TRUST AND CREDIBILITY OF URBAN YOUTH ON ONLINE NEWS MEDIA

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Abstract

When the Internet was introduced, there were comparatively few websites, especially news websites. Today, new media technology's drastic developments in the communications field have had a big impact on society at large. The development and larger availability of information and activities seem to offer people the opportunity of quick access, and systematically providing, in seconds, what would have previously taken months of perusing newspaper stacks of microfilm rolls (Deacon, 2007). These features supersede the more traditional print medium in terms of delivering news with immediacy and impact, and act as a powerful lure that continually draws readers. This paper investigates online consumer behaviour with regards to student perceptions of the trust and credibility of online news. From a survey of 1,000 students of institutions of higher education in the Klang Valley, findings reveal that youth still rely on traditional media to obtain news. However, traditional media fails to provide sufficient information for youth so they resort to getting additional information from alternative news websites. Nevertheless, their level of trust in alternative news websites is based on how accurately these sites reflect the current scenario. Findings also reveal that students believe alternative news websites present different viewpoints, are more critical, have more in-depth analysis and are relatively free from interference. All these factors seemingly contribute to youth's trust of the alternative news websites they read. What is interesting is the fact that the trust extends to alternative online news sources but excludes blogs and the findings clearly show that the youth are not weaned off of traditional media.

ISU KEPERCAYAAN DAN KREDIBILITI BELIA TERHADAP BERITA MEDIA DALAM TALIAN

Abstrak

Bila internet mula diperkenalkan, wujud hanya beberapa laman web terutamanya laman web berita. Hari ini dengan perkembangan teknologi media baru dalam bidang komunikasi wujud satu kesan yang besar terhadap masyarakat. Perkembangan dan ketersediaan informasi dan aktiviti memberikan masyarakat peluang akses laju dan secara sistematik memberikan apa yang sebelumnya mengambil masa berbulan untuk menatap gulungan microfilm akhbar kini mengambil masa beberapa saat sahaja (Deacon 2007). Faktor ini menggantikan media traditional terutamanya dalam melaporkan berita secara terus-menerus dan mempunyai daya menarik masyarakat. Makalah ini mengkaji kelakuan pengguna media dalam talian berdasarkan persepsi pelajar tentang kepercayaan dan kredibiliti berita dalam talian. Daripada sebuah survei 1000 pelajar pusat pengajian tinggi di Lembah Klang, hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa belia masih bergantung pada media tradisional untuk mendapatkan berita. Namun begitu, media traditional gagal memberikan maklumat yang mencukupi dan ini menyebabkan mereka mendapatkan maklumat daripada laman web alternatif. Kadar kepercayaan pada laman web alternatif ini bergantung kepada ketepatan maklumat yang mencerminkan keadaan sebenar. Hasil kajian juga menunjukkan bahawa laman web alternatif memberikan pandangan yang berbeza, lebih kritikal, mempunyai analisis yang lebih mendalam dan agak bebas daripada 'gangguan'. Semua faktor ini menyumbang kepada kepercayaan belia terhadap apa yang dibaca. Apa yang menarik adalah bahawa kepercayaan ini menjangkau kepada sumber berita laman web alternatif tetapi tidak melibatkan blog dan jelas menunjukkan juga bahawa golongan belia masih tidak dapat dipisahkan daripada media tradisional.

Kata Kunci: *Internet; kelakuan pengguna; belia; dalam talian; kepercayaan; kredibiliti*

Introduction

Internet usage in Malaysia began around 1992. The Internet, which started with a simple browsing and e-mail experience, has now turned into a mechanism to creatively disseminate information. It has complemented the existing mass media and, as this study revealed, the Internet has overtaken radio as a source of information next to newspaper and neck to neck or at par with television (Salman et al. 2010). During the 1990s, the Internet grew to become one of the most important technological advancements in society. It became so popular that people relied on the Internet not just for work and study purposes, but also entertainment and news. Most of the information which is spread on the Internet is raw materials which need to be given a meaning unlike information through the mass media, which at most times is edited by writers and analyzers according to their own ideologies and personal views (Samsuddin 2010). Today, a copious amount of news is available in digital format in the form of online news portals and e-newspapers. With the advent of the Internet, news is also no longer the domain of large news media conglomerates. Media observers have claimed that the Internet has democratized the news industry, allowing the average citizen to put forth his views for public viewing and consumption; Malaysiakini's KomunitiKini is an excellent example of citizen journalism in Malaysia. Due to the relatively free space that it affords for the articulation of news and views, the Internet has gained a strong following, especially among news junkies. Online news websites are able to present news and disseminate information in a highly engaging and visually attractive manner by inserting video and audio clips, as well as animated graphics together with the written news report.

In the past, people considered online news to be a supplementary medium to traditional print news, which was their primary source of information. Online newspapers, websites and blogs were just alternative sources. In fact, at one point in time, blogs were seen as unreliable and not credible (Johnson & Kaye, 2004). Today, however, the alternative media have become the new mainstream media, and internet news sites are far more popular with readers than print media, which is suffering a decline in readership globally.

However, there exists the issue of credibility and trustworthiness of news and information on the Internet. According to Johnson and Kaye (1998), one of the basic characteristics of the Internet is its free access; anyone can upload any sort of information without much scrutiny. Nevertheless, such free access could affect the credibility of online news as a source of information. Flanagin and Metzger (2000) noted that newspapers, books, and television verify their information before going public with the news whereas internet sites do not necessarily always do so. Online information providers are not bound by editorial and gatekeeping rules like in the traditional print and broadcast news media.

Nevertheless, in a time of information overload, credibility becomes an even

more important factor for content selection (Schweiger, 1998). The journalistic and commercial success of a medium may depend on the credibility of the news it offers (Schweiger, 2000). Online news industry observers and newspaper editors are concerned about, among other things, credibility and believability (Lasica, 2001; Arant & Anderson, 2000).

Research problem

Due to the proliferation of information and news on the Internet, the issue of credibility, trustworthiness and believability is especially critical. Unlike mainstream news, which undergoes various checks and editorial gatekeeping, most news and information on the Internet come from diverse sources. Anyone with access to the Internet can post all kinds of information without having to go through the necessary process of verifying the data. Rumours may end up as news online and this affects the latter's credibility and believability. However, the internet news audience may not be able to differentiate fact from fiction, and may accept what they read online as the "gospel truth". Thus, it is important to examine their perceptions on the issue of credibility and trustworthiness of online news, and to investigate if they truly believe what they read online. The focus of this study is on youths as they are the most avid users of the Internet and also tend to consume online news more than the traditional print medium.

Research objective

The purpose of this research is to examine the perceptions of urban youths on the issue of trust and credibility of online news compared to mainstream news. It aims to investigate if urban youths believe what they read online and their reasons for turning to the Internet for news. The research also explores whether or not youths intend to totally migrate from traditional mainstream news to online news.

Literature Review

The question relating to perceptions of media credibility has been a recurring issue in mass communication scholarship since the mid-20th century. Hovland and Weiss (1951) concentrated on dimensions of source credibility, (Rimmer & Weaver,1987) highlighted variations in credibility perceptions of different channels, while Westley and Severin (1964) conducted the first comprehensive analysis of news credibility across media outlets. In their classic study, the authors noted that certain demographic variables (such as age, education, and gender) mediate people's perceptions of news credibility. Several analysts indicated that television news was more credible than newspapers (Carter & Greenberg, 1966; Lemert, 1970; Gaziano & McGrath, 1986). Other researchers have traditionally related credibility perceptions to media political and ideological

leanings, especially in election times. Past studies suggest that how credible one views a medium is strongly related to how often one relies on it (Johnson & Kaye 2008; Wanta & Yu-Wei Hu, 1994), with relationships proving stronger for reliance measures than general use ones (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986). It has also been suggested that people judge their preferred medium as the most credible, with television gaining the highest ranking (ASNE, 1985). Research findings suggest that those who are older, wealthier, and better educated are least likely to view media as credible, while males judge media as less credible than females *(Westley and Severin, 1964)*. For the past two decades, the public's overall trust in the press has declined (Project For Excellence in Journalism, 2006).

With the changing and times and the development of technology and the introduction of the Internet, researchers are including the traditional comparisons of credibility to the online media. According to Kiousis (2006), a rising concern in both research and industry circles regarding the proliferation of online news involves its potential impact on credibility evaluations (Johnson and Kaye,2002). Credibility research involved source and medium credibility (Kiousis,2001). In the first, variations in communicator qualities are thought to shape how people judge media messages (O'Keefe, 1990). In the second, variations in the qualities of channels themselves are thought to impact such evaluations (Gunther, 1992). Crucial distinctions in measuring credibility perceptions lie in differentiating among perceptions of message sources, perceptions of channels through which messages travel, and perceptions of messages themselves (Kiousis, 2001; Metzger et al., 2003). Sundar and Nass (2001) and Meyer (1988) both submit that bias and accuracy are key dimensions. Further Gaziano and McGrath (1986) agree that trustworthiness is a central indicator while Bucy (2003) and Johnson and Kaye (2002) concur that believability is a major component as these investigations examined the credibility of news. Also previous research shows that internet users will exert more or less effort in determining the credibility of online information depending on the information-seeking context *(Metzger, 2007; Taraborelli, 2008)*

According to Johnson & Kaye (2008), most internet credibility studies have focused on mainstream media or online mainstream news sites. More recently, researchers have focused on blogs (Banning & Trammell, 2006), bulletin boards/lists and chat/ instant messaging (Kaye & Johnson, 2006). These online components have emerged as influential forums of political discussion and thus, draw politically interested users, further warranting study of their believability, fairness, accuracy and depth. While numerous studies have examined the information contained on campaign Web sites (e.g., Bichard, 2006; Stromer-Galley & Baker, 2006; Trammell, 2006; Kerbel & Bloom, 2005),few have examined the degree to which people believe the information they find there.

According to Metzger et al. (2010), a vast majority of scholars assume that individuals work in isolation to form credibility opinions and that people must

assess information credibility in an effortful and time-consuming manner. In their study using a focus group data from 109 participants to examine these assumptions, results showed that most users rely on others to make credibility assessments, often through the use of group-based tools. Results also indicate that rather than systematically processing information, participants routinely invoked cognitive heuristics to evaluate the credibility of information and sources online.

The most commonly expressed concern is related to the high speed with which stories can be posted online. The competition to be the first to report breaking news stories is heightened by the Internet and this makes errors more common. The majority of journalists surveyed in a Pew Research Center (2004) study said that the Internet has increased the amount of incorrect information in news stories (Cassidy 2007). According to Kiousis (2001), findings suggest that people are generally skeptical of news emanating from all media channels but they do rate newspapers with the highest credibility, followed by online news and television news respectively and state that opinions about news credibility seem to correlate across media outlets. Nevertheless, question arises if online news can be seen as more credible by Malaysian urban youth.

According to Bucy (2003), to test credibility of both online newspapers and news websites, one should first define credibility and analyze factors used to test credibility by previous researchers. Media credibility can be defined as perceptions of a news channel's believability, as distinct from individual sources, media organizations or the content of the news itself. Media credibility differs from source credibility which focuses on characteristics of message senders or individual speakers.

Researchers (Mackay and Lowrey 2007;Gaziano and McGrath 1986) used their news credibility scale to measure the credibility of the press. 13 aspects which includes fairness, bias, telling the whole story, accuracy, invading privacy, watching after the readers' interest, concern for community well-being, separation of fact and opinion, trust, concern for public interest, factual and well-trained journalists were some of the aspects used in the scale to measure the credibility of news. Flanagin and Metzger (2000) pointed out that when measured as a single perception dimension, media credibility is more consistently operationalised as believability. Believability becomes another important aspect that should not be ignored as it is directly linked to credibility and all stress on the importance of fairness, accuracy and believability in relation to credibility

In a research done by Metzger et al. (2003) on students' perception towards the information credibility of the web use shows that students tend to depend on the web for information rather than seeking information from the library. In fact the research showed that students depended on the world wide web for information when they were assigned to do research in college. However it is said that web-based information differed from the traditional channels as

web-based information is said to be easily rendered. The research claims that students do their research over the Internet without much attention paid into the credibility of the information. It is said that students prefer using the medium to search for information because it is easier and more convenient to obtain information.

According to Mingxin (2006), on the researcher's study on the situation and analysis of the mass media and media credibility in the countryside of mid China, the researcher pointed out that the credibility in mass media is really blurry and the credibility of the information is said to be a quality of information that is deemed believable among the public (West 1994).

Johnson and Kaye (2002) in a 1996 online survey of politically interested Web users, found online newspapers and political issue-oriented sites rated more believable than their traditionally delivered counterparts, while credibility scores differed little for online and traditional newsmagazines and candidate literature. In general, online sources were judged only as "somewhat credible." The more individuals relied on the Internet, however, the more likely they were to judge it as credible.

Meanwhile a UCLA study discovered that while more than half (54.7%) of internet users said most or all information on the Internet was reliable and accurate, only a third of nonusers voiced that opinion. A significant portion of both users (35.7%) and nonusers (45.7%) said that only "about half" of the information on the Internet was credible. Not all studies have found people rating internet information as credible. A Roper study for the Freedom Forum found leading traditional sources rated as more fair and unbiased than internet sites.Little attention has been paid to why individuals rate the Internet as credible as they do traditional media sources.

However, Flanagin and Metzger (2000) suggest that as people become more experienced with the Internet, they become increasingly savvy about what sites to trust and which ones to ignore. Further, more experienced internet users were more likely to verify internet information and to judge information they found online as credible than less frequent users. Information on online media sites might actually also be just as accurate and trust - worthy as in the traditional media. The Digital Journalism Credibility study suggested that experienced internet users relied on online versions of traditional sources, such as CNN.com, for their information. Online users recognize that online news differs little in content from its traditional counterpart; only the delivery is different. Also, it is argued that online journalists maintain the standards of accuracy and credibility just as fiercely as traditional reporters and thus take as much care in writing and reporting.

In an exploratory study using a national telephone survey of 536 adults that analyzed the components of credibility from news in the newspapers, television and online sites, Abdulla et al. (2002) found that online news credibility was built upon trustworthiness, timeliness and bias factors while the traditional

news medium of newspapers was found to have balance, honesty and currency dimensions.

In Malaysian scenario, in a study by Mohd Sobhi et al.(2011) of the credibility of information as an antecedent factor in influencing the perception of users about Islam on the internet, using a survey of 330 respondents it was found that the credibility of information has a significant antecedent influence towards the assumption of the usefulness of the Internet. Findings in this study also revealed that those who have a religious education place credibility of information as an important factor which creates their assumption about the Internet and is a determining factor of the receiving and using of information about Islam on the Internet. Simply put, the religious background will influence how users receive and use the information from the Internet. If the religious thinking correlates with the information then it is considered credible. Although this study is not one which focuses on religion, nevertheless, the underlying principal is that the criteria set are very much based on those mentioned by Flanagin and Metzger(2000), which stresses on fairness, accuracy and believability and there could possibly be different sets of factors affecting different sets of assessments.

The questions arise in this study if youths believe what they read on online news are: 1) Have they moved over from the traditional news media to online as what is believed?; 2) Do they still rely on the traditional news media?

Methodology

This paper investigates online usage behaviour and choice of sources in relation with students' perceptions on the trust and credibility of online sources. The study is based on a face-to-face questionairre survey of 1,000 students from institutions of higher education in the Klang Valley area. The college student population changes so frequently from cohort to cohort that it did not allow the researchers time to access or build a sampling frame for probabilistic sampling. Hence, a quota sampling scheme was adopted for this survey. The sample of 1,000 interviewees entailed nine public and 29 private institutions in the Klang Valley. To reduce sampling bias, there were three visits each day and usually more than one sampling day at a given site. This area was chosen because it has the highest internet penetration and the largest college student population. Thus, Klang Valley youths can be deemed to be trend setters for internet media usage among Malaysian college students. The quotas were enforced by the field supervisors who controlled on the ratio on gender, race and size of institution. The researchers also spread out the sample among major institutions such as UM and UKM to ensure representativeness of the sample.

The questionnaire were developed through a process that entailed a brainstorming session, followed by a focus group discussion with about 15 students to identify various possible online media usage among post-secondary school students and their likely attitudes towards online media. A small-scale pilot

run was conducted on the drafted questionnaire to sharpen the language and to ensure that smooth rapport could be built between the respondent and the interviewer. Subsequently, a large scale quantitative survey was conducted with this questionnaire. In order to study the relationship between online usage pattern with user groups and their attitude toward different online sources, the questionnaire consists of 3 sections namely, demographic, behavioural and attitude. The response to questions on attitude is measured by 5 point likert scale.

The data was captured directly in SPSS format and frequency tables on the response were tabulated to scan for errors in data entry or coding before it proceeded to further analysis. The analysis began with scanning for first order relationship between demographic and behavioural variables through two-way tabulation of frequency and counts followed by a Chi-square goodness of fit test on the significant or lack of association between pair of variables. This simple but effective test is a good start to scan for relationship between variables. If necessary we also conduct generalised linear model to scan for interaction effect from a pair of factors; however, we do not detect significant interaction effect thus we do not report any. Subsequently the procedure extended to track correlation between online usage habit, usage pattern with the students' attributes. As for their attitudes towards online media, the researchers applied various data reduction techniques like factor analysis to extract the essential features of the respondents' mindset.

Findings

The sample of 1,000 respondents is equally distributed in terms of gender (see Graph 1 below) and conforms to the average age range of university/college students – between 18 and 23 years old (see Graph 2 below). Two-thirds of the sample is from private colleges and universities in Malaysia, while the remaining one-third is from public universities. The majority of the respondents surveyed are currently doing their undergraduate degree (62%), while 28% are pursuing their diploma. A small number (9%) are in the process of obtaining their certificate or Master's degree (3%). Thus, all respondents can be classified as student youth.

**Graph 1 : Gender breakdown of respondents**
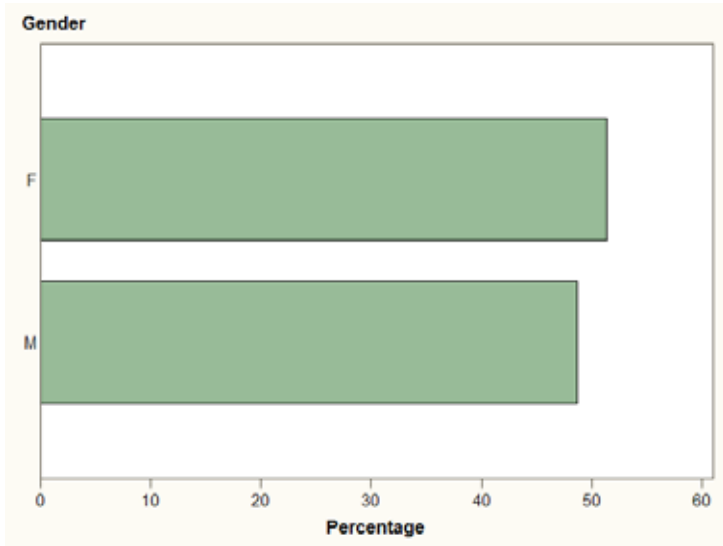
Graph 2 : Age distribution of respondents
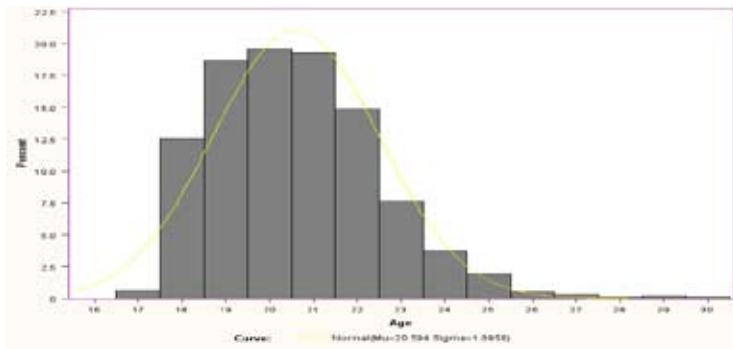
Not surprisingly, in terms of ethnic grouping, one in four respondents was Chinese (40%), while 46% were Malays and 12% Indians (see Graph 3 below). It is a known fact that private institutions have more non-Malay students, which is why the percentage of Chinese (50.3%) and Indian (17.1%) students is more than the national average of 23.7% and 7.1%, respectively.

Graph 3 : Ethnic breakdown of respondents
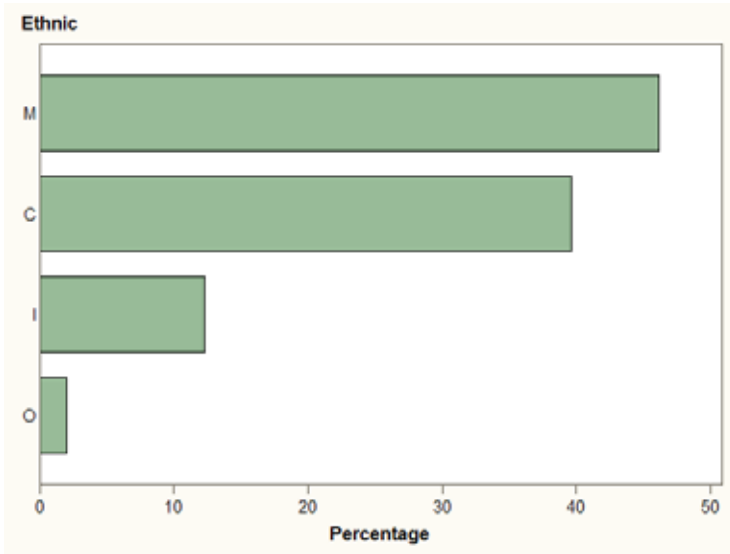
M = Malay; C = Chinese; I = Indian; O = Others

Since the respondents are youths in their late teens and early twenties, the majority (95%) of them own a computer. Nevertheless, they still rely on traditional media (newspapers/television/radio) to obtain news (94%). The newspaper is still the most favoured traditional medium to get news followed by television and then the radio (42%). Only 26% said that television was the most important source of news access, followed by newspapers and radio. Findings from the same survey that tested for kinds of online activities among students reveal that students' activities online (in order of frequency) include surfing, e-mailing, updating and checking social networking sites like Facebook, MySpace and Friendster. Other activities include chatting, reading and updating blogs or tweets, playing online computer games and posting in forums (Leong et al 2011). This clearly indicates that news consumption scores relatively low in terms of priority when it comes to online behavior for the group of students surveyed.

It is also highly possible that the kind of traditional media the respondents gravitate towards might actually be tabloid newspapers such as Kosmo and Harian Metro, which contain a larger mix of sensational news stories and a more diverse range of entertainment news than other newspapers. Figures from the Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC) showed that the circulation of traditional newspapers such as The Star, New Straits Times, Utusan Malaysia and Berita Harian, has fallen over the past five years. From 2005 to 2009, The

Star's circulation dropped from 310,000 to 287,000 (-7.4%), New Straits Times from 139,000 to 111,000 (-20 %), Utusan Malaysia from 213,000 to 169,000 (-21%) and Berita Harian from 204,000 to 155,000 (-24%). In contrast, ABC's figures showed that from 2005 to 2009, circulation of "light reading" newspapers such as Harian Metro and Kosmo shot up from 250,000 to 350,000 and from 101,000 in 2006 to 172,000 respectively (Yow et al. 2010). This shows that the reading public is being drawn to "hot" gossip stories, catchy headlines and large sensational photographs and does not bode well for quality of news that is consumed by youths.

Findings indicate that the respondents seek alternative news websites because the latter offers more information. On the statement that alternative news websites present additional information not found elsewhere, 70% of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed with no significant differences among the ethnic groups and genders. Three-quarters (75%) agreed and strongly agreed that alternative news websites present different views from mainstream media, while 63% agreed and strongly agreed that alternative news websites are less censored compared to mainstream media. Slightly higher percentage of Malay students agreed that alternative news websites were less censored but the differences among ethnic groups register less than 2%. This indicates that on the whole, the respondents have greater desire to seek information from sources other than traditional media.

Interestingly, the percentage of those who agree that alternative news websites are less censored matches the respondents' general opinion that these websites are not monitored by the government. In fact, only 31% of the respondents think alternative news websites are monitored by the government and this figure is proportionately represented across ethnic groups as well. A relatively high percentage of respondents averaged across ethnic groups at 42.6%, however, indicated neutral in their response to this point (see Table 1 below). The neutral response may be because respondents are unsure about whether the government monitors alternative news websites since evidence of such surveillance is not readily apparent.

**Table 1 : Ethnic breakdown in response to the statement
"Alternative news websites are monitored by the government"**

Ethnic	Alternative news websites is monitored by the government.				
	Strongly Agree	**Agree**	**Neutral**	**Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**
	Row N %	Row N %	Row N %	Row N %	Row N %
Chinese	7.1%	23.0%	44.4%	23.0%	2.5%
Indian	7.3%	25.2%	39.0%	22.8%	5.7%
Malay	4.6%	26.9%	46.9%	19.3%	2.4%
Others	10.0%	30.0%	40.0%	15.0%	5.0%

Despite this figure, only 49% agree that alternative news writers can write without fear of action by authorities. Among the three ethnic groups surveyed, a slightly higher percentage (13.8%) of Indian students, relative to its sample size, appeared to strongly agree with this view (see Table 2 below). In general, however, this indicates that the population sampled perceives that writers do not write with impunity even though they believe the news content on alternative news websites is subject to fewer censorship or legal restrictions compared to print and broadcast news.

Table 2 : Ethnic breakdown in response to the statement "Alternative news writers can write without fear of action by authorities compared to mainstream news writers"

Ethnic	Alternative news writers can write without fear of action by authorities compared to mainstream news writers				
	Strongly Agree	**Agree**	**Neutral**	**Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**
	Row N %	Row N %	Row N %	Row N %	Row N %
Chinese	8.6%	40.7%	29.0%	17.2%	4.5%
Indian	13.8%	38.2%	26.8%	15.4%	5.7%
Malay	12.4%	35.6%	32.3%	18.2%	1.5%
Others	.0%	50.0%	40.0%	10.0%	.0%

The belief that alternative news websites are less censored may explain why a very large percentage of university students (76.3%) sampled agreed that the coverage of alternative news websites is comprehensive in their coverage of controversial issues (see Table 3 below) with a slightly higher percentage of students from IPTAs represented compared to IPTS students.

**Table 3 : Education Institution breakdown in response to the statement
"Alternative news websites have more comprehensive coverage of
controversial issues"**

Institution	Alternative news websites have more comprehensive coverage of controversial issues.				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
	Row N %	Row N %	Row N %	Row N %	Row N %
Private	14.6%	60.0%	23.2%	1.8%	.4%
Public	18.7%	61.2%	18.7%	1.5%	.0%
Subtotal	15.9%	60.4%	21.7%	1.7%	.3%

The fairness and objectivity of alternative news websites is also an area where 51% of respondents agreed on; however, a slightly lower percentage of IPTA students thought this (30.9%) compared to its sample population of 33%. This skew could be caused by a higher percentage of Indian students (15%) who believed this to be true. It is logical for the respondents to infer that the media with fewer restrictions and interference from the government are more able to cover news in a more comprehensive and fair manner.

The findings also show that people prefer alternative news websites because they believe that the sources are more accurate and thus more trustworthy. Slightly more than one-third (36.3%) agreed and strongly agreed that they trust alternative news websites more than traditional news media.

**Table 4 : Ethnic breakdown in response to the statement
"Alternative news websites are more accurate compared to mainstream
news media"**

Ethnic	Alternative news websites are more accurate compared to mainstream news media.				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
	Row N %	Row N %	Row N %	Row N %	Row N %
Chinese	3.5%	35.6%	50.8%	9.6%	.5%
Indian	17.9%	40.7%	36.6%	4.9%	.0%
Malay	6.5%	38.8%	44.3%	9.5%	.9%
Others	10.0%	25.0%	65.0%	.0%	.0%
Subtotal	6.8%	37.5%	46.3%	8.8%	.6%

From Table 4 above, it is evident that of those who strongly agreed, many more were Indians (17.9%) compared to the proportion of Indians in the sample (12%). Chinese and Malays overall were more skeptical as the percentage of their response of 'strongly agree' and 'agree' to the statement was less than the sample proportion of 40% and 46% respectively. While an overall total of 44.3% believed that alternative news websites were more accurate, more Indians and Malays believed this to be true compared to the Chinese. The latter was again comparatively more skeptical as only 35.6% agreed on the accuracy of alternative news websites and a mere 3.5% strongly agreed.

Despite the skepticism of the Chinese, in the last general election, 43% of the respondents relied on alternative news for election coverage compared to mainstream news media; interestingly, Indians (16%) and Chinese (42%) were more reliant on alternative news websites compared to Malays (40.8%). This finding is a possible indicator that the Chinese and Indians were fence-sitters and undecided on who to vote for, compared to the Malays who were more decisive and hence, less reliant on information from alternative news media.

The findings also indicate that more males (53.6%) were reliant on alternative news websites for election coverage compared to females (46.4%). Of the 25.3% who indicated they might stop getting their news from the mainstream media, there is a similar percentage of males and females who predict they may get 100% of their news from alternative online sources in the future. By far, a larger percentage of students from IPTS feels this way (70%) compared to those from IPTAs (30%).

The reliability of alternative news websites can be attributed to their in-depth analysis, verified information and reliable sources. All the respondents agree (59.9%) that such websites provide in-depth analysis and this sentiment is consistent and proportionately represented across ethnic groups and gender (see Table 5 below).

**Table 5 : Ethnic breakdown in response to the statement
"Alternative news websites provide greater in-depth analysis of an issue
compared to mainstream news media"**

Ethnic	Alternative news websites provides greater in-depth analysis of an issue compared to mainstream news media				
	Strongly Agree	**Agree**	**Neutral**	**Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**
	Row N %	Row N %	Row N %	Row N %	Row N %
Chinese	6.3%	53.8%	33.1%	6.6%	.3%
Indian	13.0%	48.0%	35.8%	2.4%	.8%
Malay	11.7%	47.6%	35.9%	3.9%	.9%
Others	5.0%	55.0%	40.0%	.0%	.0%
Subtotal	9.6%	50.3%	34.8%	4.7%	.6%

More than one third (36.5%) respondents agreed that the sources quoted in alternative news websites are reliable with Indians and Malays agreeing disproportionately higher at 16.7% and 49.3% than the sample's ethnic proportion. This ethnic profile is consistent when it comes to the checking and verification of information published online as well, with Malays at 50.8% and Indians at 15.7%. The Chinese are considerably more skeptical of the reliability of alternative news websites - only 32.3% agree that sources quoted are reliable and only 31.4% believe the information published has been checked and verified. This percentage is much lower than the sample proportion for Chinese respondents.

Despite the strong influence of alternative news media in the lives of university students, it is unlikely that the youths will abandon mainstream news media altogether as only 25% agreed that they would stop getting news from the mainstream news media and rely 100% on news from alternative news websites. Of those willing to switch over, males (52.6%) are more likely to do so compared to females (47.4%).

Table 6 : Ethnic breakdown in response to the statement
"In the future, I may stop getting news from the mainstream news media
and get 100% of my news from alternative news websites"

Ethnic	In the future, I may stop getting news from the mainstream news media and get 100% of my news from alternative news websites.				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
	Row N %	Row N %	Row N %	Row N %	Row N %
Chinese	2.5%	19.9%	38.1%	33.3%	6.1%
Indian	9.8%	23.8%	46.7%	15.6%	4.1%
Malay	5.0%	21.0%	38.0%	31.9%	4.1%
Others	.0%	20.0%	55.0%	25.0%	.0%
Subtotal	4.5%	20.9%	39.4%	30.3%	4.8%

Interestingly, in reference to Table 5 above, Malays (26%) and Indians (33.6%) were more likely to switch to new media compared to the Chinese (22.4%). This data is consistent with the overall findings which show the Chinese are, in general, more skeptical about the accuracy and reliability of alternative news websites. The relatively higher percentage of Indians who will do so suggests that the mainstream news media is not catering to their needs or addressing issues and covering news pertinent to their community.

The assumption that many young people rely on blogs for their news and consider it to be trustworthy is also unfounded. Contrary to popular belief that youth rely a lot on blogs for info and news, the statistics show that on average less than 30% refer to blogs, and this is true across all ethnic groups. With regards to online new consumption, almost two-thirds (64%) of the respondents indicated that they read Malaysiakini, making it the most popular online news website across all the ethnic groups. The results also show that more IPTA students (72.1%) read Malaysiakini compared to IPTS students (56.7%) which is consistent with the ethnic data (Leong et al, 2011).

On the issue of reliability of blogs, almost half of the respondents were neutral. The majority disagreed (31.3%) that blogs are a reliable source of news. The ethnic breakdown of this data is in Table 7 below.

**Table 7 : Ethnic breakdown in response to the statement
"Blogs are reliable sources of news"**

Ethnic	Blogs are reliable sources of news				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
	Row N %	Row N %	Row N %	Row N %	Row N %
Chinese	1.5%	15.7%	46.0%	30.1%	6.8%
Indian	5.7%	32.5%	38.2%	19.5%	4.1%
Malay	2.8%	21.5%	46.9%	25.8%	3.0%
Others	.0%	15.0%	60.0%	25.0%	.0%
Subtotal	2.6%	20.4%	45.7%	26.7%	4.6%

Of the 23% who did think blogs are reliable, Indian students were proportionately more at 20.4% whereas the Chinese were the lowest proportionately at 29.6%. Slightly more females (52.6%) than males (47.4%) believe that blogs are reliable. Even though 23% found blogs to be reliable source of news, less than half of that number actually trust what they read in blogs (12.7%). In fact, more than a third (37.1%) does not trust what they read in blogs. Of those who did trust what they read in blogs, the Indian students seem to have greater trust at 16.5% compared to the sample proportion of 12% whereas the Malays were disproportionately less trusting of blogs, registering 40.2% which is a lower percentage than the proportion of Malay students sampled, i.e. 46%.

Conclusion

Believability as part of credibility and reliability becomes an important aspect for content selection at a time of information overload. According to Abdulla et al. (2002) online news industry observers and newspaper editors have expressed similar concerns over credibility, believability and ethical lapses (Lasica 2001; Arant & Anderson 2000). As the findings from our research above indicate, such concerns have not escaped the discerning news consumption habits of the Malaysian student youth surveyed.

Overall, the students surveyed seek out online news because the traditional media in Malaysia fails to provide sufficient information and is perceived to have more censorship or legal restrictions than online news websites. Due to fewer such restrictions, alternative news websites are also deemed more fair and objective in their news articles; additionally they also provide more comprehensive coverage—particularly for controversial issues—compared to the mainstream news media. Students also believe that alternative news websites present different viewpoints, are more critical, have more in-depth

analysis and online writers are relatively free from interference.

Despite such positive perception of alternative news websites, the level of trust in such websites is not consistent across ethnic groups, although gender differences are negligible. On the whole, Chinese students seem to be the most skeptical of the accuracy and reliability of alternative news websites in relation to other ethnic groups. However, this does not mean the students surveyed distrusted such websites but only that the percentage of their trust was not more than 50% in most areas covered by the tables above.

Today's growth of blogs and online news websites has given youths the opportunity to pick and choose information that suits their personal gratification. What is interesting from our survey is the fact that the trust of the students surveyed extends to alternative online news sources but excludes blogs. The level of trust of blogs is comparatively lower and does suggest that students are less gullible than some might expect. However it is suprising to note from our findings that youth still rely on traditional media to obtain news and as it stands, the percentage of those who are likely to migrate fully to online news media in the near future is still relatively small. Evidently, online media is still not mainstream in Malaysia.

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