Managing Impressions of Culpability: A Membership Categorisation Analysis of 1MDB’s CEO Radio Interview

David Yoong
Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya

Abstract
Ever since its inception, 1MDB has been associated with rife corruption, fiscal mismanagement, and political scandals. Insider leaks and unflattering international reports of this strategic development company have not only affected a wide range of public opinion and discourses, but also tainted Malaysia’s reputation, and had a destabilising effect on the nation's economic, political and societal health. 1MDB’s dealings have been a subject of news reports, legal and criminal inquiry in various parts of the world. In fact, the US Department of Justice declared 1MDB a symptom of the worst form of kleptocracy that put the spotlight on the then Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dato’ Sri Najib Razak. To counter the narrative of misconduct and distrust, numerous initiatives were performed including roadshows and an interview of 1MDB’s CEO by a prominent independent radio station, BFM. This 1-hour long radio interview is the focus of this research. Coming from a membership categorisation analysis lens, this research examines the types of categories that were invoked by the CEO to deflect and manage impressions of culpability in an adversarial interview. Studying this interview helps us understand the CEO’s communicative strategies in deploying categories, and how counter categories and narratives work to make the question “Who to trust?” difficult to answer.

Keywords: 1MDB, adversarial radio interview, managing culpability, membership categorisation analysis

1. Introduction
One of the effects of corruption scandals is distrust. Scandals usually a reveal stark contrast between i) expected norms of morality and adherence of rule of law, and ii) discovered immorality and violation of laws. The greater the contrast, the greater the degree of distrust and other associated feelings of displeasure. Individuals, brands and groups who built their reputation around moral associations (e.g. integrity, honesty, respect) and who are seen as role models, but have been found to have engaged in immoral and/or unethical practices tend to experience the damaging effects of distrust. These damaging effects can be observed in numerous scandals around the world, including the infamous Watergate scandal, the former South Korean president Lee Myung-bak’s corruption case, sexual offences by Catholic priests, Tiger Wood’s sex addiction, the abuse of private Facebook user data by Cambridge Analytica, FIFA’s bribery corruption, the Olympus’s financial scandal, Volkswagen’s tempering of emission data, and 1MDB’s abuse of State funds.

When the people at the center of these scandals who are trusted to uphold written and unwritten social moral contracts are implicated and exposed, the public may feel cheated, ashamed and disgusted. Studies have shown that political corruption scandals leads to substantial negative effect on trust in politicians and their institutions, the effects are stronger in days following its disclosure. Additionally, Scandals can lead to societal discontentment (Ares & Hernández, 2017; Bowler & Karp, 2004). Implicated politicians can expect to face further character questions
stemming from their previous behaviour “regardless of the amount of time that has passed since the offense” (Doherty, Dowling, & Miller, 2014, p. 357).

Scandals erode public’s trust and the credibility of those implicated. Scandals also invoke strong reactive public reaction in various forms: congressional hearings, impeachments of presidents, arrest of executives, boycotts, drops in share prices, and public protests among others. Interestingly, Tybout and Roehm (2009) found that the people in these scandals understand this, but they are “much more likely to be caught off guard by how far-reaching the aftershocks of a scandalous situation can be – and how varied the degrees of blame may be among the players involved”, and they deploy five strategies to manage impressions of culpability. These strategies are promising investigations, avoidance, shifting blame, taking responsibility and denial; and they can take any combination. Missteps in addressing these scandals can have costly, devastating and irreparable results. In addition to conducting audits and increasing focus on ethical discernment and ethical behaviour (Barlaup, Drønen, & Stuart, 2009), these communicative strategies may repair and restore trust in personal or corporate brands if done appropriately, as shown in the case of the 2013 Findus Nordic horsemeat scandal (Falkheimer & Heide, 2015).

In this research, we focus on the 1MDB saga. 1MDB was established as a national sovereign wealth fund to develop Malaysia’s economy and encourage foreign direct investment that would propel the country to achieve developed status as quickly as possible. Instead, it was mired in controversies ranging from money laundering, selling of national assets to foreign powers, procuring overinflated-priced assets, playboy mansions, private jets and yachts, and to alleged murders. Indeed, 1MDB courted so many controversies that the US Attorney General, Jeff Sessions in December 2018, described the 1MDB scandal as “kleptocracy at its worst”. 1MDB had an adverse effect on the reputation of many national institutions, including Bank Negara, the Royal Malaysian Police (RMP), the Attorney Chambers, CIMB, the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission, the Malaysian Public Accounts Committee, as well as local and international banks like AM-Bank, Goldman Sachs, ANZ, BSI, Royal Bank of Scotland, UOB, Standard Charted, Coutts, UBS and Falcon PBS.

Investigations into the company are ongoing internationally, and to date (September 18, 2018), the parties in the center of the 1MDB scandal, namely i) former Malaysian Prime Minister Dato’ Sri Najib Razak, ii) the alleged masterminds of 1MDB, Low Taek Jho, iii) SRC International Nik Faisal Ariff Kamil, iv) the CEO Arul Kandasamy, and v) 1MDB board of directors, have denied any wrongdoing. Prior to the 14th General Elections held on May 9, 2018, the Inspector General of Police, the Attorney General and Najib’s ministers and political party claimed that 1MDB had not done any wrong – despite international investigations having been launched into the company’s international dealings, and arrests and sacking of financial senior executives linked to 1MDB in various parts of the world. All that changed after the General Elections – but this is another story for another research.

In the face of tarnished reputation, this research examines how 1MDB’s CEO defends 1MDB’s operations over an adversarial radio interview on BFM89.9 (henceforth BFM). This event is considered quite rare when the 1MDB scandal was exposed because public debates and press coverage in mainstream news media on 1MDB were suppressed and avoided by the related officials (C. R. Brown, 2015a). This line of enquiry is also pursued because, as implored by Szyniczak (2015), “scholars [need] to take seriously the verbal statements made by people when their behaviour falls short of societal expectations”. Furthermore, Kandasamy’s acceptance of this radio interview gives an impression that he has nothing to hide and there is no reason to believe that 1MDB is evading responsibility. Kandasamy’s discourse also warrants closer examination.
because he is regarded as a master debater even by his foes. Indeed, Tony Pua, an opposition MP who has been at the forefront of demanding accountability of 1MDB, remarked (UiHua, 2016):

“Arul Kanda is smooth. And he is very clever. Underestimate him at your own expense. You expect an aggressive cocky person, but what you get is a highly convincing hypnotic persuader. When he speaks, if you don’t remain alert, you could almost fall in love with him.”

UiHua also solicited views from listeners of this BFM radio interview. One said:

“Honestly based on his BFM interview, he is damn good at answering questions and a taichi master. The radio presenter got grilled instead, in my opinion.”

Surprisingly, even Julian Ng, Kandasamy’s BFM radio interviewer, said that:

“No specific questions were given, only a discussion outline… It was a freeform, unrehearsed discussion the moment we went on the record. We did brief him that the Breakfast Grille is a no-holds-barred kind of show. [He did not reject any questions]… Arul was cordial, professional and gentlemanly throughout.”

While numerous studies have looked at these strategies of scandalous parties from various angles, we approach the 1MDB scandal from a Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA) lens to show how impressions of culpability are managed by its CEO. We show how he deploys categories to deflect reputational threats to 1MDB, and to convince listeners that all is well with 1MDB. This radio interview reveals how conflicting views make the 1MDB saga convoluted and difficult to follow. It also demonstrates how they make the questions like, ‘Has 1MDB committed any offences?’ and ‘Can we trust 1MDB?’ difficult to answer.

What follows in the subsequent sections of this chapter are a brief dossier of 1MDB and the radio station BFM, and a review of how MCA interfaces with ideas in culpability management, before moving to the analysis. This article ends with a discussion of how we can use the analysis to improve interviews with individuals who communicate like Kandasamy. We also discuss some limitations of this research, and possible research trajectories that can be explored in the future.

2. Research Context
2.1. 1MDB Related Events Leading to the Radio Interview
1MDB started out as the Terengganu Investment Authority (TIA), a body established on May 27 2009 that was meant to be a sovereign wealth fund to promote the economic interests of the state of Terengganu located in the east coast of peninsular Malaysia. After Najib Razak became Prime Minister on July 31, 2009, the federal government took over TIA and renamed it 1MDB (Hisyam, 2015). 1MDB’s objectives were to boost Malaysia's economic growth and attract international investment by means of supporting projects of national significance. 1MDB went into a business venture with PetroSaudi, but in October 2009, 1MDB board members expressed concern that only USD300M was transferred to them, while the remaining USD700M went to a different account not part of the joint venture (K. Brown & Wright, 2016). In September 2010, 1MDB went through a series of auditors (EY, KPMG and Deloitte) because they refused to approve 1MDB’s financial accounts (Wong, 2016). Big companies usually solicit one of the ‘Big 4s’ – financial and accounting auditors to vet corporate practices to provide stakeholders accurate details of business practices. The Big 4s also have a reputation to keep because they are seen as trusted institutions that will identify any corporate discrepancies or malpractices.
In early 2015, 1MDB missed payments for some of the USD11B it owed to banks and bondholders (Blakkarly, 2017). 1MDB’s infamy grew when it was reported in the international news media in the same year that money was siphoned off from its accounts and laundered, which allegedly enriched an elite few - notably Najib Razak, his circle and associates. Citing a leaked Malaysian government investigation in July 2015, the Wall Street Journal reported that more than USD700M was separately wire transferred from the Singapore branch of the Swiss Falcon private bank owned by the Abu Dhabi fund Aabar into the Prime Minister’s private AmBank account in Kuala Lumpur on March 2013, just before he announced the General Election (C. R. Brown, 2015c). Fueling the drama further, the son of AmBank’s founder claims his father, Hussain Najadi, was assassinated a day after the latter made a police report in July 2013 regarding this large sum transfer (C. R. Brown, 2015b). Najib denies all allegations of corruption and claims they are part of a conspiracy to tarnish his name and to topple the government. His supporters also declared that the money in his accounts came from a donation from a Saudi Arabian royal family member.

Several task force was asked to investigate 1MDB’s financial dealings such as the MACC (Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission) and the PAC (Public Accounts Committee) with the underlying impression that 1MDB is being audited, however numerous unprecedented events took place. On June 24, 2016, Najib and his circles alienated and sacked Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Dato’ Dr. Muhiddin Yassin and UMNO leader, Datuk Seri Panglima Shafie Apdal – both of whom were critical of 1MDB. On the morning of Monday 28 July, the Attorney General, Tan Sri Datuk Seri Panglima Abdul Gani Patail was summarily dismissed by a civil servant. In a public statement, Najib said the country’s top legal officer was too ill to continue in the role. Also relieved of their posts were the head of the police special branch, Datuk Seri Akhil Bulat. Bank Negara Governor Tan Sri Dato’ Sri Dr. Ungku Zeti Akhtar and the Malaysian Anti-Corruption chief, Tan Sri Abu Kassim Mohamed. Meanwhile, four members of the investigating parliamentary accounts committee were promoted, without any choice, to cabinet positions, which left them with no power to continue investigating, and the committee’s work was declared suspended. The next day, a mysterious fire swept through police headquarters, where records of white-collar crimes were kept (Ramesh, 2016). The public speculated that 1MDB evidences were destroyed in the fire. Also in the news limelight was the story of the country’s Deputy Public Prosecutor Kevin Morais. He kidnapped in broad daylight and his body was found inside a barrel filled with cement and dumped in a swamp 12 days later. He was said to have helped leaked the 1MDB charges to the whistleblowing website, Sarawak Report (Blakkarly, 2017).

In 2016, the long-awaited Public Accounts Committee audit report on 1MDB was classified under the Official Secrets Act (OSA) (Boo & Kamal, 2016; "Final 1MDB audit report classified as official secret," 2016), and this was the first time the public was denied access to a PAC report. Malaysia’s new Attorney-General Apandi Ali in January 2016 cleared Najib of any wrongdoing in relation to 1MDB (Holmes, 2016). However, several countries around the world, including Switzerland, Singapore, the United Kingdom and the United States, initiated their own probes into corruption and money laundering because 1MDB transactions also took place in their jurisdictions. In July 2016, the US Department of Justice announced the move to seize more than $1.3 billion in assets allegedly siphoned from 1MDB (Blakkarly, 2107).

As a result, 1MDB faced a deficit of trust among urban Malaysians. Criticisms became widespread among Malaysians who demanded accountability and answers from the government regarding the missing funds. At one point, an NGO called Bersih was able to mobilise thousands of protesters within Malaysia and abroad to protest 1MDB and systemic corruption within the government. In the midst of all these widespread allegations and criticisms against 1MDB, several
measures were taken by the government to water down public discontentment. Among others, 1MDB carried out CSR programmes like funding Hajj pilgrims and patients with heart diseases (Cheah, 2014), the Special Affairs Department (JASA) carried out nationwide roadshows and distributed 1MDB booklets to university students, and state media were silent on 1MDB’s alleged misdoings ("Putrajaya goes to campuses with propaganda book on 1MDB." 2016).

While most people would associate 1MDB with Najib, the company is actually led by Arul K. Kandasamy, who took over the position of president and group executive director in 2015 – at the height of the 1MDB scandal saga to save the company (UiHua, 2016). Kandasamy is a UK-qualified barrister who specialises in corporate and commercial law, and he has had a string of experience under his belt: among others, He was a Director of RHB Bank Bhd, Director of Global Investment House K.P.S.C, Director of Securitisation at CALYON, Head of Islamic banking at Barclays Capital, and Executive Vice-President and Head of Investment Banking at Abu Dhabi Commercial Bank P.J.S.C. (George, 2017). On March 25, 2016, Kandasamy appeared on the radio station, BFM89.9, for an hour to address issues concerning allegations of his company’s mismanagement and malpractice ("What Arul Kanda Had To Say About 1MDB When Grilled On Radio For The First Time?," 2016). On June 29, 2018, weeks after the Barisan Nasional coalition led by PM Najib lost the 14th General Elections, Kandasamy was sacked from 1MDB.

2.2. Setting of the Live Radio Interview: BFM 89.9
Dubbed the ‘Business Radio Station’, BFM89.9 is a Malaysian independent radio station that declares itself as having no political affiliation. Using both frequency based and online radio channels, BFM has influence over the airwaves. Its CEO, Malek Ali, says they have more than 50,000 followers on Twitter, and their listener base is approximately a quarter of a million people. More than 6,000 BFM podcasts are downloaded and streamed online daily. 55% of listeners are corporate decision makers. Because of its non-partisan nature, its interview and commentary programmes are occasionally critical of both government and opposition parties. Indeed, the Deputy Home Minister, Nur Jazlan, once remarked that if the government was truly draconian, it would have shut down BFM, because “BFM has been very vocal against the government”.

The Breakfast Grille which operates at 8am (MYT), is the station’s flagship programme (personal communication with an executive producer), and it features hard-line interviews with key policy makers, politicians, industry owners and the likes. On March 25, 2016, Kandasamy was featured in the Breakfast Grille, where he was interviewed by Julian Ng and Ibrahim Sani. It is relevant to note that both interviewers are experienced bankers. Ng has held Vice President and managerial positions at CIMB, J.P. Morgan, and Public Bank before joining BFM while Sani, on the other hand, was a member of the Media and PR team at CIMB before becoming a presenter at BFM. The Breakfast Grille occasionally follows a ‘hard-talk’ interview format where questions are pointed, direct and can be potentially face-threatening (Piirainen-Marsh, 2005). Guests on the show are usually powerful and affluent individuals. The Breakfast Grille follows the journalism style in western democracies where journalists are notably more adversarial and less deferential in their questioning of public figures (Heritage, 2001, p. 54).

Consent to use the full unedited interview was obtained from the CEO of BFM and Melisa Idris, BFM’s Morning Run team leader, provided access to the data. While the interview was not recorded live, minor ‘cosmetic’ audio edits were made (e.g. removal of “sorry-sorry can you start again cause the recording was stopped”)

---

1 Julian Ng’s LinkedIn profile: https://www.linkedin.com/in/julian-ng-a59039112/; Ibrahim Sani’s LinkedIn profile: https://www.linkedin.com/in/ibrahimsani/
The radio interview was transcribed using Jefferson’s transcription method (see Appendix A).  

3. Membership Categorisation Analysis

MCA takes an ethnomethodological approach to look at ways interactants use categories to go about their routine business in everyday life from the participants’ viewpoints, and not so much from the researcher’s prescriptivist viewpoint. MCA looks at how routine ordinary common-sense knowledge of social structures is used to navigate society in people’s descriptions and orientations of their social world (or culture-in-action), as conveyed through symbolic representation and interpretation (Housley & Fitzgerald, 2015), with the aim to produce formal descriptions of the procedures people employ in particular talk and action (Hester & Eglin, 1997). MCA is concerned the empirical examination of what people seem to be orienting to in order to achieve whatever it is they are doing.

Using this simple narrative as an example, ‘The baby cried. The mommy picked it up’, Sacks (1995) says there are two applicational rules that interlocutors use to interpret and use categories in common-sense interaction. One, the economy rule dictates that a reference to a category from any device is an adequate unremarkable reference without further need of elaboration (e.g. mommy and baby are adequate categories that do not need further categorisations). Two, the consistency rule stipulates that if a member has been categorised within a particular device, then other members can be categorised in the same group (e.g. mommy and baby are family). The rules also enable us to construct common-sense sequences in the story (the mother picked the baby up because it cried), motivations (the mother picked the baby up to console it) and attributes (this is what mothers do).

At the time when Sacks was developing MCA, MCA was not so much a methodology but a collection of observation of practices employed by members. Analysts observe, uncover and detail the methods, techniques and orientations employed by members as they go about their routine tasks such as accounting for, justifying and making sense of actions (Housley & Fitzgerald, 2015). Over time, MCA became more advanced over time as scholars started to pay more attention on developing methodological practices. Among them, scholars started to see the benefits of having conversational analysis approaches inform MCA, rather than to treat them as independent and disjointed areas. As Hester and Eglin (1997, p. 2) note:

“The production of particular types of sequential items is informed by an orientation to the membership categories of the speakers, just as these items contribute to the categorisation of the speakers. Social identity provides for a sense of the (sequentially organized) talk, just as the talk provides for a sense of social identity”.

Also, to produce formal description of procedures which people employ in particular, singular occurrences of talk and action, scholars are encouraged analysts to focus on the following:

- Membership categories – classifications or social types that may be used to describe persons (e.g. nerd, student, mother)
- Collectivities (collectivity [membership] categorisations) – concretely located and/or abstract designators and/or holistic constructs (e.g. the legal system, state bureaucracy, house)
- Membership categorisation devices (MCD)– linked membership categories that go together which forms classes and collections; any collection of membership categories

---

2 We thank Dhyane Laxmi and Dania Yahya for their help in transcribing the data.
which may be applied to some population containing at least a member (e.g. MCD of ‘family’ = ‘father’, ‘son’)

- Category bound activities and predicates – activities which are expectably done by persons in those categories (e.g. babies cry in the MCD of ‘stage of life’); this is related to the viewer’s maxims: the observed activity permits inferences to the doer’s identity in relation to activity norms and bounded categories.

Contemporary MCA incorporates CA approaches i.e. by examining turn-by-turn sequences that contribute towards meaning making. It shows alignments among others and how participants sequence their talk in meaningful ways in order to accomplish their interactive goals such as managing talk time and contents through prosodic markers and turn-taking rules. The analysis in this research involves building a collection of explicit and inferred mentions of categories and memberships and how they are sequenced in the interaction.

When studying natural conversations, analysts need to remember that in category work is “multi-linear, flowing through time, changing and adapting according to the immediate and distal relevancies if, as, and when they become salient to the participants’ orientations” (Housley & Fitzgerald, 2015). The on-going in situe nature of members’ category work whereby category and predicates do not remain static but are continually developed, clarified and even retrospectively modified.

4. Analysis

The BFM radio interview covered various topics of discussions and there are topic overlaps as the discussion went on. It started off with the press release by the then Governor of Bank Negara (the federal bank), Governor Ungku Zeti Akhtar, on administrative actions on 1MDB, followed by topics such as 1MDB’s business dealings with PetroSaudi, 1MDB’s purpose, returning of funds, 1MDB’s blackmailer’s credibility, 1MDB’s public relations failure and 1MDB’s board of directors’ business decisions, changing of auditors numerous times, and assurances that 1MDB will not harm the nation. In these topics, the talk show hosts were adversarial in the sense that almost every turn after the customary greetings were issues and questions that indicate chronic financial mismanagement in 1MDB. There are two main collectivities that were deployed in this interaction: i) good behaviour and ii) bad behaviour. These collectivities cover smaller MCDs whose membership categories are manifested in acts, labelling and adjectival descriptions with regard to legal and moral viewpoints that paint the players in 1MDB as innocent/morally right or guilty/morally wrong. The deployment of these membership categories may be implicative or explicative.

In the following subsections, we examine how Kandasamy downplays and counters bad character-implicative categories with good character related categories. By slowing down the interactions into turn-by-turn, we are able to identify certain categories and other communicative strategies that were used by AK to counter the deficit of trust in 1MDB over live radio. For the purpose of this research, we cover these analytical parts.

- Projecting positive moral categories and downgrading significance of implicative-issues (Section 4.1)
- Associating the interviewers with bad behaviour categories (Section 4.2)
- Reframing perceived abnormalities as normal practices (Section 4.3)
4.1. Projecting Positive Moral Categories and Downgrading Significance of Implicative-Issues

In the following exchange, we see how Arul Kandasamy (AK) counters the bad character-implicative categories raised by Ibrahim Sani (IS) and Julian Ng (JN), with good character related categories. AK deploys categories of morality and ethics to counter the interviewers’ MCD of bad behaviour. These emerged in the first topic of the interview vis-à-vis the remarks made by Governor Zeti at a press conference. In that press conference, the Governor announced that Bank Negara – the central bank – will be taking action against 1MDB because 1MDB failed to repatriate funds back into Malaysia.

Excerpt 1. Framing Governor Zeti’s press conference in taking action against 1MDB and AK’s reactions

1. IS: ↑Governor (.).↑Zeti (.). ahh yesterday has mentioned in her press conference .hh that they will proceed with their administrative action or ↓so-called↓ ahh powers within their ahh ambit .hh to actually go after the notion that (.). the ↑funds have not been repatriated back (.).hh the one (.). point (.). eight (.). billion US dollars (.).hh and this is with regard to the E(.).C(.)A(.). (xxxian) control act (.).↑WHY (.).↓was this (.). ahh not repatriated back (.).↑was there some something else.

2. AK: Ibrahim (.). as you know (.). ah Bank Negara Malaysia (.). has extensive (.). p-powers (.).h regulatory and administrative po:wers↑(.). .hh >and we as 1MDB fully RESPECT (.). .hh that authority of the central bank.hhh (.). ah Clearly (.). these are matters (.). that ahh happened a long time ago.h (.). and we have explained <↑in detail> (.). .h to the ↑central ↑bank.hh ↑the ↓reasons.h (.). as to <why we are unable to comply.hh (.).

3. with (.). their (.). requirements (.). .hh now (.). in relation to the specific comments attributed to the governor↑(.). .hh we have not received (.). anything official↑(.). or-or in writing >from the central bank< (.). so (.). I can’t really ↑a-add (.). to what is already in the public domain (.). but I-I look forward to sharing that (.). as an when we do.

IS frames his first question with a narrative of Governor Zeti’s press conference on taking administrative action against 1MDB because 1.8 billion dollars of “↑funds have not been repatriated back” (1-8). This footing (in Goffman’s terms) which foregrounds the governor’s power in penalising 1MDB, projects 1MDB as a wrong-doer for having not returned a very large sum of money – a category implicative attribute. IS then asks in Lines 8-9 “↑WHY (.).↓was this (.). ahh not repatriated back (.).↑” The choice of question and the emphasis on ‘why’ makes the aforementioned implicative category a given fact, and it demands AK to provide reasons for committing this offence. The question can also be seen as a criticism towards 1MDB. As Bolden and Robinson (2009, p. 93) notes, “why-formatted interrogatives display a challenging stance toward the accountable event and responsible agent(s) and are, thus, frequently co-implicated in complaining, criticising and blaming”.

AK begins with a vocative case in Line 11 (Ibrahim). As Axelson (2007, p. 101) notes, vocatives are almost never neutral in English because they are used as markers of power and
solidarity, in-group status, pseudo-intimacy, equality or condescension, or redress action for face-threatening acts. Since IS’s turn was face-threatening to 1MDB and by extension, to AK, arguably, AK’s use of vocative is suggestive of formality, distance and assertion of power status. If that were the case, this footing in context is a way to empower AK’s responding categories.

AK frames his response by first projecting 1MDB as a law-abiding company. He does this by acknowledging Bank Negara’s extensive authority (Lines 11-13), and follows up by saying 1MDB is very compliant and cooperative (as reflected in the emphasis of ‘respects’, coupled with the modifier, ‘fully’). In Lines 15-19, he downgrades the significance of the governor’s press conference by saying, “Clearly (.) these are matters (. ) that ahh happened a long time ago”. By placing the governor’s issue in a historic time frame, he implies that the governor’s issues are no longer points of contention, as the issue is ‘expired’. Additionally, the interactional metadiscourse, ‘clearly’ appears to appeal to others that it is for certain (Hyland, 2005) and it should not be contested further as this ‘expired’ information is already known, understood and accepted by all. Hence there is nothing new in the governor’s concern. In Lines 16-19, AK projects attributes of diligence and responsibility when he reports how as social actors, 1MDB has “explained <↑in detail> ↑the ↓reasons.h (. ) as to <why we are unable to comply .hh (. ) with (. ) their (. ) requirements”.

In Lines 19-22 (hh now (. ) in relation to the specific comments attributed to the governor↑ (. ) .hh we have not received (. ) anything official (. ) or-or in writing >from the central bank<), AK does two things: first, he disassociates the governor’s statement from Bank Negara (i.e. not identifying the governor as a category member of the central bank in this instance), and second, he frames the Governor’s press conference as having no legal weight, compared to a writ. By doing this, AK argues that Bank Negara has not followed legal due process, hence 1MDB is not obliged to respond. However, In Lines 24-25, AK attributes 1MDB as being transparent and cooperative by saying, “so (. ) I can’t really ↑a-add (. ) to what is already in the public domain (. ) but I-I look forward to sharing that (. ) as an when we do.” The discussion continues on below.

Excerpt 2. Framing Governor Zeti’s press conference in taking action against 1MDB and AK’s reactions (cont.)

25. JN:  hhhh I think it is really interesting< when (. ) you
26. say (. ) that (. ) you’re un(. )able to compla::y
27. wi:::th ahhhh >the institution that is im(pa:::rsed) to
28. manage the systemic integrity (. ) >↑financial
29. ↑integrity< of our-our nation.hh (. ) and you’re both
30. under the MOF (. ) right↑ >so< (. ) is there
31. such a:::hh roo:rn for (. )↓non-compliance with bank negara
32. requirements↑
33. AK:  hhhhh a-as I mentioned earlier Julian↑ (. ) the::: (. )
34. central bank has the authority (. ) to demand aah certain
35. action(s).hh >now (. ) whether certain actions< ah <can
36. (. ) be (. ) met (. ) or (. ) not> (. )is a function (. ) of
37. the facts ahh of the situation=
38. JN:  =but Is-Is-isn’t this a ca::se for the la:::w to deci:de
39. a-a-a::s either.hhh against the law (. )or it’s complying
40. with the law (. )↓right
41. (. )
42. AK:  a-absolutely (. ) and a:::as I said (. ) we fully respect
43. the:::-the la:::w (. ) and the authority of bank negara:.hh
44. a: to impose any such action (. ) as it (. ) may deemed
45. necessary (.)
In Line 26, “hhh >I think it is really interesting<“ indicates JN’s focus shift into AK’s earlier remark in Lines 18-19 (Excerpt 1), and JN sees this utterance as an admission of guilt, as shown in Lines 26-30. After JN upgrades Bank Negara’s importance by categorising it as an MCD of integrity and power, he presents a yes-no question (is there such a::hh roo:m for (.)) ↓non-compliance with bank negara requirements↑). JN’s line of inquiry which focuses on categories of right and wrong can also be seen as a leading ‘trap question’. If AK responded with a ‘yes’, it will be detrimental to 1MDB’s reputation, while a ‘no’ would mean that AK would contradict his earlier answer.

In Lines 35-38, AK reframes the conversation to an earlier referenced point – of how AK accepts Bank Negara’s authority, thus reiterating the law abiding category (Lines 35-38). However, in Lines 39-42, JN steered the conversation back to the fundamental rules of engagement, and seeks AK’s agreement with a tag question (↓right) that one either follows the law or goes against it. At this juncture, AK agrees with JN’s categories of good and bad in Line 43 (a-absolutely ()), which gives an impression of agreement, but it is actually not in reference to 1MDB’s culpability. Instead it is in reference to the power of authorities to decide whether something is legal or not. AK invokes again the category in Lines 43-46, by reiterating how 1MDB fully respects the law and the authority of Bank Negara.

Following this, IS takes over the floor from JN (Excerpt 3).

Excerpt 3. Framing Governor Zeti’s press conference in taking action against 1MDB and AK’s reactions (cont.)
46. IS: ok (.) so: (.) you: were mentioning that-tha: you have
47. not received anything a::: from bank negara.hh a: but
48. ↓this is with regard to the >>>administrative action<<<
49. but you HA::VE recei::ved i::nstructions from bank
50. negara to actually >>repatriate it BACK<< .hh in fact
51. (. ) the BA:NK (. ) ha:s (. ) revo:ked (. ) >three
52. permissions that was ↑gra:nted (. ) under your firm< .hh
53. under the EC-ECA (.) for investments abroad (.) and THIS
54. (. ) (w)-is (. ) contravening >>>the (financial services)
55. act<< so (.) ↑that (. )↓paper (.) >>>>what hhas b’n given
56. to you guys<<<< (. ) >>but no:ne action (.) following
57. that paperwork is the contention in this question< (.)
58. AK: a::-absoutely (.) and I-and again there is no dispute on
59. tha-t (.) ↑fact ↓and that point.hh ah:: but (xxx) (.)
60. one (. ) point (. ) eight (. ) three (. ) billion dollars
61. (. ) which overtime ended up as being two (. ) point (. )
62. three (. ) three (. ) billion dollars in fact (. ) a-a-a
63. large proportion of that (. ) has already been.h (. )
64. spent (. ) a-on various requirements (. ). hh a-and the
65. the balance h-has been designated (. ) fo:r a (debt for
66. asset swap that we have emplaced with IPEC) (. ) .hh we
67. have explained this in detail to the cental bank (. )
68. they are aware (. ) of (. ) these (. ) facts (. ) >but of
69. course< we respect (. ) their right (. ) to impose (. ) hh
70. whatever (. ) sanction (. ) that they may may-deem
71. necessary (. ) under the law.
In Line 47, IS’s “ok (.) so:” indicates IS’s dissatisfaction with AK’s response. IS recounts AK’s response (you have not received anything a::: from bank negara.hh ...) before arguing that Bank Negara has actually sent out instructions to 1MDB (Lines 50-51). IS upgrades his claim from Lines 51-58 (in fact) with historical events (Bank Negara revoked three permissions, 1MDB contravened the Financial Services Act, no action from 1MDB, paperwork) to make his claim difficult to dispute.

AK avoids contradictions to 1MDB’s moral image by expressing his agreement yet again in Lines 59-60 (a:::-absolutely (.) and I-and again there is no dispute on tha-t (.) ↑fact ↓and that point.hh). His agreement may possibly be in reference to the paperwork point, and not to the other remarks. This is because agreeing with the entirety of IS’s remarks is damaging to 1MDB as they all confirm the bad-character implicative category. He proceeds in Lines 61-63 to state numbers (1.83 billion dollars becoming 2.33 billion dollars) and how the money has been used on ‘various requirements’ and ‘debt for asset swap’. Doing this, he steers away from IS’s topic of illegality to 1MDB’s business spending. In Lines 67-69, AK again invokes a category of transparency and accountability (we have explained this in detail to the central bank (.). they are aware (.). of (.). these (.). facts) and ends his turn by reiterating 1MDB’s acknowledgement of Bank Negara’s authority for the fourth time. This reiteration is a possible indicator that this response was coached or planned before this interview, as AK appears to project it strongly to counter allegations of non-compliance to Bank Negara.

4.2. Associating the Interviewers with Bad Behaviour Categories

There are a few instances where AK deploys bad behaviour categories to attack the interviewers’ credibility and reliability, in what seems like an attempt to discredit them and to cast them as having misleading and ideologically motivated intents to defame 1MDB. These categories are commonly (but not always) accompanied by vocatives. Consider the following excerpts.

Excerpt 4. Accusing JN for misrepresenting AK when JN elicits reasons 1MDB has a bad reputation
343. JN: ... why has it come to this(.)? has it been a: <P:R
344. failure> on the part of(.)1MDB not being able to
345. explain(.)to the public at large and the world (.).hh
346. that you are innocent(.)and everyone still hhh making
347. a:lot of conjecture: about what is happening(.)?
348. AK: ↑JULIAN↑: let-lets be clear(.). you are putting £words
349. into my mouth by saying(.).we are claiming innocence(.)
350. what we have always said ↓said().is that(.).1MDB
351. ↓is a company that has faced challenges(.).these
352. a primarily business challenges(.).and those challenges(.)
353. started in November twenty fourteen(.). a:hh a confluence
354. of three events right-
355. JN: //->[If you are not innocent you are guilty right?]<
356. AK: =a:hh again (.). you are innocent until proven guilty(.)

In Excerpt 4, JN queries why 1MDB has a bad reputation and questions if 1MDB’s public relations (Lines 343-345) is to be blamed for not being competent in clarifying issues that 1MDB is innocent. AK does not answering JN’s question. Instead, he picks and latches on JN’s point (you are innocent— Line 346), employs a vocative case (↑JULIAN↑), and says “let’s be clear(.)

---

3 In this context, ‘okay’ indicates a transition discourse marker i.e. rethinking a different strategic approach (Beach, 1995) while ‘so’ is a sequence-initiator that is used to advance an interactional agenda (Bolden, 2009).
you are putting words into my mouth by saying(.).-by claiming innocence” with a smiley voice. In the face of criticism, the brief smiley voice expression (Lines 348-349) seem to project AK’s ‘disbelief’ that JN has misrepresented what AK has said. AK also implies that JN is irresponsible and incompetent – MCD of unprofessionalism. AK then provides a juxtaposed counter narrative by portraying 1MDB as reliable and consistent (we have always said ↑said(.)).

However, before AK can complete his turn, it seems that JN was not satisfied with AK’s denial because JN interjects in Line 355 with a tag question, “>If you are not innocent you are guilty right?<” – which effectively relive that topic of innocence. Following Hepburn and Potter (2011), tag questions are indicative of the speaker’s stance toward the recipient as it aims to elicit agreement and/or confirmation. JN wants AK to agree with him that 1MDB is trying to claim innocence, and this counter-challenges AK’s accusation. AK corrects JN’s stance by saying, “you are innocent until proven guilty” – an allusion to Article 11 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and MCD of natural justice. The ‘successful’ rectification of JN’s claims can be seen as legitimising AK’s accusations.

AK also uses a condescending category on JN when JN queries the reason 1MDB was established (Excerpt 5).

Excerpt 5. Using a condescending category on JN

572. JN =][/But the-the government is in a position to tweak ahh
573. their >P.P.A< policy ahh was there really-really a ne:ed
574. to start a company ahh you know burning (.).carbon
575. footprint (.).taking on forty two billion ringgit of
576. debt(.).ahh just to do that and-and at the end of the
577. day(.)to what end right?(.)because all this have been
578. sold to the chinese↓=
579. AK =Julian I think you are £being £very £naughty by(.)
580. equating(.)power purchases with forty two billion of debt
581. in one breath ahh
582. JN =[/WE SHALL GET ON TO THAT BUT PLEASE GO ON//]
583. =The debt of 1MDB started as five billion...

- Journalists have become notably more adversarial and less deferential in their questioning of public figures (Heritage, 2001, p. 54)
- Quick recap of the research objectives:
  - Adversarial questioning concerning damaged trust of 1MDB.
  - Focuses on how the CEO of 1MDB addressed allegations of 1MDB’s wrongdoing
  - Part of a series of analysis that focuses on this interview
- Kandasamy’s efforts are driven by a need to restore trust and some degrees of credibility to 1MDB’s damaged identity. The battle is to convince the listeners if 1MDB is to be trusted. Also, Kandasamy’s appearance on this talk show is a strategic one: to display that there is nothing to fear/hide if no wrong has been done.
- Invoke moral and group distinctions - others are wrong (blaming others); current management of 1MDB did not do wrong; if there were misconducts, it was before my time; deflecting blame

In Lines 574-576, JN uses the figurative expressions, “burning” and “carbon footprint” as well as the quantifier “forty two billion ringgit of debt” to categorise 1MDB as wasteful and not being financially prudent. In Lines 577-578, he projects an moral-implicative category on 1MDB when he alludes that 1MDB has sold Malaysian land and assets to China. AK responds again with a vocative in Line 579, and says, “I think you are £being £very £naughty” with a suppressed laughter. ‘Naughty’ is a category-tied descriptor associated with badly behaved
children. Since the interaction is adversarial, the manner in which the laughter and category were deployed suggests AK’s condescension towards JN, and that JN’s trustworthiness is not to be taken seriously.

Another kind of attack that AK makes on the character of the interviewer is by projecting attributes of inconsistencies. Doing so casts questions of the interviewer’s reliability like ‘can this interviewer be trusted?’ A possible intended outcome of this approach is the listeners’ increase distrust towards the interviewers and evasion of having to answer the question. Consider the following excerpt where JN accuses 1MDB of jeopardising the country’s wealth.

Excerpt 6. Attacking JN for contradicting themselves when JN questions 1MDB’s rationalisation plan

676.  JN:  =I-I think the issue for <me as a Malaysian>a-and as
677.  someone who is losing-ah as someone who is looking at how
678.  my tax money is being ↑spent(.) and umm it seems to me
679.  like 1MDB has been set up(.)solely for the purpose of
680.  putting the country into gra::ve financial risk because
681.  your capital is at one million(.)a::nd you went on to
682.  took the purchase of all this power assets land assets
683.  (.)(.)which in my vi::ew a:hh does not have a lot of dev-
684.  developmental benefits for the country right? Thi-this
685.  is a power sector very established(.)a:hh property
686.  sector>really any private sector company can do it<
687.  but what you have done is set up this company under the
688.  auspices of the M.O.F just to ↑generate a lot of debt and
689.  take over assets and later on flipping them(.)=
690.  AK:  =so Julian again I think you’ve you’ve just
691.  contradicted yourself multiple times in just your
692.  statement(.) a:hh a million ringgit of equity that is
693.  taxpayers money I fully agree with you a:hhh the rest of
694.  what 1MDB has was borrowed so it is ↑debt which needs to
695.  be paid back now unfortunately as we a:hh discussed
696.  earlier the company went through a number of challenges
697.  in(.) November twenty fourteen primarily caused –//by

In Line 676, JN foregrounds his Malaysian citizenship. Doing so, JN categorises himself in the MCD of stakeholder of 1MDB, to argue that he has every right to know about 1MDB’s business. He again projects a morally-wrong category on 1MDB for “putting the country into grave financial risk” and that it “↑generate a lot of debt and take over assets and later on flipping them”. In Line 690-692, AK responds with a vocative, followed by a ‘assessment’ statement (again I think you’ve you’ve just contradicted yourself multiple times in just your statement). This exemplifies JN again as an unreliable character who fits into the MCD of unprofessionalism.

There was also an instance where AK warned IS that his line of question is defamatory. It had the effect of ending IS’s pursuit of 1MDB’s board of directors’ roles in decision making, as shown in Excerpt 7.

Excerpt 7. IS Questioning the involvement and role of 1MDB’s board of director member

991.  IS:  Now (xxx) is not located just or-or-or or restricted within
992.  Tan Sri Lodin ↑Wok umm Tan Sri ↑Ismee who is also your
993.  board of director and who is also sitting as a C.E.O
994.  of Tabung Haji who is also a connected party so I ↑am
995.  GETTING a (xxx) sense that things are not really
996. at arm’s length (.) could you care to comment on that?
997. AK: =I(.)absolutely deny what you have just said I think that
998. is potentially libelous as we mentioned(.)a:hh the (.)
999. relevant directors abstained from decision making a:hh
1000. both institutions are major players in the financial
1001. landscape of Malaysia I think its only a:hh right that
1002. a:hh they have the opportunity to invest in what is going
1003. to be an extremely attractive proposition
1004. ...
1010. IS: =Now↑ back to square one then because(.)while we have all
1011. this >corporate governance< in place while >we have all
1012. this operating procedures< in action umm this is(.) going
1013. back to all these allegations that a:hh its still
1014. standing so I’m pretty sure you have done all you can
1015. infact more than what is required to actually explain the
1016. position if lMDB all this arm’s length transactions yet↑
1017. the-the adventure that we are on here as Malaysians is
1018. that lMDB saga still continues(.)hhh ↑what went wrong?

Tabung Haji is a governmental body that manages the funds of muslim pilgrims to Mecca. In this exchange, IS queries the potential conflict of interest of the CEO of Tabung Haji because he was also a 1MDB body of director member. In Lines 994-996, IS says, “so I ↑am GETTING a (xxx) sense that things are not re:ally at arm’s length”. ‘Arm’s length’ in this context refers to ‘arm’s length transaction’ i.e. a fair business transaction with no collusion between the buyer and seller. IS suspects that the Tabung Haji transactions were not fair, thus flagging possible corruption (MCD of illegal and immoral acts).

While IS’s statement was hedged (not re:ally), AK regards it as damaging to the reputation to 1MDB and to the BOD member. He goes denies this category of corruption (Line 997) and warns IS that his statement “is potentially libelous” (Line 998). Yet another MCD of unprofessionalism, AK frames IS’s statement as an immoral-implicative category i.e. IS has slandered. AK then gives a counter-account of how the BOD are professionals (Lines 1000-1003). This warning seemed to have worked: when AK finishes his turn, IS did not pursue this line of questioning anymore although he is unsatisfied with the response given.

4.3. Reframing Perceived Abnormalities as Normal Practices
In the following exchange concerning 1MDB’s financial decisions and risk-taking, JN highlights the abnormal changes of reputable auditors in short time spans using MCD of normal auditing practices. JN alludes to the shared common understanding between the interlocutors: the typical auditing practices of big companies, where a Big Four accounting firm is hired to audit financial accounts and corporate practices. These abnormalities suggest 1MDB’s bad behaviour. We see in this exchange in Excerpt 8 of how AK navigates and reframes JN’s perceived abnormalities as something normal and common sense.

Excerpt 8. Questioning involving changes of Big Four auditors
1331. JN =And-and we-we will be able to see the maths of this
1332. wi:th your >audited accounts< right? becoz a:hh I- and
1333. I would love for you to comment on this as to wh:::y a:hh
1334. so many of the auditors were changed you started with
Ernst and Young and then KPMG and now Deloitte is the-the
guy(.) that’s ]//it-
AK =[///Okay I’m-I’m[///glad-
JN =[///Auditors [//((xxx)-
AK =[/// You asked that question if you look at a:hh Ernst
and Young they were auditors appointed by the (.).previous
shareholder of 1mdb which was the state of Terengganu
a:hh whilst-or when 1mdb was the Terengganu investment
authority so when the federal government took over as
shareholder as it is very↑ usual in such circumstances
a:hh a new shareholder will appoint (.). its (.). own (.)
auditor >so in fact< the first audited a:hh accounts of
the company were done by (.).KPMG who audited <a:hh for>
three years in a row a:hh and the last two years its
been audited by(.).Deloitte so the next change was from
KPMG to Deloitte a:hh and that happened at the time when
1mdb purchased its power assets a:hh Deloitte as you know
is the largest accounting firm in the world a:hh and a
decision was made based on a proposal from Deloitte where
they committed fifteen audit partners regionally and a:hh
domestically a:hh for the interest of the company so↑(.)
after three years of KPMG we moved to-to Deloitte I think
it’s very important to highlight that 1MDB moved from one
big >four firm< to another big four firm and not from
KPMG to Ali Bala and Chong((xxx)).

In Lines 1337 and 1339, AK interjects JN and projects himself as an eager participant who has
positively anticipated the projected category of abnormalities and has answers (=[///Okay I’m-
I’m[///glad- You asked that question). Effectively, this causes JN to end his turn abruptly.
AK recounts it was 1MDB’s predecessors who appointed Ernst & Young, and not the current
management team. Not only does this statement absolves 1MDB’s responsibility, but AK projects
himself as revealing an unremarkable common reality or social rule in corporate auditing, as
manifested in the emphasis of the intensifier ‘very’ in “it is very↑ usual” (1344). He proceeds
in Line 1346 with a marked evidence discourse marker (>so in fact<) to provide examples of
how 1MDB engaged with other auditing firms, KPMG and Deloitte for a number of years. Note
also that he attributes positive moral categories to them: “the largest accounting firm in
the world”, and “they committed fifteen audit partners regionally and a:hh
domestically a:hh for the interest of the company” (1352-1355). He ends his turn by
saying that 1MDB has engaged with the MCDs of reliable Big 4s instead of MCDs of unknown
auditing companies (Ali Bala and Chong - 1359). Here, he projects 1MDB again in a good
behaviour collectivity, where he infers that the 1MDB management has nothing to hide from the
reputable auditors because 1MDB has always been transparent and it has always practised high
principles of accountability.

Continuing in the next excerpt below, JN attempts to get AK to make a disclosure that
1MDB’s accounting practices were abnormal.
Excerpt 9. AK projecting himself as more experienced in matters concerning auditing protocols

1360. JN =Ah that’s—that’s correct and in-fact the-those have
1361. been your > public statements< but I-I just wondering
1362. whether we can go< an extra step of verifying this a:hh
1363. the statement being made to fact that Ernst and Young
1364. was fired↑ after it couldn’t agree or-or question profits
1365. earned at ↑Petro Saudi according to your bo:ard minutes
1366. (0.1)Again a:h you know the- the change of auditors
1367. was done per the a:hh relevant procedures a:hh and the
1368. considerations of the company at that time(.)so
1369. unfortunately £I £wasn’t there so I cannot go beyond(.)
1370. what was in the company records and what the company has
1371. said publicly=
1372. JN =I-I guess this are the kind of a banter that people
1373. ha::ve in coffee shops and (hhh) in fact in the
1374. international press as well >and they are just asking< eh
1375. why ah-why are all these auditors are being fired I-I
1376. [/think-
1377. AK = [/What’s more relevant is(.)typically you know if there
1378. is any impropriety or wrong doing a big four firm would
1379. not take on the role all of them have very strict
1380. compliant procedures (xxx) client procedures and client
1381. due diligence procedures so the fact that we moved from
1382. one big four to another a:hh to me should allay a lot of
1383. those concerns(.)I-I just wanted to-to make it clear to
1384. your listeners that you know the challenges in lmbd are
1385. very clearly documented a:hh the company has admitted
1386. this very early on a:hh and taken steps for example
1387. bringing myself in a:hh the strategic review and the
1388. rationalization now whilst we can all debate about what
1389. happened↑ umm the reality is there is a number of
1390. investigative authorities trying to establish the fact
1391. a:hh and in my mind they will show↑ in-in much detail
1392. what went wrong a:hh or what went right↑ thats important
1393. is that we now need to move on and the rationalization
1394. plan is exactly that a:hh to show to the rakyat that a:hh
1395. although this company faced various challenges it is able
1396. using its own resources to sell the ↑assets that it took
1397. on using debt and to a:hh repay the debt so from that
1398. perspective I hope the rakyat will be confident a:hh
1399. in-in the success of the rationalization plan and it has
1400. been >publicly acknowledged< for example a:hh yesterday
1401. Moody’s rating agency also highlighted the benefit of
1402. what has transpired through > the lmbd rationalization
1403. plan<
JN counters AK’s categories of normality in Excerpt 8 by claiming that Ernst & Young “was fired after it couldn’t agree or-or question profits”. Despite hedging (I-I just wondering), JN’s predicate is an upgrade from his earlier inference of abnormality (1331-1336) for it implies that the auditors were ‘punished’ for disputing 1MDB’s accounts and had their services ended prematurely. AK responds by doing two things: i) he does not dispute the ‘firing’, instead, he says this normal due process, and ii) he absolves responsibility by saying he was not involved in the decision making (unfortunately £I £wasn’t there - 1369). Doing so disassociates him from any form of culpability.

From Lines 1372-1376, JN tries another approach to suggest that 1MDB’s actions are abnormal by saying that many members of the general public including professionals. Doing so, he constructs an MCD of every individual questioning the abnormalities of 1MDB with the same collective question, “why are all these auditors are being fired”. AK interjects at 1377 and reframes JN’s footing (“What’s more relevant is”) to the MCD of reputable auditors. AK argues that as members of reputable auditors, the Big 4 auditors will affiliate themselves with malpractices. Since they have affiliated themselves with 1MDB, therefore, 1MDB has not done any malpractice. In Line 1381-1383, AK says moving from one member to another in the same category, should not be viewed with suspicion.

5. Discussion and Concluding Remarks
Here is a quick recap of this research objective. This research, which is a part of a series of analysis focusing on Kandasamy’s interview, focuses on how the CEO of 1MDB addressed allegations of 1MDB’s wrongdoing over an independent radio station. Kandasamy’s efforts are driven by a need to restore trust and some degrees of credibility to 1MDB’s damaged identity. The interview highlights a battle to convince the listeners that 1MDB has not committed major transgressions. Also, Kandasamy’s appearance on this talk show is a strategic one: to display that there is nothing to fear/hide if no wrong has been done.

Using MCA to examine small areas of the data, we are able to identify a few collectivities and categories and generate an analysis showing how AK deployed them in order to construct and re-represent a reality that everything is alright with 1MDB. To invoke moral and group distinctions where others are wrong (or blaming them), the current management of 1MDB did not do wrong, and deflecting blame, AK:

- projected 1MDB as a professional moral law-abiding and responsible company by providing selected performative examples (e.g. we explained in detail; I look forward to sharing [information]; we fully respect the law; 1MDB moved from one big four firm to another… and not to Ali Bala and Chong)
- downgraded the evidence of the interviewers (e.g. categorising the Bank Negara governor’s press statement as obsolete (or irrelevant) and having no legal weight)
- categorised AK’s adversarial interviewers as unprofessional and having bad behaviour (e.g. you are putting words into my mouth; I think you are being very naughty; what you said is libelous)
- normalised 1MDB’s practices as natural and common business practices (e.g. It is very usual to change auditors when management changes)
Kandasamy also strategically ignores and counters negative categories of immorality and illegality with counter categories. By this, he takes advantage of the multiple issues that are raised by the interviewers in their turn by ‘cherry picking’ on issues that are ‘easier’ to target (as shown in his ‘absolutely’ agreements to certain issues). In other words, in some instances, Kandasamy gives the impression of answering questions (see Excerpt 3), when he actually evades them by either ignoring them or focusing on other seemingly but not related aspects. These constructs are not necessarily lies (and it is not the intent of this research to determine validity of statements), but they are clearly strategies used to maintain a narrative that 1MDB is clean and having small hiccups. We can also make a few deductions from the analysis. First, Kandasamy is a skilled interviewee. Second, Kandasamy seems prepared for the interview as suggested by the flow of his delivery of insider’s information to every query and issue raised by the interviewers. At no point in the interview where he indicated a lack of knowledge of issues concerning 1MDB’s dealings. Obviously, the stakes are high for 1MDB, and admitting or indicating guilt can have serious repercussions for them.

While we did not examine Kandasamy’s prosodics in great detail, it is worth exploring other areas of discourse analysis, e.g. multimodal expressions like prosodic calmness. Kandasamy does not exhibit signs of uncertainty, rather what we see are projections of confidence, certainty and conviction. These traits are correlated with the absence of stammering (nervous ticks), self-initiated repairs, inconsistent verbal frequency pitch, and rush and delayed speech (Kimble & Seidel, 1991). The data also does not provide verbal cues like Kandasamy’s seating manner, his appearance, gazes and hand gestures, so we are unable to comment much on them – but undoubtedly, these too play a big part in Kandasamy’s self-image projection that he is a capable and confident leader who has nothing to hide, and a ‘Mr Fixit’ person, as dubbed by BFM.

As for practical takeaway suggestions, we think the interviewers and future interviewers engaged with ‘hard journalism’, should consider investigating the nature of agreement markers (i.e. what is being agreed by the guest?), being aware of attacks that is used to diminish credibility of interviewers, and carrying out post-interview reviews by means of transcribing the interviews in order to ‘slow down’ and ‘rewind’ the talk to reveal communicative styles/strategies of interactants and provide opportunities to determine best method of interviewing engagement.

References


UiHua. (2016). If Arul Kanda left 1MDB, would you hire him? We asked some people. Cilisos.my.
Appendix A

Transcription Legend (Jefferson, 2004)

[ ] Overlapping talk
= No discernible interval/silence
    between turns
(.), Discernible silence but less than 0.2 of second
(0.2) Silence within turns or in talk
. Closing intonation
? Rising intonation
:, word Elongation of preceding sound
Word Emphasis
WORD Spoken more loudly
<word> Spoken more softly
↑, ↓ Marked increase/decrease in pitch
Hhh Outbreath or laughter
.hh In breath or laughter
Hah, heh etc. Laughter
£word£ ‘Smiley’ voice
<word> Talk is drawn out
>word< Talk is speeded up
((word )) Transcriber’s notes
(), (word) Transcriber unable to hear or uncertain