JOURNAL OF COMMUNICATION, LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Views from Journalists: Social Media Practice in Malaysian Newsrooms

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Abstract

Social media has transformed the world of journalism and opened up channels for greater communication between journalists and news organisations with the public. This research aims to identify the perception of Malaysian journalists on the use of social media in the newsrooms. In addition, the research discusses the use of social media in the journalistic practice of Malaysian newsrooms. Snowball sampling was adopted for in-depth interviews with journalists from various Malaysian news organisations. Findings suggest that the majority of Malaysian journalists view the adoption of social media positively as a medium to engage with the audience of the news organisation. While social media algorithm has their benefits, journalists expressed concerns over its technology that could lead to an invasion of privacy and confirmation bias. Finally, findings suggest that though social media adoption in newsrooms is seen as beneficial in many aspects of journalistic work, journalists are cautious about adopting its technology due to ethical concerns. This signifies the awareness of media literacy among journalists interviewed. This study addresses the lack of non-Western literature on social media newsroom practices. It contributes to the literature on newsroom practice in Malaysia and social media practice among journalists in nations of the South.

Keywords: social media; newsrooms; journalists; algorithms; Malaysia
Received 12 May 2024 **Accepted** 27 August 2024 **Published** Jan 2025

Journal of Communication, Language and Culture
doi: https://doi.org/10.33093/jclc.2025.5.1.3
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Published by MMU PRESS. URL: https://journals.mmupress.com/jclc

Introduction

The introduction of social media as an everyday practice in various sectors has impacted the world of journalism. The media revolution has increased the power of the digital world by using social media such as Facebook and Twitter to freely disseminate information to anyone, anywhere, at any time, making the news media industry more complex and condensed (Ahmad, 2017). Therefore, the need for social media literacy has become more crucial than before since its utilisation in newsrooms become commonplace. Social media literacy is defined by content, competencies, and the interrelations between the two (Cho et al., 2022). This includes the awareness, understanding and knowledge necessary to attain social media literacy as well as the skills and abilities for demonstrating them (Cho et al., 2022).

The effectiveness of any technological change in journalism, such as the introduction of social media in everyday journalistic practice, will require knowledge of social media literacy among journalists and those working in news organisations. Numerous studies have analysed the role of social media in various aspects of newsrooms. However, most are within the Western context. This study aims to find the use of social media in the context of Malaysian newsrooms. It aims to answer the following research questions:

Research questions

1. What is the perception of Malaysian journalists on the use of social media in newsrooms?
2. How is the use of social media in the journalistic practice of Malaysian newsrooms?

Social media adoption in newsrooms is perceived positively among Malaysian journalists as its adoption has many advantages. However, journalists have limitations on algorithm advancements that they view as concerning. While journalists welcome the use of social media accounts in their job tasks, especially for audience engagement, they also emphasise the need to adhere to journalistic ethics.

Literature Review

Social media makes it more convenient for journalists to share crucial information, and it helps inform the community of breaking news immediately, besides providing detailed illustrations of the moment of the incident. The knowledge of social media has become compulsory for all journalists as its adoption in news production is inevitable.

There is a rapid increase in TV news organisations preoccupied with assigning journalists to social media journalism, hoping to attract, engage, and grow their audiences (Al Yousufi, 2019). Similarly, legacy news organisations such as The New York Times, the BBC, and AP Press are among many news organisations focusing on social media as part of their news production and engagement (Gleason, 2010). Within myriads of social media types, Twitter is the preferred journalism platform. Twitter, in particular, has been widely adopted in newsrooms to become an integral part of journalist toolkit for journalists to monitor social media for breaking news and content, find sources and eyewitnesses (Heravi & Harrower, 2016), besides demanding journalists to engage with their audience and readers. Nevertheless, journalists face various challenges in their social media adoption. For example, one study has highlighted the dilemma of journalists in self-identifying as professional journalists and individuals with personal views and expressions while utilising Twitter in their everyday tasks (Hanusch & Bruns, 2017).

Further, the use of social media among journalists is challenged by issues within the operationalisation of algorithms. Algorithms in social media have become the determinant factor to the

rules of its operations, making one social media platform unique over the other. Therefore, social media and algorithms exist as one. The increased prominence of algorithms as decision-making tools and their utilisation across multiple domains have shaped our knowledge practices (Carlson, 2019). Algorithms mediate communication on social media in ways that transform communication, relationships, and society (Taylor & Choi, 2022). This situation may lead to other causes of concern among journalists, such as increased confirmation bias.

While the normative role of a journalist remains similar to the past, its journalistic epistemologies have been transformed through digital social media platforms such as Twitter. If journalists approach technology in the workplace with a sceptical mindset, it will be burdensome (Heravi & Harrower, 2016). As a result, journalists are always expected to establish themselves, keep up with current events, and be trustworthy sources. The use of Twitter in newsrooms by journalists could help in building a strong web profile. This is especially relevant to suit the demands of younger news consumers, particularly Gen Z, who are raised in the digital media age.

Nevertheless, one previous study on Australian journalists' use of Twitter identified three broad areas of concern, which are transparency and accountability practised by journalists, the way news is gathered from sources obtained via social media, and the ability of journalists to attract readers and sustain relationships (Hanusch & Bruns, 2017). Since each country is unique, this study intends to identify journalists' perceptions and social media use in Malaysian newsrooms.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach through a non-probability sampling method. In snowball sampling, respondents are requested to suggest different individuals with suitable characteristics to be studied (Krejice & Morgan, 1970). Snowball sampling was chosen in this study due to the ability of interviewed journalists to recommend their colleagues for the study. However, it is difficult to get the time of some journalists as promised, and some did not answer the questions, accordingly, resulting in the need to find a substitute reporter.

According to McCracken (1988), eight informants are ample when conducting in-depth interviews. Meanwhile, a study on the use of Twitter by journalists in the Netherlands interviewed 12 journalists (Schultz & Sheffer, 2012). This study interviewed ten journalists from various Malaysian news organisations such as mainstream television channels TV3, rolling news channel Awani, some Malaysian dailies and online news portals.

The first three questions required informants to provide some basic background information, such as age, experience, and education level, while other questions were directed to answer the research question. All interviewed journalists have different experiences in journalism, and the selected journalists have experience between 2 and 10 years. All interviews were manually transcribed and translated into English before data analysis was conducted. It took approximately 3 weeks to transcribe the interviews from all reporters, with about 3 hours spent per reporter transcript. Thematic analysis is considered the most appropriate for any research study aiming to discover through interpretation (Alhojailan, 2012). Therefore, the data were analysed using thematic analysis. Themes and sub-themes were created from the data collected.

Findings and Discussion

This section is divided into two parts. The first part of the findings section answers the following research question: What is the perception of Malaysian journalists on the use of social media in newsrooms?

Social media engagements are rewarding.

Findings from the first research question suggest that social media is perceived as advantageous among journalists in newsrooms. Therefore, multiplatform distribution is a way to engage journalists and news organisations with their audience by emphasising social media practices in newsrooms. The public is the audience for an organisation's media, and in Malaysia, many people do not access news via television. Instead, the news is accessed via social media platforms through mobile phones. Therefore, news organisations must follow the demands of the changing times.

According to Informant 1, a journalist for the Malaysian National News Agency (BERNAMA), "People have moved from the more traditional platforms, moving away from newspaper or television to social media platforms". Therefore, news organisations are moving from the traditional media approach towards social media platforms for better audience engagement. This is especially important for smaller, newly established news portals such as The Vibes, The Malaya Post and Weirdkaya, a newly launched independent Malaysian news website with the tagline "Malaysian's Daily Dose of Social Media Stories". New emerging independent news portals add competition to traditional news platforms as they are designed and established by younger creators with social media in mind. Thus, it enables smoother connection with younger audiences who are mostly social media savvy. The situation pushes high demand on the need for multiplatform in Malaysian newsrooms. According to a journalist who works for a Malaysian private television news channel, TV3:

> We have competition with other social media applications. For example, newspaper news has started to switch to digital so that their news gets published on Facebook and Twitter (Informant 5, Reporter from TV3)

In 2010, TV3 became the first Malaysian TV station to have its Twitter account @BuletinTV3 followed by other news networks (Hamzah & Esa, 2020). Meanwhile, Astro Awani, a Malaysian rolling news channel, promotes its journalist's personal Twitter accounts as a step towards audience engagement. The move in 2012 has resulted in the news channel gaining more followers than the other six mainstream media Twitter accounts, with a following of 1.6 million (Hamzah & Esa, 2020). The news organisation has also been identified as the most trusted news source in the country (Newman et al., 2020). The high number of Twitter followers demonstrates not only the use of Twitter by the news organisation's journalists but, more importantly, reflects the transparency and credible image of the rolling news channel among Malaysian news consumers. Hedman (2016) cited previous studies that have argued that transparency helps build trust, relationships, and binding loyalty between news organisations and target audiences (Hedman, 2016). Additionally, a positive image of a news organisation will ultimately boost its brand in the industry. A previous study contends that journalists are encouraged to promote organisational branding (Holton & Molyneux, 2017), which is partly achievable through using Twitter in newsroom practice.

Social media enables a wide range of actors to actively participate in an issue as consumers, providers, and disseminators of knowledge (Qerimi & Gërguri, 2022). Findings suggest that besides greater audience engagement, social media is also a platform for journalists to obtain information from various community sources. Further, interviews suggest that many official sources, such as politicians and

ministries, post official information on social media. Journalists use social media, particularly Twitter, to obtain credible information from official sources. According to a journalist working for BERNAMA:

> YB Khairy (the then Minister of Health, Malaysia), for example, is active on Twitter. Sometimes, he answers questions on Twitter, and those answers can be made into news. So I think social media plays a big role (Informant 2, Reporter from BERNAMA)

Thirdly, features within social media can ease a journalist's task of searching for information. Search optimisation and keyword search through hashtags help journalists search for relevant references. For example, to search on the issue of "food crisis in Malaysia", a journalist needs to include a hashtag together with the keyword "food crisis" to obtain relevant news and information about the topic. The use of hashtags is not uncommon, particularly on Twitter, where hashtags are argued to be used as an index for a topic of discussion (Omena et al., 2020). Besides to use hashtags to search for relevant information, journalists must be able to identify relevant hashtags to be included in their social media news posts to increase audience traction. According to one reporter who works for Sinar Harian, a Malaysian news organisation:

> Yes, it is easy to use because of keywords and the use of hashtags, like on Twitter. We can use what is trending and the news will get attention or will be picked up by many parties. So, the right hashtag is important. (Informant 7, Reporter from Sinar Harian)

Journalistic search optimisation is also aided by algorithms set by designated social media platforms. Algorithms, to some extent, help shape journalistic newsroom practice from news gathering to delivery. Findings from the study suggest journalists have mixed views on the use of social media and algorithms in Malaysian newsrooms, as explained next.

Mixed views on social media and algorithms

Algorithms are instructions or rules that are computer-generated and aim to provide a solution to problems that arise. The Cambridge Dictionary defines algorithms as a set of mathematical instructions or rules given to a computer that helps calculate an answer to a problem (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). Social media algorithms are computational models for transforming data into personalised content that populates a person's social feeds, such as the Facebook News Feed or TikTok's "For You Page" (Taylor & Choi, 2022). In social media, algorithms help channel posts and accounts similar to the user's liking. According to one informant from TV3:

> Algorithms have many advantages. For instance, it filters our social media according to our interests. Things we like will appear more frequently than others (Informant 9, Reporter from TV3)

The algorithm plays an important area in journalism. This is because algorithms are a method for news organisations to connect with their audience. This is done using keywords or trending words on social media posts. However, some journalists believe that algorithms have their downsides. The content seen by social media users is often influenced by algorithms that create filters and make social media platform users more vulnerable to confirmation bias and may be more exposed to biased and misleading information. For example, when using social media, an individual who does not know about vaccines may accidentally press "like" content related to anti-vaccine. Every time he uses social media, only content related to anti-vaccine will appear on his feed. This can be confusing and biased. According to a journalist from Utusan Malaysia, a Malaysian daily:

> Algorithms on social media, I think they cause biases but this is my personal opinion. Do you know why? When we see something interesting, we like it or it attracts our attention. It doesn't matter if we hate it or don't like it, it attracts our attention. In social media, if you like something near a post, then the tone of another post is similar to the post you like. The post will appear and it doesn't matter if you follow it or not the account. If you don't follow, it will still appear and causes confirmation bias because we are seeing an issue from one side of the story" (Informant 10, Reporter from Utusan Malaysia)

One previous study contends that confirmation bias drives one's understanding and decision-making in news consumption (Distera Adeline & Ahmad, 2022). Findings further suggest that some journalists believe algorithms interfere with their privacy because the information shared on social media platforms, such as sharing the location while being in a certain place, causes advertisements about that place to appear on their social media feeds. This is because the information has been taken by a third party to promote products and services. Indirectly, the individual feels insecure because a third person has used the shared information without realising it. According to one journalist working for the Malay Mail:

> It interferes with my privacy because something accidentally appears on my social media page and I accidentally click "like" and after that, so many links start to appear. Unconsciously I start liking and buying things they promote" (Informant 4, Reporter from Malay Mail)

The excerpt above indicates other dilemmas journalists face when using social media in everyday practice. Nonetheless, self-control is needed when reading and consuming news via social media. As the reporter from Nikkei Asia says:

> Some people might say it might intrude on your privacy but I would say that if you use it sparingly, then no privacy will be intruded (Informant 3, International Correspondent from Nikkei Asia)

This section has explained Malaysian journalists' perception regarding social media use in newsrooms in Malaysia. Findings suggest journalists see social media use as advantageous in newsrooms but have reservations when expressing their views regarding algorithms within social media.

The second part of this findings section aims to answer the second research question: How is social media used in the journalistic practice of Malaysian newsrooms?

Journalists and the use of personal social media accounts

Findings from this section suggest that journalists in Malaysian newsrooms use personal social media accounts for several reasons. Firstly, journalists acknowledge that using social media is a cost-reducing strategy for news organisations to help reduce the cost of production. According to one reporter from Nikkei Asia:

> The main reason that news organisations adapt to social media platforms is due to its cost-effectiveness. It is also a way for news organisations to gain online subscribers to their news sites. (Informant 3, International Correspondent from Nikkei Asia)

Secondly, organisational media engagement with the community is very important since most people rely on social media to get the latest news. Journalists need social media accounts to engage with their audience so that they are able to gauge the understanding and acceptance of the content produced. Journalists who are savvy in approaching the audience can improve their image and the image of the organisation they represent. Findings suggest that among popular social media applications that journalists in Malaysia use are Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok. These findings align with a previous study on Malaysian journalists working for a mainstream news organisation, which suggests the popularity of Twitter as part of newsroom sources and contributors (Hamzah & Esa, 2020).

Findings further suggest that some news organisations provide journalists with social media accounts as part of their engagement and cost-saving strategy. However, this only applies to the social media platform Twitter. Twitter accounts of journalists have the name of the journalist followed by the name of the organisation. For example, Norfazilah Mohd Sahir @ FazyNewsMPB. Therefore, information discussed at work will be tweeted by journalists through their official personal Twitter account and then retweeted by their organisation. According to a journalist working for TV3:

> In our company, we do set up a Twitter account. We do have a personal account; at the same time we have an account provided by the company. We use company names a lot because we have formal names. Sometimes for personal names, we use nicknames instead of glamourous names, so it is advised or encouraged to use the social media accounts that have been provided by this company so that it looks professional and standardised (with other journalists) (Informant 9, Reporter from TV3)

Meanwhile, another journalist commented on the following:

> We will tweet information. Information from the workplace where we do not have to wait until the news is published but will give input. For example, I am covering the news about the Prime Minister announcing something so I will tweet and my tweet will be retweeted by our official bulletin page TV3 (Informant 5, Reporter for TV3)

Journalists need to practice using social media prudently, whether using a personal social media account or an official personal social media account provided by the organisation. This is because journalists represent a media organisation. Therefore, journalists believe that setting limits when using personal accounts is important to protect the reputation of a journalist and the organisation represented. Clear references must be indicated for any personal views expressed on social media. According to a journalist from TV3, "We are free to comment on many issues as long as there is a disclaimer that it is a personal view and it does not involve the organisation" (Informant 5, Reporter from TV3).

Findings suggest journalists share some ways that can be practised to set limits when using social media. Firstly, there is the need to refrain from sharing sensitive issues since Malaysia is a multiracial, multi-ethnic and multireligious nation. Secondly, journalists need to think before posting anything on social media and ensure that words do not incite hatred or anger among citizens. Therefore, journalists need to re-read the written sentence before sharing. Information or views shared will be read by many people. Therefore, the statement shared must be professional and not personal.

One previous study on journalists in New Zealand suggests journalists routinely vent their frustration on social media about official information obstruction, particularly on politically sensitive newsworthy details (Robbie, 2018). However, in Malaysia, journalists believe that not everything can be shared on a journalist's social media, including politically sensitive information. Journalists need to ensure

that the shared idea does not involve the organisation and criticise any (political) party. Views provided must be fair and balanced as the public will read them. Therefore, they should not be emotionally attached to any specific issues in their social media postings. According to journalists from TV3 and Utusan Malaysia, a Malaysian daily:

> One must not use vulgar or harsh words as it is not professional. A journalist must know his limits on whether an issue can be shared or not and how much information about an issue should be shared (Informant 5, reporter from TV3)

In addition to refraining from expressing personal feelings, interviewed journalists believe in maintaining facts when presenting information, even if it does not meet their preferences. In a nation where politics is a highly preferred topic of discussion, journalists cannot convey information based on their preference or the content shared will be seen as skewed and biased. According to a journalist from Astro Awani, "We journalists cannot take sides. First of all, we should not be biased towards any (political) party for each of our posts" (Informant 8, Reporter from Astro Awani).

Further, journalists must follow guidelines set by their work organisation. Each news organisation in Malaysia has its own guidelines and work ethics, which journalists should follow. Interviewed journalists believe the guidelines provided by the organisation they work for have carefully stated that they should not express anger or write according to emotions. Journalists are subjected to their employment contract, which they agree to and will abide by. Violation of the terms will have repercussions for the journalist. According to the International Correspondent from Nikkei Asia:

> We need to adhere to our internal guidelines of social etiquette. We cannot use social media to express our emotions, it is very clear in our employment contract (Informant 3, International Correspondent from Nikkei Asia)

Thus, journalists in Malaysia use social media whilst adhering to the basics of journalistic ethics, such as fair and balanced reporting. Further, journalists use social media to engage with the public at large.

Engagement between journalists and the public at large

Engagement with the community is the interaction between journalists and the community. The purpose of engaging with the community is to encourage the community to read or watch the news produced. According to journalists interviewed, the existence of social media facilitates communication with the community. The transition from traditional to digital media helps create two-way communication where the public can provide opinions, ask questions regarding the news broadcast and get feedback from journalists and news organisations. This shows that journalists have a role in engaging with the public and acting as an intermediary for organisations to reach a wider audience. According to a journalist from TV3:

> This social media actually makes our work easier. We can get closer to the audience easily and quickly. Ten years ago, we did not have this kind of involvement with the community, we just focused on spreading the news. (Informant 9, Reporter from TV3)

Findings suggest journalists have different approaches to engaging with their public. However, all journalists interviewed agreed that using a personal social media account helps them reach their audience,

and that engagement is very important. As informant 5, a reporter from TV3 mentioned in a May interview, "Yes, I agree that our engagement with the community is very important".

Among the methods used to approach the audience on social media is to share activities at work. Journalists who go to a workplace, such as a press conference will share brief information about the conference through their personal social media accounts before it is shared on the official news organisation's social media page or broadcast on television. This attracts the public to watch the news later.

Audience engagement is heightened in times of crisis. For instance, during a major flood incident in Malaysia, journalists received feedback from their social media followers to help flood victims in places where the news was reported. According to a journalist:

> In the flood, we had a behind-the-scenes story and it went viral. Many people commented saying they want to come down to help. Not only people but Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) came down (to help). The good thing is we can be close to the local community with social media. (Informant 8, Reporter from Astro Awani)

Another method utilised by journalists for audience engagement is through the 'live' sharing of assigned events. Journalists will opt for 'live' social media reports, especially when reporting in places that are not common or allowed for public entrance. According to Informant 7, a journalist from Sinar Harian, “I will always do live on Facebook. Let's say I went to a place ordinary people can't follow, such as the palace. So, I'll do it live”.

Audience engagement through social media provides many benefits for journalists and the public. Interviews with journalists suggest that through audience engagement via social media, journalists help to reduce fake news on viral issues which are found to be fake. Social media engagement enables journalists to approach their audience while the audience comments or re-shares the post. Indirectly, journalists help reduce the spread of fake news. According to Informant 5, a reporter from TV3, "I try to always be a commentator on current issues, especially issues that may be misunderstood by the audience."

Social media has been widely used as a platform for the distribution of fake news. Therefore, the correct use of social media through audience engagement benefits both journalists and the public. The involvement of journalists in social media is significant to strengthen the relationship between journalists and the public. This section has discussed the use of social media in the journalistic practice of Malaysian newsrooms. It discusses the various methods journalists use to engage with their audience whilst utilising various social media platforms.

This study aims to answer two research questions: Malaysian journalists' perception of social media applications in newsrooms and how journalists use these social media platforms in their journalistic practice. Findings for the first research question have identified that most journalists have an optimistic view of adopting social media in newsrooms. Social media use eases journalistic work, such as obtaining information from sources and increasing audience engagement. However, journalists have mixed views regarding algorithms in social media. While some view algorithms as an advantage towards audience engagement, others are sceptical and cautious over their role. Journalists voiced their concern over confirmation bias and invasion of privacy.

Findings on the use of social media among Malaysian journalists suggest that most have personal social media accounts or accounts specifically created by the news organisations they work for. This is part of the news organisation's cost-reduction strategy and increasing audience engagement. Most journalists adopt Twitter as their most favoured social media for news gathering, production and delivery.

In their social media adoption, findings in this study suggest that journalists are aware of journalistic ethics and aspects of balanced and fair reporting are emphasised in their practices. This shows that social media adoption is practised within the ethical limitations of a journalist.

Conclusion

Malaysian journalists are cautious about the ethical issues guiding their social media activities. However, there is a vague line between sharing posts as a journalist representing a news organisation versus sharing posts as a journalist and a Malaysian citizen with personal views on various issues. Therefore, in their social media use, journalists will encounter a continuous struggle to maintain a boundary between their personal and professional lives in posting information deemed "suitable" on their social media accounts.

In addition, the lack of privacy faced by journalists due to third-party access is a concern that needs to be addressed. The Personal Data Protection Act (PDPA) 2010 guides the data protection of individuals in Malaysia. Non-compliant individuals will be liable to a fine not exceeding five hundred thousand ringgit or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding three years or both (Percetakan Nasional Malaysia Berhad, 2010). Although the law that governs the PDPA 2010 is in place, Malaysia is ranked the 11th most data-breached country in the second quarter of 2022 (Murugiah, 2022). Thus, the enhancement of cyber security is needed to ensure the safety and privacy of its users, including journalists, when using social media and other websites. If journalists continue to feel that their privacy is invaded, they will not be able to maximise their social media use to the fullest. This will ultimately impact the process of news production and delivery.

Findings from this study further suggest that journalists view the adoption of social media in newsrooms as a method for newsrooms and journalists to be closely engaged with their audience. Nevertheless, the positive approach taken by journalists, particularly in highlighting the need to adhere to journalistic ethics, is promising for journalism in Malaysia. It signifies that journalists are adaptive towards technology and simultaneously cautious of their normative role as information disseminators. Therefore, media literacy is seen among interviewed Malaysian journalists as they adopt technology ethically. Findings from this research indicate the importance for journalists to be well literate in social media, not merely from the contents being produced and delivered via the platform but also the need for journalists to understand how social media works, particularly algorithms. Although journalists cannot avoid using social media in their everyday lives as news producers, it is important to fully grasp and understand the characteristics of every social media platform they utilise. This is because each social media platform has its algorithms and way of working. Finally, this study suggests a comparison with similar studies in other South-East Asian nations that would expand the ongoing literature on social media practice in newsrooms in nations of the South.

Acknowledgement

The authors of this article express their deepest gratitude to all informants and the news organisations they represent for their time and insight in this study.

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