



BUILDING A MORE ROBUST AND RESILIENT INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM

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On 15 February 2020, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the director-general of the World Health Organisation (WHO) said that "we're not just fighting an epidemic; we're fighting an infodemic".¹ This much was true and remains so two years later. At any given time, much is talked about the novel coronavirus and the vaccines for it – some truthful, some less so, and some false.

Worryingly is how no one truly knows the extent of Covid-19 misinformation circulating online. Indications, however, can be drawn from the number of fact-checks published worldwide. For example, the International Fact Checking Network's (IFCN) Coronavirus Facts Alliance (CFA) has published more than 16,000 fact-checks from 86 countries since its formation in January 2020.² This means that on average, CFA published at least 640 fact-checks a month, 160 fact-checks a week, or 22 fact-checks a day since Covid-19 was detected. At home, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission's *Sebenarnya.my* fact-checking platform has published almost 600 Covid-19-related fact-checks and clarifications over the same period.

The consequences of which are concerning. One study claimed that in the first three months of 2020, nearly 6,000 people were hospitalised and 800 might have died because of coronavirus misinformation.³ This, however, is debatable because a group of Iranians, who died from methanol poisoning, could have skewed the numbers. It remains unclear whether those who perished had done so to prevent or treat Covid-19 infection or were doing it for pleasure, mistaking it for ordinary alcohol.

Regardless of whether those deaths could be attributed to misinformation, health-related misinformation circulating since the start of the pandemic can have implications on health-related decisions and behaviours.

For example, it may lead to a reluctance to adhere to public safety advice, downplaying of the risks associated with Covid-19 and hesitancy to receive vaccination.

Loomba et al attempted to quantify the latter: the relationship between exposure to online misinformation on Covid-19 vaccines with intentions to vaccinate. His randomised controlled trial of 8,001 respondents (4,000 in the United Kingdom and 4,001 in the United States) shows that exposure to misinformation lowers the intent to accept a vaccine among people who would otherwise "definitely" accept the vaccine by 6.2% in the UK and 6.4% in the US, relative to the control group.⁴

The potential harm does not stop there. Any semblance of successful pandemic management requires the cooperation of the whole of society. This means that a minority's misinformed decision can have further implications for the rest of the community.

FIGURE 1. Number of Malaysians who consider fake news a problem

9 in 10 Malaysians consider fake news a problem



Source: MCMC Internet Users Survey 2020

Worryingly, 92.3% of respondents to MCMC's Internet Users Survey 2020, conducted during the first year of the pandemic, considered fake news a problem in Malaysia.

Efforts so far

In Malaysia, efforts to contain and limit the consequences of Covid-19 misinformation falls into three categories: (1) public service announcements to highlight, among others, the need to vaccinate, how it is safe to do so, and warnings about false information circulating online; (2) fact-checking initiatives led by *Sebenarnya.my*, the dedicated Quick Response Team under the Ministry of Communications and Multimedia, and complemented by various media and civil society fact-checkers; and (3) legislation, such as Section 505(b) of the Penal Code, Section 233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998, and the now-repealed Emergency (Essential Powers) (No. 2) Ordinance.

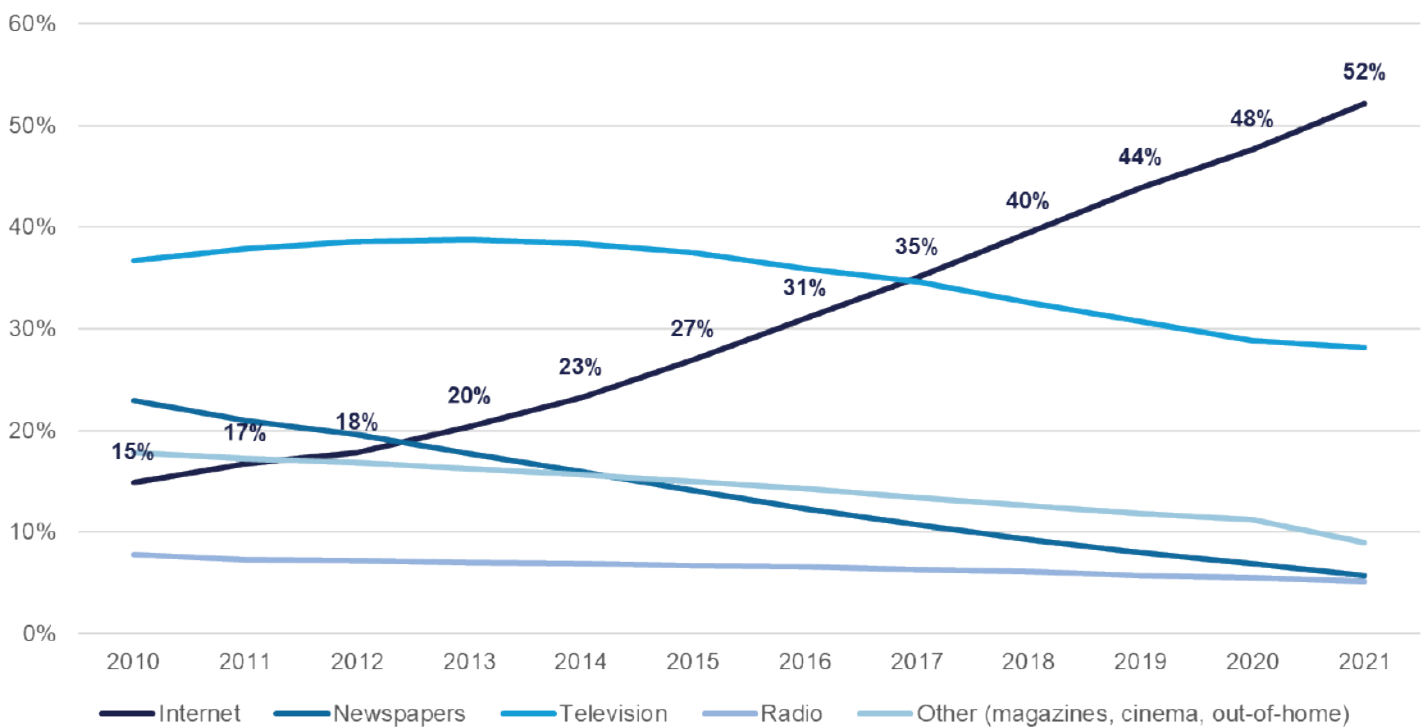
As Malaysia proceeds towards the endemic phase of Covid-19, some lessons are worth remembering moving forward. This can be applicable for future pandemics, of which scientists are already warning of, and other related disasters, such as the impending climate crisis. In this article, I highlight three: (1) how the news media ecosystem needs to be economically and politically viable; (2) how a laissez-faire approach towards social media platforms is no longer tenable; and (3) the need to improve our legislation. These will act as the foundation to safeguard and build resilience of the information environment for the next infodemic.

News media must be economically viable

Amid the deluge of misinformation circulating during times of crisis, the role played by the news media – such as print, radio and television – as a trustworthy source of authoritative and credible information cannot be understated. Yet, the ability of the news media to play this role has been undermined by decreasing advertisement revenues over the past decade, primarily attributed to shifting consumption patterns from print to online.⁵

FIGURE 2. Share of global advertising expenditure by medium over time

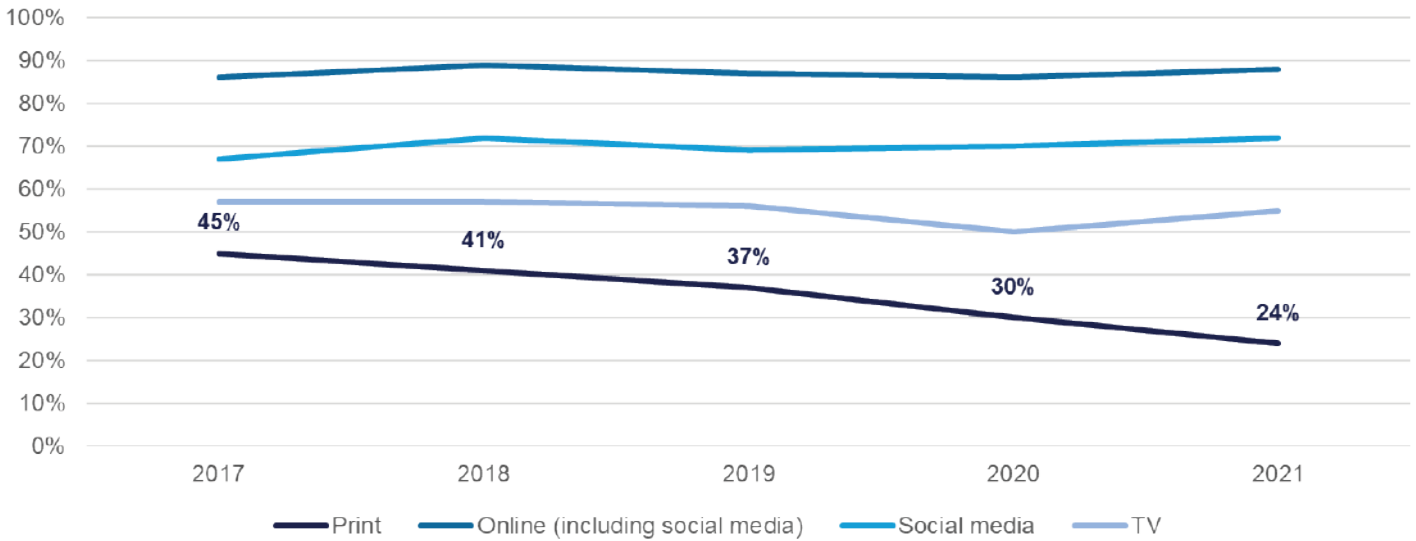
Internet advertising made up more than 50% of global advertising expenditure in 2021



Source: UNESCO

FIGURE 3. Sources of news in Malaysia

Print as a source of news decreased by 46% over the past 5 years

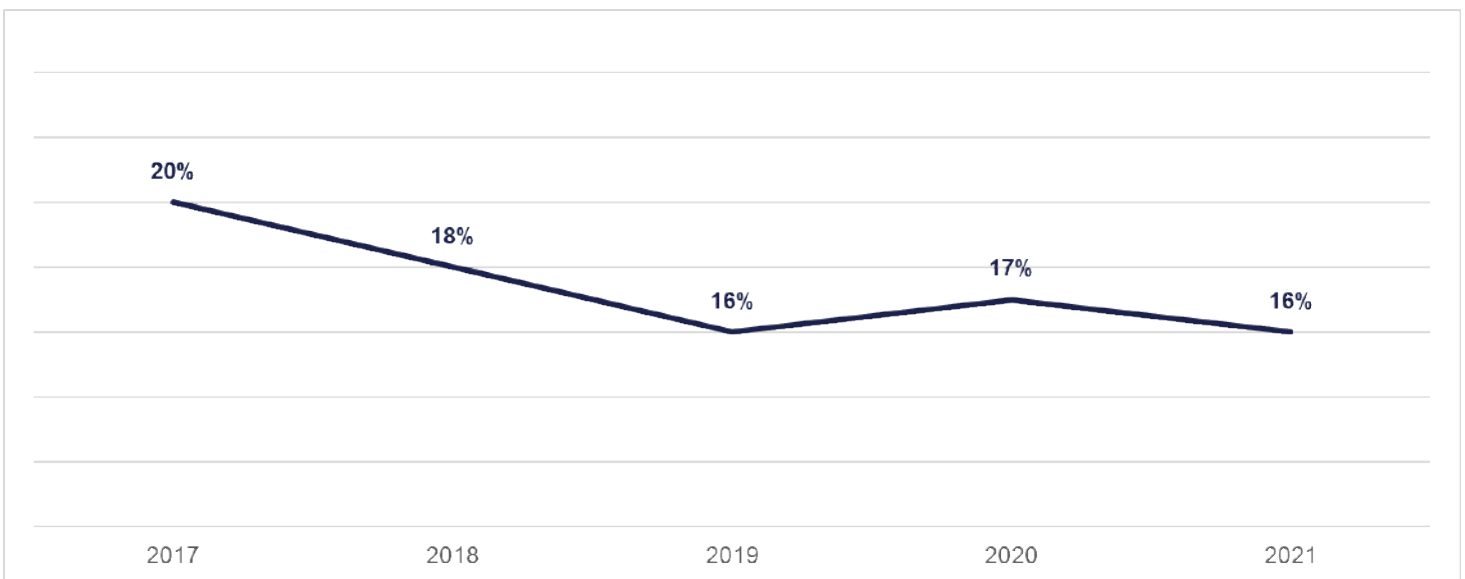


Source: Reuters Institute 2021

According to Premesh Chandran, former CEO of Malaysiakini, this change in news consumption pattern has resulted in almost 1,000 times lower advertisement revenues per day. This is attributed to tech giants, such as Google and Facebook (now Meta), offering advertising at much lower rates to larger audiences as opposed to media companies.⁶

FIGURE 4. Percentage of Malaysians paying for online news

Percentage of respondents paying for online news in Malaysia decreased



Source: Reuters Institute 2021

This is further exacerbated by how levels of paid news subscriptions remain incredibly low at 16%, according to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021.⁷

Taken together, these are not good signs for the news media's economic viability in Malaysia. Falling advertisement revenue and the lack of paid subscribers would limit the ability and capacity of newsrooms. This comes at a time when more is being demanded of newsrooms – to practise higher journalistic standards, which entail more time spent per news piece; to provide time- and resource-consuming fact-checks; and to create more engaging content. This is against the backdrop of journalists facing heightened risks while conducting their work during the pandemic.⁸

It is clear that there is need for a more equitable distribution of digital revenue. Australia's News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code is one example that can be considered.⁹ The code, intended to ensure news media are fairly remunerated for the content they create, achieves this by addressing the bargaining power imbalance between digital platforms, such as Google and Meta, with local news businesses.¹⁰ This follows a similar payout by Google to French publishers for news snippets used in search results.¹¹

Consideration can also be given for a portion of the Malaysian service tax on digital services by foreign service providers to be earmarked for news purposes.¹² This would funnel funds from foreign digital service providers, including from digital advertising, back to Malaysian newsrooms and media companies.

Lastly, there needs to be a gradual cultural shift among Malaysians towards paying for the news they consume. This would also allow newsrooms to be more independent and move away from the current model of relying on external funders, especially those with political connections which could affect real and perceived independence.

Social media transparency and regulation

Social media platforms have come under tremendous fire over the course of the pandemic, with perhaps US President Joe Biden's comment that they are "killing people" with misinformation among the harshest.¹³ Regardless of whether one agrees with his assessment or not, it cannot be denied that social media platforms play a role – whether it is active, or passive is debatable – in the spread of false information during this pandemic.

Responses to Covid-19 misinformation by social media platforms¹⁴

	Facebook	Instagram	YouTube	Twitter	LinkedIn	Snapchat	Reddit	TikTok	Twitch	Messenger	WhatsApp
Prohibits Covid-19 misinformation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	×	×	×
Has a Covid-19 misinformation policy	✓	✓	✓	✓	×	×	×	×	×	×	×

On one hand, credit should be given to the eight platforms that prohibit Covid-19 misinformation and the four that has introduced a specific Covid-19 misinformation policy. Further credit can be given for the platforms' diligent publications of transparency reports over the past 24 months. Yet on the other hand, questions remain over whether these policies

have been sufficiently and fairly applied not just in key markets in the West, but also in the developing world. Further questions remain on whether these are adequate, particularly in light of how misinformation remains a problem in these platforms.

From a policy response standpoint, the lack of granularity in the transparency reports means that what exactly is circulating in these platforms remain largely unknown – despite previous work to try to understand this better. (For example, my past work here and here.) This information gap is problematic as it limits policymakers' understanding of the specificity of the issue(s) at hand and blunts the accuracy of counter-messaging efforts.

Here are a few considerations for future references.

The first is to de-platform and defund accounts seeking to profit from Covid-19 misinformation, inclusive of those selling cures that go against the consensus of medical opinion. Defunding and de-platforming have been demonstrated to be a feasible approach towards problematic content, as seen during the Russo-Ukrainian war.¹⁵

The second is for Malaysian policymakers to follow US Surgeon-General Dr Vivek Murthy's request to social media companies to disclose the sources of Covid-19 misinformation, its extent and targeted audience.¹⁶ This can allow Malaysian policymakers and policy communicators to be more targeted in counter-messaging efforts. On transparency, further calls need to be made for social media companies to disclose how exactly do their algorithms treat user-generated content – what type of content is prioritised, how this is determined, and what safeguards are in place to protect the integrity of online discourse.

Third, would be to begin discussions towards a standardised format for transparency reports – including scope of content. This will allow policymakers and researchers to better compare the content-moderation efforts across platforms and assess whether self-regulation is working as intended. Should this be found lacking, processes to identify local standards for content moderation must start now. This is to align the types of content permissible on social media to a Malaysian audience. This is by no means calling for cultural relativism when it comes to free speech rights, but rather a sober recognition of the downsides of a laissez faire approach adopted by the US, where these companies are often based, towards content moderation. It goes without saying that these local standards must be jointly identified by the government together with civil society, especially free-speech defenders to mitigate the risks of censorship.

Regulating free speech

The pandemic had exposed how ill-equipped our legislations are to address an imperfect information environment. For example, the Emergency (Essential Powers) (No. 2) Ordinance 2021 (EO2) introduced during the Emergency repeats the problems with previous legislations meant to address "fake news" – never mind that it was a copy of the repealed Anti-Fake News Act 2018.

Section 4 of EO2, together with the two other legislations used to address "fake news", Section 233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act (CMA) 1998 and Section 505(b) of the Penal Code, sets the bar incredibly low for content to be potentially infringing these legislations. Further, the same provision in EO2 and the Penal Code only requires the content to be "likely to cause" the low threshold of harm, making actual intent secondary.

This is problematic and concerning during the infodemic, where there is "an overabundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it".¹⁷

When coupled with the push factors of low digital literacy skills among the people and a constantly evolving science and muddled information environment, the desire to share "helpful" information among friends and families during the pandemic runs the magnified risk of falling afoul of these laws.

In moving forward, what is sorely needed is a paradigm shift from one seemingly focused on vaguely defined and broadly applicable legislations to ones specifically addressing the types of harm intended to be regulated. For example, if it is anti-vaccine information, then the legislation should guard against that. Ergo for other types of false information that causes harm, such as those affecting the integrity of democratic discourse (like deepfakes of politicians), and those resulting in racial and religious tensions.

With specific legislations, the public can then be better able to regulate their conduct appropriately. Here, it is worth remembering Blackstone's ratio that "it is better that 10 guilty persons escape than one innocent suffers". No innocent person should be exposed to the indignity of being accused to have committed a crime and having to go through the traumatising investigation and trial processes.

As we step into the third year of Covid-19 and as we prepare for future crises that could see knock-on implications on our information environment, the policy investments must be made now. Only then will the information environment be more resilient in the face of future challenges. As with most experiences with Covid-19, it shed light on deficiencies in existing systems and ways of doing things, and the onus is now on policymakers to ensure that these lessons are learned before the next crisis hits.

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Endnotes

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