



Information Ecosystem Among Malaysian Youth: The State and Challenges

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Abstract. Today's era of communication technology has seen that information plays a very important role. Information is no longer just notification and messages, but it has become an important commodity in almost every aspect of life. Accordingly, this study aims to examine the scenario of the information ecosystem, especially among the youth in Malaysia. The main question to be answered is what is the position and challenge of creating an information ecosystem for Malaysian youth. A study in the form of a survey using a questionnaire on more than 305 teenagers across the country was carried out to achieve that goal. The results of the study found that although new media is the main source of obtaining information, the belief in information is dominated by conventional media. In addition, the challenge of youth participation in the information ecosystem that is beneficial to them was also discussed.

Keywords: Community media · Freedom of information · Social change · Media literacy

1 Introduction

Freedom of information is an essential principle within the democratic process, ensuring the ability of individuals to engage in discussions, share ideas, and engage in debates. This freedom plays a crucial role in fostering an informed citizenry and promoting a civilized society through both online and offline mediums. Given that the youth comprise nearly 30% of the Malaysian population, they possess immense value as assets to the country. Consequently, it is crucial to foster and enable young individuals with the essential knowledge, mindsets, and abilities required to create a supportive and forward-thinking information environment that corresponds to the requirements of the nation. Community media initiatives aim to facilitate diverse communities and constituencies in claiming their own spaces and voices, advocating for transformative change through various media platforms [1].

In general, Malaysians have experienced increased press freedom. Referring to 2020 World Press Freedom index published by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Malaysia made a significant leap of 22 positions, securing the 101st place and surpassing its neighbouring countries: Indonesia, Myanmar, Philippines and Thailand. Additionally, based

on a report from the Statistics Department, Malaysian households' internet accessibility rose by 3.1% to reach 90.1% in 2019, compared to 87% in 2018. These circumstances signify notable and dynamic advancements in the country's information ecosystems. These factors significantly influence the formation of civil society, governance, and the overall individual well-being. The aim of this study was to investigate and acknowledge the varied information ecosystems that exist among Malaysian youths.

2 Information Ecosystem

The media landscape in Malaysia has undergone a significant transformation due to recent political, social, and economic developments. This has brought forth a fresh set of challenges and opportunities. Malaysian youths have experienced a particularly exciting period in recent years, who comprising 28 percent of the overall population. In 2019, a Constitutional Amendment was passed by the Malaysian Parliament, reducing the voting age from 21 to 18. This decision created greater opportunities for young individuals to contribute to and shape the future direction of the country. Additionally, the digital and online platforms are playing a pivotal role in shaping the new information landscape, gaining substantial popularity in the nation. The younger generation, in particular, is driving the consumption of online information and the utilisation of social media, a trend that has also extended to rural areas. As a result, Malaysians are increasingly opting for diverse channels to both receive and disseminate information. Particularly, these virtual spaces have created an environment where individuals can express their perspectives more freely, leading to substantial social as well the political transformations [2].

The Information Ecosystem Assessment (IEA) is a comprehensive analytical framework designed to encompass all aspects of the interaction amongst information consumers and the availability of information. The primary objective of an IEA is to uncover "deeply local information," which is at the core of information ecosystem mission. IEA adopts a people-centred approach to gain a profound understanding of how individuals and communities discover, exchange, appreciate, trust, and generate information within their unique local environments. This approach aligns with research conclusions that emphasize the necessity of an inclusive approach for Malaysian youth, while also considering global advancements [3].

Information ecosystems extend beyond the realm of official information channels, news and media. These encompass various forms of information exchange, including informal, personal, civic, community, and trust-based channels, which may or may not be impacted by traditional news or media outlets. In the context of the IEA Malaysia 2020, we evaluate the Information Ecosystem of specific target groups based on various dimensions: information landscape, production and dissemination, information needs, information utilisation, impact of information, social trust, access dynamics, and influencers. A study conducted on a particular group of Malaysian youth revealed encouraging and promising outcomes when they were empowered to actively engage in the media ecosystem [4].

Above all, the defining characteristic of Information Ecosystems is the distinct "information behaviour" exhibited by individuals residing within them [5]. As human beings continually strive to engage with information, it is their consumption patterns, production practices, contributions, interactions, and overall conduct surrounding their access

to information that render information ecosystems dynamic, diverse, and occasionally idiosyncratic and difficult to anticipate.

3 Methods

The robustness of a research study heavily relies on its operational procedures. In order to ensure the study's comprehensiveness, a mixed-methods research approach incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methods was utilised [6, 7]. This decision was made for several reasons, including the desire to incorporate multiple data sources and perspectives to enhance the understanding of the social landscape under examination. Given the significance and sensitivity of the subject matter in this study, a diverse range of methods were utilised to effectively identify and analyse the gathered data.

For data collection, a survey questionnaire was utilized, encompassing both closed-ended and open-ended questionnaire. By employing this approach, it became possible to gather data from a substantial number of participants, making it well-suited for obtaining direct insights from young individuals and accurately representing their perspectives [8].

The questionnaire utilized in this study encompassed seven sections of the information ecosystem, namely media consumption, media ownership, community access, sustainability of information and media, and prospects and requirements assessment [7]. The insights gained from the data collected from participants provided a deeper understanding of the existing state of the information ecosystem among the respondents, thus reflecting the overall condition in Malaysia. The study sample involved of individuals aged 15 to 30, ensuring representation of youth from respectively states in Malaysia.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, data gathering for this study primarily occurred through the digital platform using an online survey as the main method. The requests to take part in this research were principally distributed through diverse social media platforms. Traditional methods of data collection, such as physical meetings, were also employed but to a limited extent [8, 9]. Online data collection spanned a duration of 20 days of field work. Overall, 305 questionnaires were received and considered complete and appropriate for further analysis. The data underwent coding and analysis utilising the Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS) computer program. Following that, descriptive data analysis methods were utilised to assess the status of the seven components of the information ecosystem.

4 Findings

There are two components of findings discussed in this section. Firstly, data related to the state of information ecosystem are presented. The second component focused on the challenges in creating information ecosystem for the youth.

4.1 The State of Information Ecosystem

Considering this aspect, it is unsurprising that the primary and favored information source for this group is new media, as depicted in Fig. 1. Merely 26% of the participants

in the study indicated traditional media platforms like television, radio, newspapers, and interpersonal communication as their main channel for obtaining information. The majority (74%) expressed a preference for new media platforms such as social media, websites, mobile applications (e.g., Astro Awani, Malaysiakini, and News Malaysia), and internet-based news platforms.

The usage of media for information acquisition is observed to be consistent across genders, ethnic groups, and localities. While a particular media type may enjoy popularity within a specific community, it does not necessarily imply that the community perceives it as a reliable source. The study's results indicate that even though traditional media is less favoured among young individuals, they still consider it more trustworthy compared to new media.

Among the 305 respondents surveyed, a majority of 63% expressed the highest level of trust in mass media. Within this group, approximately 43% selected radio and television as their most trusted sources, while 20% placed greater trust in newspapers. Conversely, new media platforms were regarded as the most trustworthy by less than 20% of the participants (19% favoured internet-based news platform, 9% preferred social media, and an additional 8% chose information from the websites) (Fig. 2).

One of the main roles of the media is to distribute information that empowers communities to address the issues that impact their everyday lives. In relation to this, the findings from the analysis (refer to Fig. 3) of the seven categories of media content revealed that economic information and news were perceived as the most reliable. Approximately 40% of the respondents indicated economics as their most trusted content, while 29% favoured sports information and news. The participants in the focus group discussion emphasised the significance of sports in their lives, considering it a topic of great interest. Political content obtained the third rank in terms of trustworthiness (17%), followed by entertainment (10%). Religion, social issues, and crime, among other content categories, obtained trust from 1% or less of the respondents.

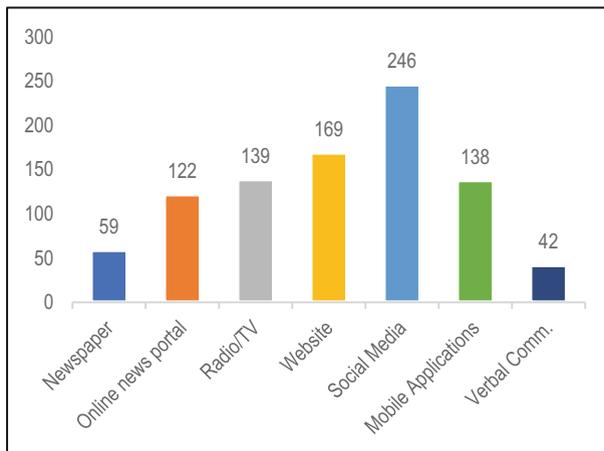


Fig. 1. Source of information

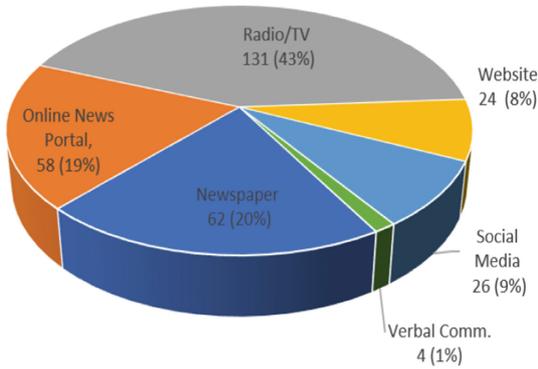


Fig. 2. Most trusted media source

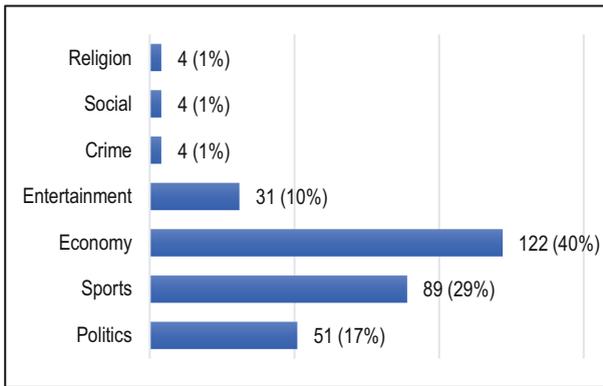


Fig. 3. Trusted media content

Overall, most of the participants believe that the media they utilize is pertinent and advantageous to their lives. This trend is evident in the data presented in Fig. 4. Out of the total 305 respondents involved in the study, 255 individuals, constituting approximately 84%, acknowledged the relevance of the media they use to themselves. Moreover, 265 respondents (87%) stated that the use of media has exerted an impact on their lives.

Among the five surveyed aspects of life, social issues stood out as having a significant impact, with 80.3% of respondents acknowledging its influence. These issues encompassed social relations, societal problems, quality of life, and community development. Many participants in the focus group study expressed that media information affected their perceptions and relationships with community members. Approximately 69.5% of respondents indicated that their educational choices and opportunities were influenced by media information. They emphasised that the knowledge acquired not only aided their present learning process but also played a crucial role in future educational planning. The political dimension surfaced as the third area of influence on the lives of the respondents, with 60.7% acknowledging that media information provided them with an understanding of politics and influenced their attitudes towards it. A notable proportion

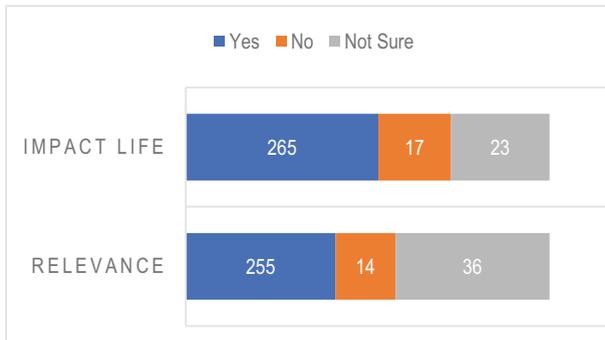


Fig. 4. Perceived of media consume

of participants in the focus groups (56.4%) expressed that media information helped them recognize and acquaint themselves with politicians and political affairs. Finally, the economic factor emerged as another area of impact, as media information facilitated a better understanding of finance and business matters in general.

Limited and unreliable Internet access emerges as a significant barrier to easy information accessibility, particularly considering the majority of respondents predominantly engage online. Approximately 29% of participants identified this issue as a problem. During interviews, respondents expressed their dissatisfaction with the efficiency of Internet Service Providers in delivering reliable Internet connectivity.

As depicted in Fig. 4, the second challenge encountered by respondents pertains to accessing newspapers. Around 21% of respondents stated that they do not subscribe to newspapers, while an additional 10% highlighted issues with newspaper distribution in their locality. Moreover, 7% of participants expressed concerns about the scarcity of public Internet access facilities or difficulties in finding outlets that offer print media. The third limitation is associated with lifestyle factors, including of limitations in acquiring information within a specific timeframe (17%) and language preferences for information delivery. This language barrier impacts the comfort level of individuals who prefer accessing information in their native languages, particularly among those with lower levels of education, as revealed by the focus group study findings (Fig. 5).

4.2 Information Ecosystem Challenges

Subsequently, the upcoming section will delve into the obstacles expressed by the samples concerning the information ecosystem. The analysis of these challenges is illustrated in Fig. 6.

Throughout the conducted survey, the main hurdle that surfaced was related to technical skills. A significant 73% of respondents identified it as the most crucial aspect to address. Despite actively using online media, many individuals lack the necessary skills to effectively manage information. In the focus group discussions, youth participants emphasised the need for skills in producing, processing, clarifying, and spreading information to their communities. They acknowledged their capability to utilise various

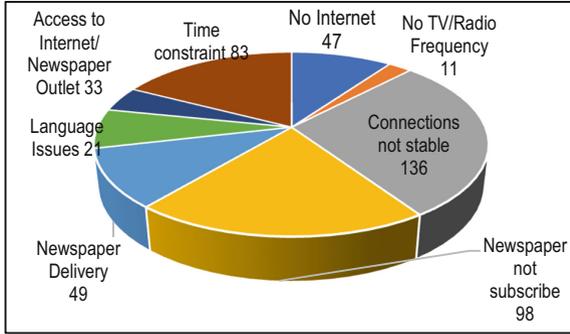


Fig. 5. Information access constraints

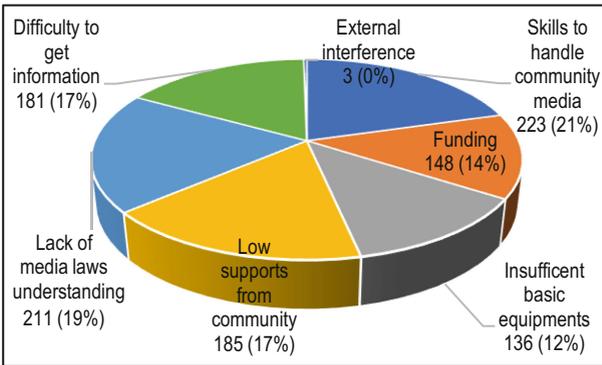


Fig. 6. Community-based information ecosystem constraints

online applications but conveyed a deficiency in efficiently operating them. This sentiment was shared by the majority of respondents, irrespective of their urban, suburban, or rural residence. Gender analysis also revealed a similar situation. While there is a good awareness of the right to information, effective information practices are still lacking.

The second aspect highlighted by respondents as important for establishing a sound information ecosystem is the understanding of legal matters. A total of 211 respondents, accounting for 69%, believed that the lack of comprehension regarding media and information laws impacts their behaviour in seeking and sharing information. Certain respondents voiced apprehension about expressing their opinions or sharing information due to concerns regarding potential legal infringements. The data also indicates that female respondents have a higher level of concern in this regard compared to male respondents.

The study's findings underscore the importance of community support, as emphasized by 61% of respondents, as an essential aspect that requires attention. According to the participants, to establish a robust information ecosystem, support from the local community and information-holding entities is crucial. Weak community support not only undermines motivation but also complicates the process of sharing and disseminating information. The focus group data reveals that one of the challenges faced is the

community's attitude, where youth are sometimes disregarded or considered less important. Additionally, differences in political ideologies further complicate the situation. The challenge of obtaining support from entities responsible for holding information is also emphasised as an issue requiring attention. The refusal to provide information or cooperate hampers the information ecosystem.

Undoubtedly, financial resources play a significant role in building a sound information ecosystem. Funding is necessary for educational initiatives, training programs, infrastructure development, and the management of an information society system. To engage the youth in the information ecosystem, adequate funds are needed to support and implement this agenda. According to the study findings, 46% of respondents acknowledge the significance of financial resources. According to the participants, a certain amount of funding should be allocated to initiate youth media communities in different areas. Financial resources are also required to provide essential operational facilities such as Internet subscriptions and basic media equipment. The allocation of funds for this agenda is perceived as a commitment that the government should undertake to achieve the goal of promoting information freedom at the grassroots level.

Setting up an information system network in the era of modern communication technology is now comparatively less challenging and intricate than it was in the past. With the Internet and electronic gadgets, the fundamental elements of an information ecosystem can be sustained. Having essential equipment is a prerequisite for the success of this ecosystem. Approximately 45% of respondents expressed that the lack of basic equipment poses a hindrance to the information ecosystem agenda. Interviews conducted with select focus groups revealed that the availability of a reliable Internet network is a fundamental requirement that demands attention. Some informants even emphasised the need not only for Internet facilities but also for a reliable network connectivity.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

The findings regarding community engagement in information ecosystems demonstrate that the youth exhibit high motivation to enhance these ecosystems. Their responses also highlight the importance of adopting integrated and comprehensive approaches to information sharing and delivery, which can lead to more favourable frameworks. Consequently, a more assertive campaign is needed to raise community awareness regarding information rights. Efforts in enforcing the law are also crucial to ensure a healthy and productive information environment. Additionally, public authorities and corporate entities should demonstrate greater professionalism in recognizing and upholding the right to information (RTI).

When asked to provide recommendations for improving information ecosystems, the respondents put forth several key suggestions. One fundamental recommendation pertained to infrastructure, highlighting the need for improved Internet speed and access despite Malaysia's already high Internet penetration rate. A majority of respondents expressed agreement on the importance of having more reliable mobile phone and Internet connections. Additionally, respondents emphasized the importance of implementing supportive regulations to enhance the information environment for youth.

Political interference and a lack of community support were identified as major challenges in establishing community media. While advocating for increased political pressure to promote media freedom, respondents also stressed the importance of enhancing young people's understanding and familiarity with these issues. They suggested empowering society through platforms such as community-based media to cultivate stronger information ecosystems. To achieve this, the youth expressed the need for access to digital skills, sufficient funding, and relevant knowledge.

In general, the respondents expressed their desire for community media outputs to contribute to the development of information ecosystems. They believed that cutting-edge information ecosystems could be built upon the innovations and technology of new media. Furthermore, a more robust and adaptable model of information ecosystems could emerge by gradually shifting values, culture, and empowering the community system.

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