is upon the agency (or lack of agency) of the 'other'. Significantly, for Politician B, the 'other' is not just the ruling local government of Penang, but also the institutional authorities at the federal level of governance. The agency of the local ruling government of Penang (the DAP) is constructed negatively in terms of "not doing

what people expect them to do”, and thus the loss of trust is directly attributed to this agency.

At the federal (and thus more macro) level, Politician B frames agency negatively by two different means: through passivity and through negative action. The Ministry of Health in Malaysia (MOH) is constructed as a passive institution: it “follows what FDA (Food and Drug Authority) (sic) does in USA. Whatever is agreed upon, MOH simply mimic because they are more distinguished”. Credibility is directly associated with agency in this case, as the FDA is seen to be more credible. The MOH, despite being a legitimate federal governing structure, backgrounds its own action by ‘mimicking’ the FDA, in the process appearing passive.

The MCMC, on the other hand, is constructed by Politician B as agentive but in a manner which leads to the loss of trust. The agency accorded to MCMC is delegitimised because “they are making things worse”. The MCMC, which is commonly perceived as the guardian of the regulatory guidelines in Malaysia, is constructed as “misguiding the people by telling them it is safe”. It is described as “vicious” and “cunning” and its credibility is questioned because it is “not telling the truth... telling just one side of the story”. These examples reveal the way in which the MCMC’s agency is predicated negatively; this not only delegitimises the MCMC’s ability to enable trust but constructs the MCMC’s agency as actively enabling mistrust.

It can be seen that Politician B frames the agency of both the micro and macro structures of governance negatively. The category of membership could play an important role here, because as a minority party in the ruling coalition of the federal government, Gerakan’s voice is often backgrounded. Thus both the local ruling government of Penang and the federal government are constructed as the ‘other’ by Politician B, in terms of agency.

Positive agentive self-reference plays a significant role in the interview with Politician C, both as an individual and as a member of the ruling local government in Penang. Politician C highlights his agency which is closely connected to his membership in the ruling government through the use of the

inclusive 'we': "We took up a press ad campaign which started today, and most of the complaints came from the Chinese and so we are putting more concentration on the Chinese press".

As an individual, Politician C highlights his own agency by the repeated emphasis on the 'I' alongside action verbs such as 'wrote' and 'gave':

I put up six talks to pass the myth of radiation impact ... I personally wrote the copies. So I gave the telcos one month to declare themselves. If the structure is not declared in MCMC, I will deem them as illegal and will be taken down immediately.

Interestingly, Politician C often moves between the micro and macro levels in terms of agency. In terms of action, he gives 'talks' which are a part of the larger agentic strategy of 'public education' in enabling trust. In terms of self-reference, he moves from the micro agentic 'I' to the macro party agentic 'we', building a close association between individual agency and institutional agency.

When it comes to 'other' reference, Politician C tends to construct a less agentic (and in fact almost passive) role. The MCMC is described as "lethargic", "being of civil servants" and "too passive" in transmitting trust-building information to the public. The telcos are also constructed as lacking in agency when it comes to enabling trust. According to Politician C, even if radiation levels are within limits, the telcos do not enable trust by actively communicating with the public, as it is akin to "being in the limelight for the wrong reasons". In fact Politician C exhorts the telcos to be more agentic: "please get your corporate communications people to tell your side of the story telling".

For Politician D, agency in relation to enabling trust is constructed in two ways. Agency is first constructed as an active attempt to communicate with and educate the public. The 'other' in the case of Politician D, i.e. the telcos and the federal authorities, both lack agency as "they did not put up enough ... information

...to educate the public that this thing doesn't cause cancer". The lack of agency is made worse because both the telcos and the federal authorities fail to give due attention to the matter. In fact, twice in her interview Politician D repeats the statement that they "did not take it seriously". Agency in relation to enabling trust is associated with taking responsibility for educating the public; yet Politician D constructs both the telcos and federal authorities as wanting in this respect. The telcos in particular are seen as not being agentive enough, because they do not pressure the federal authorities to "spend money" and educate the public; they lack agency because they do not "go back to the ministry (and) put forward to them why don't they spend money in educating the public". Of course, this implies that the federal authorities such as the ministries lack agency, as they need to be pressured into doing certain things.

Apart from but closely connected to the 'self-other' dynamics, is the second way in which agency is constructed through knowledge. For Politician D, information is crucial in enabling trust. However, she perceives a lack of agency to gain knowledge about the matter. This lack of agency has grave consequences, as it leads to misinformation. Enabling trust requires the specific action of acquiring knowledge to avoid being "misled". Interestingly, Politician D constructs the resident stakeholder group as the one who by not acquiring "awareness", lacks legitimate agency. One would imagine that residents ought to be positively predicated in terms of agency; yet Politician D undermines their agency because "they are not aware". Significantly, she also evaluates their agency negatively as "they are the one whole bunch of retirees who have nothing better to do ..."

The analysis reveals a similar trend found in the evaluation of membership, characterisation and risk, where the self-other connotations are aligned with painting the 'self' as righteous and trustworthy and the 'other' as corrupt and untrustworthy. The discourse is intertwined in a complex mix of the politicians' respective personal, institutional and societal alignment; and reflects that it is in all probability constructed with the intention to outdo the opponent.

4.3 Responsibility

Responsibility is connected with accountability, liability and obligation in the communication of trust. Politician A maintains that his responsibility is towards the affected residents in his constituency, when he declares his “main focus is to help the *rakyat* (public) in the problems they face”. He blames the Penang state local government, Traffic Management Committee and the Penang City Council for not reviewing the guidelines on the construction of telecommunication structures. He paints them as being irresponsible when he pleads “...please tear down any towers which are being built illegally. Please listen to the *rakyat*. Build on a higher ground or areas which are far away from the residential areas”. He represents himself as a reliable and trustworthy elected representative who is concerned for his constituents’ welfare.

Politician B instead stresses that his concern stems from his own experience, when his daughter fell ill allegedly from RF exposure. He depicts himself as a responsible parent first to create that bond of trust. He indicates that he feels obligated to create awareness on the harmful effects of RF exposure, based on his personal experience and the fact that he is a medical doctor. This is apparent when he states, “You see, I always say why I am interested in this field, because I’m a doctor, and I’m a parent”. He justifies that it is in this capacity and not for political reasons that he was invited to be an advisor to an NGO campaigning to lower RF exposure limits. He disassociates from his political role as he points out that the public is prejudiced towards politicians, as they (the public) deem them to be not credible. He questions the accountability of both international and local authorities vested with the duty of safeguarding public health from RF exposure. He asserts: “Do you know ICNIRP is also an NGO and our Malaysian Nuclear Energy Agency, they are simply following whatever (sic) done by WHO”. He also paints a negative picture of local government for renegeing on their commitment as elected representatives; when he highlights that “they’re not doing what the people expect them to do”.

Politician C talks about his commitment to his appointment as the head of the Penang Wireless Initiative: “This is something close to my heart ...”. He addresses the fact that there are concerns on RF exposure and he speaks about the initiatives he is executing to deal with these concerns when he says:

“...most of the complaints came from the Chinese and so we are putting more concentration on the Chinese press. I’m going to advertise every week, and every Friday to inform people at some point they know this is free. For radiation related, I put up six talks to pass the myth of radiation impact. I think we look at this seriously; it is part of public education and I personally wrote the copies”.

The excerpt also highlights that Politician C has taken on the task of educating the public. The personal pronouns “I” in the noun phrases “I put up six talk (sic)...” and “I personally wrote the copies” asserts that the politician is responsible and has gone beyond the call of duty to educate the public on RF. The politician activates his role by identifying that he has written the texts for his talks with the adverbial phrase “...personally wrote the copies”. He implies with the pronoun “we” that the party collectively views the health debate seriously but that he is personally taking the initiative to educate the public.

Politician C elaborates this further by declaring “...we wanted to tackle it from technical and scientific perspective (sic)...I became the unofficial spokesman, the custodian”. This explains that he is committed in managing his role as a politician and head of the Penang Wireless Initiative, by attending to the issue personally with sound evidence to support the government’s stand. He also highlights the commitment of the local government in addressing the residents’ complaints, when he asserts “...we also wanted to bind the local government, because their bureaucratic processes is also major cause (sic) of this problem and this has been handed to the local government since 2010. So far, not much complain (sic)”. This suggests that the current local government is acting

responsibly and has cleaned up the mistakes of the past government. He also shifts the blame and holds the telcos answerable to residents' concerns on RF exposure when he insists, "I want the operators to provide the solutions, because they are in the business, ...it is not our responsibility to do so, not the state government, but theirs".

Politician D also shifts the blame to the telcos for acting irresponsibly and building telecommunications structures without approval. She absolves the local government of any wrongdoing when she explains, "I think telcos are just trying to save cost, finding a way out, you know thinking that local council can err...sort out" (sic). Similarly, she 'others' the residents for being unreasonable, as they are demanding dismantling of telecommunication structures. However, she reveals that she does not engage personally with the residents when addressing complaints, as "most of the time I try to avoid...and I try to push to our councilors" and yet on the other hand she discloses, "see in the end ahh...when the pressure come ahh...we have to stand with the people... right?". This reinforces the perception that some politicians 'play to the gallery' and use blame avoidance strategies to build trust.

This category highlights that each politician draws attention that they are responsible and reliable, with no personal agenda. But their divided views of 'us' and the 'other' only amplifies the uncertainty of RF exposure among the public, as each side employs tactics to gain public trust.

5. Conclusion

The findings reveal that politicians from the opposition often associate themselves with the affected residents, to garner trust while downplaying their own political affiliations. The politicians from the ruling state government on the other hand hope to create trust by banking on their status as elected representatives, who are committed in creating a progressive environment for the people. This representation supports Chilton's (2004) and van Dijk's (2006) observation that political actors legitimise their actions through positive self-representation, by

emphasising their good deeds. It also infers the politicians are using strategies to uphold, guard and legitimise their power (see Boussofara-Omar, 2011; Reisigl, 2008).

The analysis highlights that a change in the state government after the 2008 elections brought about a change in policies pertaining to RF exposure. This only intensified the rift between the politicians from the ruling state government and the opposition. The lack of consensus among the politicians infers they are competing with each other; with the purpose of “winning” the support of the public, rather than seeking a plausible solution. This substantiates the views of both Leiss (1995), Trettin and Musham (2000) that the politicians are competing stakeholders and this creates a dent in trust.

The opposition in particular highlight the indifference and irresponsibility of the ruling state government in curbing the construction of illegal towers. Arguments such as these do not aid in resolving conflicts but breed mistrust, as there is inference the health risk faced by the public is ignored. This blame game by Malaysian politicians seems to strengthen the arguments of Riedlinger and Rea (2015), that government and industry are insensitive to the public.

Attempts have been made by the opposition to swerve from the negative stereotype associated with politicians. They legitimise their rhetoric on RF risk-related issues through personal experience as a parent, medical practitioner and a concerned citizen, to build trust. Such altruism is an attempt to be viewed as more trustworthy. However, politicians are public figures and therefore it is uncertain if such attempts would build trust or mistrust. The discourse on risk from RF exposure regardless of the politicians’ affiliation is crafted to make them look responsible and reliable in the eyes of the public. However, the conflicting views make one party look trustworthy, while the other is portrayed as untrustworthy. Trust, which is the foundation risk communication is built on, becomes suspicious when politicians are seen to have hidden agendas. It also corroborates the findings of Markon, Crowe and Lemyre (2013), and McComas (2003); that the public is

distrustful of politicians, as their initiatives are viewed to be politically and economically motivated.

Politicians generally use blame avoidance tactics when dealing with health debates on RF, as their utterances form structures of oppositional talk; where they either counter or reject the views of the 'other' (see Hansson 2015). This is not new among politicians and in politics but this trend is troubling. The lack of consensus does not provide a remedy to the health debates, the politicians who are agents responsible for safeguarding public health are not speaking in one voice; leading to inept risk communication efforts. It also impacts the way the public evaluates politicians in terms of credibility, responsibility and competence. Managing risk ultimately depends on the public's trust of politicians, therefore they need to see beyond safeguarding their own interests; and avoid the blame game. The politicians from both sides of the divide need to be on the same page on matters pertaining to public health and place the public's interests above theirs.

References

- Bernard, H. R. (2006). *Research methods in anthropology: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Oxford. Altamira Press
- Bousofara-Omar, N. (2011). Learning the 'linguistic habitus' of a politician: A presidential authoritative voice in the making. In A. Mooney, J. S. Peccei, S. Labelle, B. E. Henriksen, E. Eppler, A. Irwin, P. Pichler, & S. Soden (Eds.), *The Language, Society & Power Reader* (pp. 73-91). London: Routledge.
- Cabrejas-Peñuelas, A. B., & Díez-Prados, M. (2014). Positive self-evaluation versus negative other-evaluation in the political genre of pre-election debates. *Discourse & Society*, 25(2), 159-185.
- Candlin, C. N., & Crichton, J. (2013). From ontology to methodology: exploring the discursive landscape of trust. In C. N. Candlin & J. Crichton (Eds.), *Discourses of trust* (pp.1-18). Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Chilton, P.A. (2004). *Analysing Political Discourse: Theory and Practice*. London: Routledge.
- Cousin, M. E., & Siegrist, M. (2010). The public's knowledge of mobile communication and its influence on base station siting preferences. *Health, Risk & Society*, 12(3), 231-250.
- Dohle, S., Keller, C., & Siegrist, M. (2012). Fear and anger: antecedents and consequences of emotional responses to mobile communication. *Journal of Risk Research*, 15(4), 435-446.

- Fairclough, N., Mulderrig, J., & Wodak, R. (2011). Critical Discourse Analysis. In T. A. V. Dijk (Ed.), *Discourse studies: A multidisciplinary introduction* (Second ed., pp. 357-378). London, U.K.: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Hampel, J. (2006). Different concepts of risk – A challenge for risk communication. *International Journal of Medical Microbiology*, 296(1), 5-10.
- Hansson, S. (2015). Discursive strategies of blame avoidance in government: A framework for analysis. *Discourse & Society*, 26(3), 297-322.
- Henriksen, B. E. (2011). Language and politics: Introduction. In A. Mooney, J. S. Peccei, S. Labelle, B. E. Henriksen, E. Eppler, A. Irwin, P. Pichler, & S. Soden (Eds.), *The Language, Society & Power Reader* (pp. 65-68). London: Routledge.
- Kleef, E. V., Fischer, A. R. H., Khan, M., & Frewer, L. J. (2010). Risk and benefit perceptions of mobile phone and base station technology in Bangladesh. *Risk Analysis*, 30(6), 1002-1015.
- Leiss, W. (1995). "Down and dirty": The use and abuse of public trust in risk communication. *Risk Analysis*, 15(6), 685-692.
- Markon, M.-P. L., Crowe, J., & Lemyre, L. (2013). Examining uncertainties in government risk communication: citizens' expectations. *Health, Risk & Society*, 15(4), 313-332.
- McComas, K. A. (2006). Defining Moments in Risk Communication Research: 1996–2005. *Journal of Health Communication*, 11(1), 75-91.
- McComas, K. A. (2003). Citizen satisfaction with public meetings used for risk communication. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 31(2), 164-184.
- MCMC. 2014. Communications & multimedia pocket book of statistics. Malaysia: MCMC.
- Petts, J., Horlick-Jones, T., & Murdock, G. (2001). *Social amplification of risk: The media and the public*. Sudbury, UK: HSE Books.
- Renn, O., Ortleb, J., Benighaus, L., & Benighaus, C. (2011). Risks. In P. Pechan, O. Renn, A. Watt, & I. Pongratz (Eds.), *Safe or Not Safe: Deciding What Risks to Accept in Our Environment and Food* (pp.1-40). New York, U.S.A.: Springer
- Reisigl, M. (2008). Rhetoric of political speeches. In: R. Wodak, & V. Koller (Eds.). *Handbook of Communication in the Public Sphere* (pp. 243-269). New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Riedlinger, M., & Rea, J. (2015). Discourse ecology and knowledge niches: Negotiating the risks of radiation in online Canadian forums, post-Fukushima. *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, 40(4), 588-614.
- Slovic, P. (1999). Trust, emotion, sex, politics, and science: Surveying the risk-assessment battlefield. *Risk Analysis*, 19(6), 689-701.
- Tawdry victory. (2013, May 11). *The Economist*, Retrieved from <http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21577375-government-scrapes-homeallegedly-aided-vote-rigging-tawdry-victory>
- Trettin, L., & Musham, C. (2000). Is trust a realistic goal of environmental risk communication? *Environment and Behavior*, 32(3), 410-426.

- Ufen, A. (2009). The transformation of political party opposition in Malaysia and its implication for the electoral authoritarian regime. *Democratization*, 16(3), 604-627.
- van Dijk, T. A. (2006). Discourse and manipulation. *Discourse & Society*, 17(3), 359-383.
- van Dijk, T. A. (1998). *Ideology: A Multidisciplinary Approach*: SAGE Publications.
- Wenzelburger, G. (2014). Blame avoidance, electoral punishment and the perceptions of risk. *Journal of European Social Policy*, 24(1), 80-91.
- Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (2016). Critical discourse studies: history, agenda, theory and methodology. In R. Wodak & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods of critical discourse studies* (3rd ed., pp. 1-22). London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Yasui, S. (2013). An analysis of the argument over the health effects of low-dose radiation exposure caused by the accident at the Fukushima Daiichi APP in Japan. *Journal of Risk Research*, 16(8), 937-944.

About the Authors

Prasana Rosaline Fernandez is a PhD student at the Faculty of Languages & Linguistics at the University of Malaya.

Email: rosalinef24@yahoo.com

Surinderpal Kaur is a Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of Languages & Linguistics at the University of Malaya.

Email: surinder@um.edu.my

Lean Mei Li was a Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of Languages & Linguistics at the University of Malaya, until 2012.

Email: meili26@hotmail.com

Ng Kwan Hoong is a Senior Professor at the Medical Faculty at the University of Malaya.

Email: ngkh@um.edu.my