

Human Communication

A Journal of the Pacific and Asian Communication Association

Volume 1 (No 2), pp 1-21

The Effect of Message Credibility on Media Use and Perception of Fake News among Students

Authors:

Souhaila Ahmed Elyass Hussain,
Rehema Twahiry Kilagwa, Yusnita Mohd Zaali,
Saodah Wok

Corresponding Author:

Souhaila Ahmed Elyass Hussain
Department of Communication,
International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM)
Jalan Gombak
53100 Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia
Tel. No: 018-3657107 (hp)
Email: miss.elyass@gmail.com

Authors' Addresses

Wok, S. & Ithnin, N.
Department of Communication, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM),
Jalan Gombak, 53100 Kuala Lumpur

Abstract

Fake news is a major concern globally. Numerous news articles worldwide have reported on the spread of fake news in multiple arenas. Malaysia, similarly, has been covering the proliferation of fake news in the media. A Fake News Bill was passed in Parliament, at record time, in the hope of attaining preventive measures to counter the spread of fake news (the bill was repealed four months later). This study aims to determine students' perception of fake news in the context of their media usage and message credibility. Specifically, it aims to determine the relationship between media use, message credibility and perception of fake news; and to analyse the mediating effect of message credibility on media use and the perception of fake news. Fake news, in this context, is defined as deliberate misinformation spread by traditional or social media. The research utilizes the Media Dependency Theory in explaining the relationship between the audiences, media and the larger social system. The theoretical framework assumes that during times of conflict or uncertainty, in this case before the General Election 2018, audiences are likely to be more dependent on the media for information. It employs a quantitative research design using the survey method. 237 students from the Department of Communication, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) participated in the study. Findings show that there are significant relationships among media use, message credibility and fake news. The Media Dependency Theory is supported in this study.

Keywords: Fake news, global communication, mass media use, media dependency theory, message credibility.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of fake news is a major concern at the local and global levels. Dozens of news articles worldwide (Ashford, 2017; Dodds, 2017; Greensdale, 2016; Ike & Smets, 2017) have reported on the spread of fake news in the political, social, economic and entertainment arenas. One reporter wrote that we are currently living in a “post-truth” society where it is extremely challenging to correct falsehoods spread swiftly and indiscriminately through the Internet (Greensdale, 2016). Malaysia, similarly, has been vigorously covering the proliferation of fake news in the media in recent months (“Curbing fake news lies in thinking it through,” 2018; “Fake News Act a fact soon,” 2018; Nik Anis, 2018; “S’wak BN reps backing proposed Fake News Act,” 2018; Sivanandam, Tan, & Koh, 2018; Sivanandam, Zainal, & Tan, 2018).

The Dewan Rakyat (the lower house of Parliament) indicated that action would be taken against those who maliciously create or circulate fake news and passed the much-debated Anti-Fake News Bill 2018. The bill states that anyone who “by any means, maliciously creates, offers, publishes, prints, distributes, circulates or disseminates any fake news or publication containing fake news commits an offence and shall, on conviction, be liable to a fine, not exceeding RM500,000 or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding six years or to both” (Sivanandam, Zainal, & Tan, 2018). However, four months later, the new post-election parliament passed a bill to repeal the Anti-Fake News law (Sivanandam, Carvalho, Rahim, & Shagar, 2018).

Research published by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) reports that within the realm of the new media, WhatsApp is the most used platform for the spread of fake news (84%), followed by Facebook (8%), blogs (4%) and least of all Twitter (1%) (“Berita palsu musuh kita bersama,” 2018). Given the interactive nature of the social media, it is logical to assume that when compared to the traditional media, social media platforms are where unverified news is easily spread.

The MCMC also reports that researchers in Malaysia are worried about young people’s views on media privacy and moral issues. Their findings show that young users are unable to differentiate between fact and fiction and are unaware of how to look for reliable sources (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission [MCMC], 2014). This brings us to issues of credibility in the mass media.

The mass media provide a platform in which journalists, public relations professionals, advertising practitioners, politicians and issues advocates as well as many others try to educate, inform, pursue and influence audiences. The success of these endeavours depends largely on how much credibility is afforded to these institutions by audiences (Golan, 2010). This research aims to investigate whether or not audience perception of message credibility affects their perception on fake news based on their use of both the traditional and social media.

Problem Statement

The “fake news” phenomena might not be a new one, but it has definitely been of interest to researchers in the past few years. Its prevalence is more pronounced during elections when parties compete for votes. Given the current changes in the political atmosphere in the country, there appears to be little research done

linking message credibility to Malaysian's perception of fake news. In this regard, this paper examines students' perception of fake news, media usage and message credibility.

Research Objectives

This study aims to determine students' perception of fake news in the context of their media use and message credibility. Specifically, it aims to:

1. Determine the levels of student media use, perception of message credibility in the mass media and their level of fake news perception, verification behaviour and dissemination.
2. Test the relationship between media use, message credibility and perception of fake news.
3. Analyse the mediating effect of message credibility on media use and perception of fake news.

Significance of the Study

This research contributes to the existing body of knowledge on media use and message credibility through the underlying framework of the Media Dependency Theory. As will be noted in the literature review, much of academic research on the area of fake news focuses on the impact of fake news items/programs on audience perception/knowledge/attitude (Balmas, 2014; Brewer, Young, & Morreale, 2013; Marchi, 2012; Rini, 2017). All these studies and many others were carried out in America or Europe. There is minimal research conducted on this issue in Asia. This paper attempts to fill the gaps in research on fake news in the Malaysian context.

It is also important to state that the anti-fake news bill was passed in record time, was the focal point of debate among academicians, policy makers, human rights activists as well as the public (Nik Saleh, 2018; Thomas, 2018), and then swiftly repealed by the parliament (Sivanandam, Carvalho, Rahim, & Shagar, 2018). Other factors, mainly the increasing importance of the media as a source of information during times of uncertainty, the growing popularity of social media as well as the decline in the global levels of media credibility (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2018) further stress the importance and need for research on fake news.

In terms of practical implications, this research hopes to provide media institutions, government agencies as well as public relations professionals insight into the perception of Malaysian youth on fake news and message credibility in relation to their media use.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Fake News

News reporting is traditionally based upon facts. However, with the development of the Internet and social media, "alternative" narratives appeared (Albright, 2017). The phrase "fake news" was used repeatedly by President Donald Trump of the United States of America during the 2016 presidential elections.

4 *Human Communication*

Fake news is not an easy term to define. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) define “fake news” as news articles that are purposefully and verifiably false, and could misinform readers. For the purposes of their research, they rule out related “concepts” to fake news from their definition. These related concepts are unintentional mistakes made during reporting, rumours that do not have a particular source of reference, conspiracy theories, satires, false statements by politicians, and reports that are biased or misleading but not outright false.

Rini (2017) offers a similar but more inclusive definition. She states that fake news is not just false information being reported, but false information reported intentionally to deceive. She continues to elaborate that fake news is also meant to be shared and shared again and that intentions behind such fabrication are more complicated. These intentions are mostly financially motivated. She defines a fake news story as one that alleges to describe happenings in the actual world, characteristically by imitating the methods of traditional media reporting, yet is known by its inventors to be false, and is communicated with the two goals of being disseminated extensively and of misleading at least some of its audience. Similarly, Humprecht (2018) defines “online disinformation” as the intentional publication of false statements of facts for strategic purposes and spread for social influence or profit.

Other researchers write that fake news is synonymous with “satirical news”, “humorous political messages”, “fictitious news”, “negative jokes”, “inconsistencies of news”, “contradictory information”, “unrealistic”, “pre-generic”, “strategic and negative presentation of politicians”, and so on, including a much broader range (Balmas, 2014). Tandoc, Lim, and Ling (2017) contend that scholarly definitions may be studied along their variations in facticity and deception. For the purposes of this research, fake news is simply defined as deliberate misinformation spread by the traditional or social media.

As mentioned in the introduction, there is a surge of interest in fake news. Its importance may be attributed to several reasons. First, it is now considerably easier for an entity or an individual to be part of the mass media, both because it is now easy to set up websites and because it is easy to monetize web content through advertising platforms (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Second, social media are a suitable media for the spread of fake news, and social media use has risen sharply. As of April 2018, active Facebook users per month reached 2.2 billion and Twitter’s 330 million (Statista, 2018). Third, the Edelman Trust Barometer (2018) reports that 47% of Malaysians trust the media as a reliable source of information in 2018, which is 5% less than in 2017. This decreasing trust in the media could be both a cause and a consequence of fake news gaining more traction. Seven in ten (between 71-75%) Malaysians worry about “false information or fake news” being used as a weapon (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2018).

Previous studies on fake news may be classified into two broad categories. Research that explores, identifies or studies specific features of information mediums and their impact on user perception of credibility (Morris, Counts, Roseway, Hoff, & Schwarz, 2012; Marchi, 2012) and research focused on specific programs, messages or information pieces based on fake news and their effects on audiences (Brewer, Young, & Morreale, 2013; Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016). Recent studies on fake news focus on the individual level, arguing that psychological effects can explain why many people share fake news (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

Links between fake news as a general concept not associated with a specific medium or specific message is scarce. This may be attributed to the recent ‘outbreak’ of fake news epidemic

– especially through the social media; or that fake news is more accurately measured when it is narrowed down to a specific instance/occasion or through a specific communication platform such as television or Twitter.

As fake news varies in forms in different media and is still somehow a relatively uncharted territory in terms of measurement criteria, the researchers developed a scale for measuring fake news received through traditional and social media in terms of perception of fake news, verification behavior and its dissemination.

Media Use

Media usage, also called media consumption or media diet, is defined as the sum of information and entertainment media taken in by an individual or group (Statista, 2018). The term “mass media” is described by McQuail (2000) as means of communication that operate in a large scale, reaching and involving more or less everyone in a society. The mass media generally include a number of established, traditional media (such as the newspapers, magazines, radio, film, television and so on) and new media – includes all new forms of communication such as the Internet, mobile communication applications, and social networking sites. For the purpose of this research, mass media refers to the traditional media (television, radio and newspapers) and social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp).

Early mass communication research was preoccupied with media effects and their potential harms. Media use only became central when the audience was viewed as being more active than passive and considered as motivated users who are in charge of their media experience (McQuail, 2000). This can be seen in the development of the mass communication theories from the theories of powerful effects such as the Magic Bullet in the early 18th century to limited effects to mediated effects. Research on uses of the mass media only came about towards the end of the 18th century where the mediating factors were incorporated into the relationship between media use and effects. Theories such as the Diffusion of Innovation, Uses and Gratification and Media Dependency were developed.

The use of a communication medium is a function of a number of factors such as accessibility and ease of use, time and cost among others (Fulk, Steinfield, Schmitz, & Power, 1987). Cultural studies put emphasis on media use as a reflection of a particular socio-cultural context, as a process of giving meaning to cultural products and experiences in every-day life (McQuail, 2000).

Advancements in Internet technology and growth of online news have stimulated new issues. One of which, is the excessive resources of diverse information. Social media platforms such as Facebook have a completely different structure than the earlier media technologies. Within social media sites, content can be spread among users without third party filtering, verification, or editorial judgment (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). The nature of these networks is therefore a good place through which fake news may be developed and disseminated with relative ease. This nature has also led to increased interest in mass media credibility.

This research refers to both traditional and social media use in relation to message credibility and perception of fake news. The instrument used to measure media use here includes items

for traditional media and social media usage. These items were developed from an aggregate of measures for media use from the available literature. Respondents were asked questions on their level of agreement regarding the usage of media types for news and important information.

There are two theoretical approaches available to study how individuals use the mass media: the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and the Media Dependency Theory (MDT) (Patwardhan & Yan, 2003). This study uses the Media Dependency Theory (MDT) as its theoretical framework. MDT proposes dependency relations between people and media grounded on the perceived helpfulness of the media in meeting understanding (social/self), orientation (action/interaction) and play (social/solitary) (Patwardhan & Yan, 2003). The theory also states that the intensity of dependency on the media increases in times of uncertainty and social change.

Message Credibility

Media credibility is a complex and multidimensional concept. Research in media credibility has mostly been either on source credibility or on the credibility of the medium. Golan (2010) explains each, clearly stating that research on source credibility focuses on the characteristics of the message (speaker, organization, media outlet) while that on medium credibility focuses on the medium of the message delivered (newspaper, television).

Early interpretations of credibility define it as the believability of a source, and mostly depends on perceptions of the trustworthiness and expertise of the source as understood by the receiver (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). This definition steers research on credibility in psychology and communication, which largely focuses on source credibility, usually conceptualized as the believability of a speaker. However, researchers suggest that credibility of media messages may be influenced by non-source aspects, such as the medium or structure of the messages themselves (Appelman & Sundar, 2016).

This paper is concerned with message credibility – a less studied dimension of media credibility. Separating message credibility from the source and the medium can enhance the clarity and quality of research in a number of theoretical and practical ways (Appelman & Sundar, 2016). This study uses the definition proposed by Appelman and Sundar (2016) who define it in the context of news obtained from the media as an individual's judgment of the "veracity" of the content of communication.

In this modern era, news is readily available online and media conglomerates are no longer the main source of news. In the past few decades, the online digital 'alternative' media has shifted from being supplementary sources of news to the traditional newspapers and television to becoming the main source of information (Wilson, Leong, Nge, & Hong, 2011). Researchers report that newspapers, books and television verify their news before publicizing; however, in the Internet this is not necessarily true. Online information providers are not bound by editorial and gatekeeping regulations like in the traditional media (Wilson, Leong, Nge, & Hong, 2011). Therefore, with the influx of information online and offline, the issue of message credibility is crucial.

Previous studies on media credibility are abundant but studies on message credibility specifically are scarce. Studies on message credibility and fake news are even fewer. Morris et

al. (2012) investigate the user perception of tweet credibility and identify features that impact user assessment of tweet credibility. Bidin and Mustafa (2012) present findings related to youth's perception of the credibility of blogs. Karlsson, Clerwall, and Bord (2014) research the effects of transparency on source and message credibility.

Message credibility is operationalized through asking respondents the degree to which they found news items received through the different media types to be accurate, authentic and believable. These three adjectives were found to be the most reliable terms to describe the credibility of a media message as reported by Appelman and Sundar (2016). Each adjective is used in sets of five-item questions leading to an aggregate of 15 items measuring the message accuracy of traditional and social media.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical basis of this research is the theory of Media Dependency, which was proposed in 1976 by Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin Defleur. The Media dependency theory explains the essential relationship between the audiences, media and the larger social system (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). They argue that individuals use the media to satisfy certain goals, the more the media functions to satisfy these goals, the more dependent the individuals are on the media. This is similar to the Uses and Gratification Theory (Wok & Wan Mohd Ghazali, 2011). According to Wok and Wan Mohd Ghazali (2011), the audience level of dependency depends on the frequency (the time that a person spends using the traditional or the social media), the importance of the message received from the specific media use and the degree of change and conflict present in the society.

The theory argues that individuals' use of the media not only depends on internal factors, such as the extent to which the media meet a number of his/her needs, but also to external factors that may not be in the individual's control. These outside factors act as constraints on what and how media can be used and on the availability of other non-media alternatives (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). The more alternatives that people have for satisfying their needs, the less dependent they become on any single medium. This means individuals may sometime depend more on a certain medium only because of its availability.

The social media has become a powerful communication tool with its great ability to supply extensive information to the masses but also increasing risk and crises (Westerman, Spence, & Van Der Heide, 2014). Regardless of the audience's education level, age, gender or religion, people are becoming increasingly dependent on the social media by trusting its messages and using it to understand the social phenomenon, to act meaningfully and effectively in the society and even for fantasy and escape without considering the credibility of its message (Wok & Wan Mohd Ghazali, 2011). However, there are some who are not influenced by the social media, and tend to depend on the traditional media for information.

The media tend to affect the audience with higher needs more than the ones with minimal needs. University students are found to be the most dependent on the social media (Hamid, Ishak, Ismail, & Yazam, 2013) than the traditional media for many reasons: the cost of some traditional media, all messages on the traditional media can be easily accessed in the social media, and also for educational purposes (Hamid, Ishak, Ismail, & Yazam, 2013).

This study, where data was collected a few weeks before the historic 14th Malaysian general elections, assumes that there is an environment of uncertainty and social change. In addition to the newly passed and then repealed Anti-fake News law and the charged political race for votes, the Malaysian public will definitely be hungry for news and information. Hence, this study uses the assumptions of the Media Dependency theory in its examination of the people's use of mass media to obtain news in times of social change, their perception of the credibility of this news and fake news.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

This paper posits that students' perception of message credibility mediate the relationships between their media use and their fake news perceptions. In order to test this, the relationships between the variables, namely media use (both traditional and social media act as the independent variables), message credibility (mediating variable) and fake news perception (dependent variable). The following general hypotheses are proposed:

- H1: Students are likely to perceive messages from the traditional media as being more credible than messages in the social media.
- H2: There are differences in students' perception of fake news messages from different mass media, they are expected to perceive news messages from the social media more sceptically than messages from the traditional media.
- H3: There are positive correlations between media use for obtaining news, message credibility and fake news perception.
 - H3.1: There is a positive relationship between traditional media use and fake news perception.
 - H3.2: There is a positive relationship between social media use and fake news perception.
 - H3.3: There is a positive relationship between traditional media use and message credibility of traditional media.
 - H3.4: There is a positive relationship between social media use and message credibility of social media.
 - H3.5: There is a positive relationship between message credibility of traditional media and fake news perception.
 - H3.6: There is a positive relationship between message credibility of social media and fake news perception.
 - H3.7: Message credibility in traditional media mediates the relationship between traditional media use and fake news perception.
 - H3.8: Message credibility in social media mediates the relationship between social media use and fake news perception.

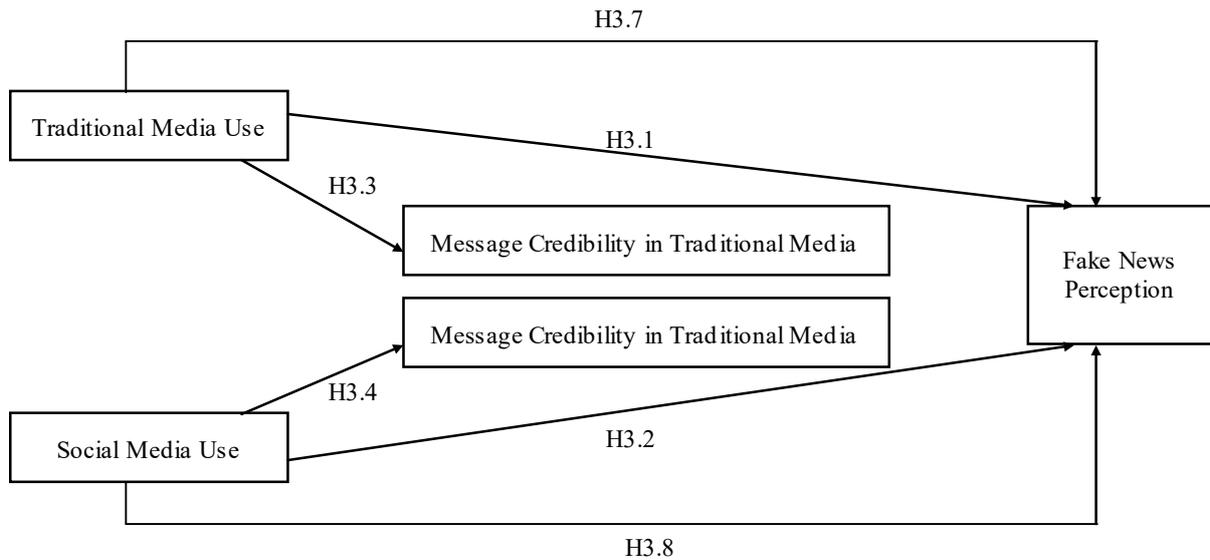


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of fake news perception and related variables.

METHODOLOGY

The study employs the quantitative research design using the survey method. This is required to facilitate the data collection process in obtaining large sets of data in a short time.

Population and Sampling

The population is approximately 500 undergraduate students, estimate received from the Department of Communication, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). Communication students were chosen under the assumption that they are exposed to basic knowledge of the different mass media and they may be among the most frequent users of media since they study mass communication.

A sample size of 237 students was obtained through the stratified random sampling, where the population is divided into subgroups according to their communication courses and respondents randomly selected from each group. Permissions were sought and gained from instructors of various communication courses.

Data Collection Instrument

Survey questionnaire was the preferred technique for data collection. The survey was conducted in three days in the middle of the semester, 25th – 27th March 2018. The data was then computed for analysis.

The questionnaire used for data collection is divided into five sections. Section one features demographic information about the respondents. Section two measures media use for obtaining news. Message credibility, section three, is then measured by asking respondents the degree to which they find news items received through the different media types are accurate, authentic and believable adapted from Appelman and Sundar (2016). The final two sections are on fake news. The fake news items are developed by the researchers.

All items are measured on a 5-point Likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = slightly agree, 4 = agree and 5 = strongly agree. The overall variable is computed to form a mean score with a minimum of 1 and a maximum of 5. To calculate the overall percentage of an item, the mean for each item is multiplied by 20, this is based on the 5-point scale which is equivalent to 100%. Therefore, an overall percentage would be gained by multiplying the mean score by 100 divided by 5 (Wok & Hashim, 2014).

Validity and Reliability

A pilot study (N=30) was conducted before the actual study to measure the flow and content of the questions, and any problems faced by the respondents. The questionnaire was also reviewed and approved by an expert in the field. Reliability tests were carried out on the complete set of items, each item was tested against Cronbach's alpha of .70 to indicate the reliability of the variables. Table 1 shows that the results confirm internal cohesiveness and consistency of the research variables with Cronbach alpha values ranging from .798 to .920.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations and Reliability of Variables in the Study

Variable	M	SD	No. of Items	Reliability (Cronbach's α)	
				Pilot Study (N=30)	Actual Study (N=237)
Traditional Media Use	3.301	0.752	5	.846	.798
Social Media Use	4.219	0.657	5	.948	.879
Accuracy in Message Credibility	3.297	0.647	5	.907	.819
Authenticity in Message Credibility	3.342	0.653	5	.861	.823
Believability in Message Credibility	3.293	0.691	5	.879	.836
Overall Message Credibility	3.310	0.593	15	.955	.920
Perception of Fake News	3.992	0.699	5	.923	.870
Verification of Fake News	3.717	0.688	5	.809	.840
Dissemination of Fake News	2.950	0.824	5	.886	.863
Overall Fake News	3.553	0.504	15	.856	.831

The study's data were compiled and analysed using SPSS v. 23. Then descriptive and inferential statistical analysis was carried out. The Descriptive analyses includes frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations, while the inferential analysis includes the t-tests, zero-order and partial correlations as well as regression analyses.

FINDINGS

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The study analysed a sample of 237 respondents from the target population. Table 2 below shows the details of the demographic characteristics of the respondents. This sample consists of under-graduate students from different specializations within the Department of Communication. The number of males (34.2%) is about half the number of females (65.8%). There are also considerably more Malaysian students (80.2%) than non-Malaysians (19.8%). A

little over half the sample of respondents is between 23 to 25-year-old (54.5%), 40% are between 20 to 22 years old, 26 years and above make up 4.1% and the least number of respondents is aged 19 years or below (1.2%). In terms of their level of study, approximately a third of the respondents are final year students (35.9%), third- and second-year students make up 32.1% and 25.3% of the sample respectively. First year students are least represented amounting to 6.8% of total respondents. A little less than half the sample specializes in organizational communication (39.7%), followed by students in electronic media (27.4%), public relations (21.5%) and finally in journalism (11.4%).

Table 2
Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Demographic characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	81	34.2
	Female	156	65.8
	Total	237	100
Nationality	Malaysian	190	80.2
	International	47	19.8
	Total	237	100
Age	Below 19 years old	3	1.2
	20 – 22 years old	95	40.0
	23 – 25 years old	129	54.5
	More than 26 years old	10	4.1
	Total	237	100
Year of Study	1st year	16	6.8
	2nd year	60	25.3
	3rd year	76	32.1
	4th year	85	35.9
	Total	237	100

Use of Traditional and Social Media for Obtaining News

Tables 3 and 4 show students' usage of traditional and social media for obtaining news, indicating greater use of social media. In the use of the traditional media, the highest percentage is for item number 2 ($M=3.494$, $SD=0.891$) where almost 70% use traditional media to obtain important information about what is happening around them. The lowest item on the traditional media scale is item number 1 ($M=2.956$, $SD=1.047$) reflecting that more than half the responses did not regularly receive news from traditional media. This item also reflected a negative but significant t value of -2.108 ($p=.036$) indicating that the traditional media is a less sought medium for obtaining news in a regular fashion. Table 3 shows that on average students' use of the traditional media for obtaining news is significant ($t=6.170$, $p=.000$) with an average mean score percentage of 66% ($M=3.301$, $SD=0.752$).

12 Human Communication

Table 3

One-sample T-test For Traditional Media Use for Obtaining News (TMU)

No.	Item (N=237)	M*	SD	%	t**	df	p
2	I find that traditional media provide important information about what is happening around us.	3.494	0.891	69.9	8.532	236	.000
4	I read/watch/listen to news reported on traditional media that is relevant to my life.	3.468	0.959	69.4	7.519	236	.000
3	I have easy access to a television or a newspaper or a radio.	3.443	1.050	68.9	6.492	236	.000
5	I follow certain programs on television/radio/newspapers regularly.	3.245	1.093	64.9	3.448	236	.001
1	I read/watch/listen to the news from traditional media regularly.	2.856	1.047	57.1	-2.108	236	.036
Total traditional media use for obtaining news		3.301	0.752	66.0	6.170	236	.000

* 5-point Likert scale where 1=strongly disagree (1-20%), 2=disagree (21-40%), 3=slightly agree (41-60%), 4=agree (61-80%), 5=strongly agree (81-100%). ** Test value is 3.

Table 4 demonstrates that 88.4% of respondents have easy access to news on social media platforms (M=4.422, SD=0.747). Overall the levels of social media use for obtaining news show a significant t value of 28.502 (p=.000) indicating that a large portion of the sample 84.8% (M=4.219, SD=0.657) use social media for obtaining news.

Table 4

One-Sample T-test for Social Media Use for Obtaining News (SMU)

No.	Item (N=237)	M*	SD	%	t**	df	p
2	I have easy access to news on social media.	4.422	0.747	88.4	29.292	236	.000
4	I follow certain news pages on social media.	4.219	0.820	84.4	22.900	236	.000
3	I read/watch/listen to news reported on social media that is relevant to my life.	4.215	0.776	84.3	24.115	236	.000
5	I find that social media provide important information about what is happening around us.	4.127	0.849	82.5	20.423	236	.000
1	I read/watch/listen to the news from social media regularly.	4.114	0.808	82.3	21.234	236	.000
Total traditional media use for obtaining news		4.219	0.657	84.4	28.502	236	.000

* 5-point Likert scale where 1=strongly disagree (1-20%), 2=disagree (21-40%), 3=slightly agree (41-60%), 4=agree (61-80%), 5=strongly agree (81-100%). ** Test value is 3.

Message Credibility

All three subcategories of message credibility showed similar response rates for traditional media as in Table 5. The highest levels are for both the first items in message authenticity (M=3.561, SD=0.850) and believability (M=3.561, SD=0.930) showing that 71.2% of respondents agree to the credibility of news in newspapers. The lowest level is for the believability of news in magazines (M=3.207, SD=0.846), with 64.1% of respondents reflecting their slight agreement on its credibility. Overall, news message credibility of traditional media results are significant with a t-value of 9.485 (p=.000) indicating a 68% agreeable mean score.

Table 5
One-sample T-test for Message Credibility in Traditional Media

No.	Message credibility in traditional media	M*	SD	%	t**	df	p
Message Accuracy							
2	News content on the radio is accurate.	3.477	0.816	69.5	8.996	236	.000
1	News content in the newspapers is accurate.	3.443	0.860	68.9	7.932	236	.000
4	News content on television is accurate.	3.401	0.851	68.0	7.251	236	.000
3	News content in the magazines is accurate.	3.228	0.817	64.6	4.291	236	.000
Total traditional media credibility – accuracy		3.387	0.707	67.7	8.431	236	.000
Message Authenticity							
1	News content in the newspapers is authentic.	3.561	0.850	71.2	10.168	236	.000
2	News content on the radio is authentic.	3.464	0.773	69.3	9.246	236	.000
4	News content on television is authentic.	3.422	0.848	68.4	7.658	236	.000
3	News content in the magazines is authentic.	3.291	0.810	65.8	5.532	236	.000
Total traditional media credibility – authenticity		3.435	0.697	68.7	9.601	236	.000
Message Believability							
1	News content in the newspapers is believable.	3.561	0.930	71.2	9.284	236	.000
2	News content on the radio is believable.	3.405	0.821	68.1	7.594	236	.000
4	News content on television is believable.	3.338	0.918	66.8	5.659	236	.000
3	News content in the magazines is believable.	3.207	0.846	64.1	3.763	236	.000
Total traditional media credibility – believability		3.378	0.749	67.6	7.764	236	.000
Total Message Credibility – Traditional Media (MC-TM)		3.400	0.649	68.0	9.485	236	.000

* 5-point Likert scale where 1=strongly disagree (1-20%), 2=disagree (21-40%), 3=slightly agree (41-60%), 4=agree (61-80%), 5=strongly agree (81-100%). ** Test value is 3.

In the social media news content credibility items, the results show an overall unfavourable response. All three indicators of message credibility reflect negative insignificant results suggesting that the respondents do not completely agree on the credibility of news in social media. The overall t value is - 0.920 (p=.359) with 59.1% of respondents narrowly falling in the 'slightly agree' category in terms of their perception of the message credibility of news in social media (Table 6). The results support H1, which states that students perceive news messages in the traditional media as more credible than messages in the social media.

Table 6

One-sample T-test Message Credibility in Social Media

No.	Message credibility in social media items	M*	SD	%	t**	df	p
2	News content on social media is authentic.	2.970	0.972	59.4	- 0.468	236	.640
3	News content on social media is believable.	2.954	0.922	59.1	- 0.775	236	.439
1	News content on social media is accurate.	2.937	0.897	58.7	- 1.086	236	.279
Total Message Credibility – Social Media (MC-SM)		2.954	0.777	59.1	- 0.920	236	.359

* 5-point Likert scale where 1=strongly disagree (1-20%), 2=disagree (21-40%), 3=slightly agree (41-60%), 4=agree (61-80%), 5=strongly agree (81-100%). ** Test value is 3.

Fake News

One-sample t-tests were run for the fake news items (Table 7). Perception of fake news and verification of fake news behaviour show similar positive evaluations as opposed to the responses for the dissemination of fake news through the media.

The results from the first category, fake news perception, show the highest level of responses for item number 1 (I think news content without a source is probably untrue). Here, 83.2% of respondents are in agreement (M=4.160, SD=0.929). The remaining four items are also significant and agreeable. Overall perception of fake news have a significant t value of 12.865 (p=.000) with almost 80% of respondents in agreement. This implies that most respondents have high levels of perception of fake news in the media.

The second category, verification behaviour towards fake news, also show significant levels of agreement, with an overall t value of 16.048 (p=.000). The highest evaluated item is number 1 (When in doubt, I check the source of the news content), in which 79.1% of responses are in agreement (M=3.954, SD=0.898).

The third and final category, fake news dissemination by the media, has inconsistent responses and an insignificant overall t-value of - 0.931 (p=.353). Of the five items, only two are significant 'I think the radio does not spread fake news' (M=3.156, SD=0.972) and "I think social media does not spread fake news" (M=2.519, SD=1.044). The remaining three items, newspapers (M=3.131, SD=1.122), magazines (M=2.966, SD=0.965) and television (M=2.979, SD=1.044) show insignificant and negative t values. These results indicate that the respondents perceive that within the traditional media, the radio is least likely to disseminate fake news (t=2.471, p=.014) and that social media is the most likely medium to disseminate fake news (t= - 7.094, p=.000).

Table 7

One-sample T-test for Fake News Perception, Verification and Dissemination

No.	Fake news items	M*	SD	%	t**	df	p
Fake news perception							
1	I think news content without a source is probably untrue.	4.160	0.929	83.2	19.218	236	.000
4	I think some news stories are fabricated to harm certain entities (ex. politicians, celebrities, businesses, etc.).	4.001	0.859	80.0	18.081	236	.000
5	Sometimes news stories are presented in a misleading way.	4.000	0.823	80.0	18.697	236	.000
3	Sometimes media institutions publish unverified information to increase readability.	3.979	0.841	79.6	17.920	236	.000
2	When the news story does not match the headline, it is likely to be inaccurate.	3.814	0.848	76.3	14.779	236	.000
Total fake news perception		3.992	0.699	79.8	21.865	236	.000
Fake news verification behavior							
1	When in doubt I check the source of the news content.	3.954	0.898	79.1	16.340	236	.000
2	I always read the content of the story not just the headlines.	3.941	0.779	78.8	18.598	236	.000
4	I usually check the date of the news story to make sure the story is relevant and up to date.	3.667	0.890	73.3	11.540	236	.000
5	I cross-check news stories in other media institutions.	3.603	0.908	72.1	10.226	236	.000
3	I ask experts on a given topic to make sure the news story is true.	3.422	0.925	68.4	7.024	236	.000
Total fake news verification behavior		3.717	0.688	74.3	16.048	236	.000
Fake news dissemination through the media							
2	dissemination through the media I think the radio does not spread fake news.	3.156	0.972	63.1	2.471	236	.014
1	I think newspapers do not spread fake news.	3.131	1.122	62.6	1.795	236	.074
4	I think television does not spread fake news.	2.979	1.014	59.6	- 0.320	236	.749
3	I think magazines do not spread fake news.	2.966	0.965	59.3	- 0.539	236	.591
5	I think social media do not spread fake news.	2.519	1.044	50.4	- 7.094	236	.000
Total fake news dissemination through the media		2.950	0.824	59.0	- 0.931	236	.353
Total Fake News		3.553	0.504	71.1	16.894	236	.000

* 5-point Likert scale where 1=strongly disagree (1-20%), 2=disagree (21-40%), 3=slightly agree (41-60%), 4=agree (61-80%), 5=strongly agree (81-100%). ** Test value is 3.

These findings support H2, which states that there are differences in students' perception of fake news; they are expected to perceive news messages from the social media more sceptically than messages from the traditional media.

Correlation and Regression Analyses

Table 8 shows that the relationships between the variables range from negligible but significant to insignificant. The relationships between traditional media use (TMU) and fake news perception (FNP) is negligible ($r=.118$, $p=.035$) while that between social media use (SMU) and fake news perception is weak ($r=.378$, $p=.000$). Similarly, the relationship between traditional media use and message credibility of traditional media ($r=.324$, $p=.000$) is weak and that between social media use and message credibility of social media is negligible ($r=.152$, $p=.010$). The relationships between message credibility of both traditional and social media and fake news perception are not significant.

Table 8

Zero Order and Partial Correlations Between Fake News Perception, Media Use, and Message Credibility

Control	Variable	FNP	TMU	SMU	MC-TM	MC-TM
None	FNP	1				
	TMU	$r=.118$, $p=.035$	1			
	SMU	$r=.378$, $p=.000$	$r=.082$, $p=.104$	1		
	MC-TM	$r=.080$, $p=.110$	$r=.324$, $p=.000$	$r=.214$, $p=.000$	1	1
	MC-SM	$r=-.064$, $p=.165$	$r=.110$, $p=.045$	$r=.152$, $p=.010$	$r=.363$, $p=.000$	$r=.363$, $p=.000$
Control	Variable	FNP	TMU	SMU		
MC-TM	FNP	1				
	TMU	$r=.089$, $p=.067$	1			
MC-SM	FNP	1				
	SMU	$r=.393$, $p=.000$		1		

The relationships between message credibility of both the traditional and the social media and fake news perception are insignificant, with social media showing a negative correlation ($r=-.064$, $p=.165$). This may suggest that the higher the perception of message credibility in social media, the less is the perception of fake news. These findings show partial support of H3, supporting H3.1 to H3.4 and rejecting H3.5 and H3.6.

In order to test the last two hypotheses on the mediating effects of message credibility on the relationship between media use and fake news perception, partial correlation and regression tests were carried out. Table 8 displays the results of the partial correlations while Tables 9 and 10 show the results of the regression analyses. Findings indicate that the message credibility of traditional media is not a predictor of fake news perception ($r=.089$, $p=.067$). This initial result is further supported by the regression analysis where the F value is not significant ($F=1.893$, $p=.153$). However, in the case of social media, the results on Table 11 indicate that message credibility is a predictor of fake news perception ($F=21.913$, $p=.000$).

Table 9

Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Traditional Media Use on Fake News Perception with Message Credibility of Tradition Media as Mediator

Model	Variables	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients (Beta weight)	t	p
1	Constant	3.629		17.803	.000
	TMU	.110	.118	1.826	.069
F(1,235)=3.335, $p=.069$; R=.118; Adjusted R ² =.010; R ² Change=.014; F Change=3.335, $p=.069$					
2	Constant	3.506		12.797	.000
	TMU	.096	.103	1.506	.133
	MC-TM	.050	.046	0.677	.499
F(1,234)=1.893, $p=.153$; R=.126; Adjusted R ² =.008; R ² Change=.002; F Change=.459, $p=.499$					

Table 10

Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Social Media Use on Fake News Perception with Message Credibility of Social Media as Mediator

Model	Variables	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients (Beta weight)	t	p
1	Constant	2.297		8.379	.000
	SMU	.402	.378	6.256	.000
F(1,235)=39.142, $p=.000$; R=.378; Adjusted R ² =.139; R ² Change=.143; F Change=39.142, $p=.000$					
2	Constant	2.542		8.542	.000
	SMU	.422	.397	6.535	.000
	MC-SM	-.111	-.124	-2.039	.043
F(2,234)=21.913, $p=.000$; R=.397; Adjusted R ² =.151; R ² Change=.015; F Change=4.158, $p=.043$					

The results suggest that there are significant but weak relationships between media use and message credibility, meaning that to a small extent the more the respondents use the media for news purposes the more likely they are to perceive the news content to be credible for both the traditional and the social media. However, the insignificant correlations between message credibility and fake news perception imply that the respondents' perception of message credibility does not lead them to perceive news content of the mass media as fake news. Additionally, the findings also show that message credibility is not a predictor of fake news in traditional media but is a predictor of fake news in the social media. Therefore, hypothesis H3.7 is rejected and H3.8 is accepted.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the results of the research show that students tend to use the social media to obtain news more than they use the traditional media. Ironically, they also perceive social media as the most likely medium through which fake news is spread. The general relationships between mass media use and message credibility as well as media use and fake news perception are significant but weak. This means that even though there is correlation between mass media

use, message credibility and perception of fake news, there are other mediating variables that are not measured in this study. The findings also further demonstrate that while students' perception of social media message credibility is a predictor of fake news perception, the same does not apply for the traditional media.

The objective of this paper is to determine students' perception of fake news in the context of their media use and message credibility under the framework of the Media Dependency theory. The findings reflect that during this election season, students' dependency on the social media for obtaining news is more than on traditional news sources. Additionally, the results imply that students are not fully capable of differentiating between factual and fake news as supported by the research done by MCMC ("Berita palsu musuh kita bersama," 2018).

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This study focused on the undergraduate Communication students of IIUM. It is suggested that for future research, the population be widened for better representation. Another limitation in this research is that it measured mass media use in general and did not focus on a single medium. It is therefore suggested that future research look into a specific medium for more accurate findings. This study used the survey design and the data was collected and analysed close to the national general elections. It is suggested that future research to consider longitudinal design by comparing two different periods (during campaign versus after election). Lastly, the study was guided by the Media Dependency theory "the more the media functions to satisfy certain goals, the more dependent the individual on the media". Further research should try to look at other theories to see if media functions to satisfy the individuals' goals where fake news is rampant.

REFERENCES

- Albright, J. (2017). Welcome to the era of fake news. *Media and Communication*, 5(2), 87-89. doi:10.17645/mac.v5i2.977
- Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social media and fake news in the 2016 election. *NBER Working Papers Series*, pp. 1-32. Retrieved from <http://www.nber.org/papers/w23089>
- Appelman, A., & Sundar, S. S. (2016). Measuring message credibility: Construction and validity of exclusive scale. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 93(1), 59-79. doi:10.1177/1077699015606057
- Ashford, B. (2017). *A christian response to fake news, cynicism and 'PC' conformity*. Retrieved from <http://www.faithwire.com/2017/03/23/a-christian-response-to-fake-news-cynicism-and-pc-conformity/>
- Ball-Rokeach, S. J. & DeFleur, M. L. (1976). A dependency model of mass-media effects. *Communication Research*, 3(1), 3-21. Available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/00936502760300>
- Balmas, M. (2014). When fake news becomes real: Combined exposure to multiple news sources and political attitudes of inefficacy, alienation, and cynicism. *Communication Research*, 41(3), 430-454. doi:10.1177/0093650212453600

- Berita palsu musuh kita bersama, musuh negara! (2018, March 24). Utusan Malaysia, p. 5.
- Bidin, N. A., & Mustafa, N. (2012), Blogosphere: How youth perceived blogs credibility. *Malaysian Journal of Communication* 28(1), 33-53.
- Brewer, P., Young, D., & Morreale, M. (2013). The impact of real news about 'fake news': Intertextual processes and political satire. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 23(3), 323-343. doi:10.1093/ijpor/ed1015
- Curbing fake news lies in thinking it through. (2018, March 8). *The Star*, p. 2.
- Dodds, L. (2017, November 14). Fake news makes cynics of us all, and in doing so undermines our faith in democracy. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/11/14/fake-news-makes-cynics-us-undermines-faith-democracy/>
- Edelman Trust Barometer. (2018). *2018 Edeleman trust barometer: Global report*. 2018 Edeleman trust barometer: Global report. Retrieved from <http://www.edelman.com/trust-barometer>
- Fake news Act a fact soon. (2018, March 6). *The Star*, pp. 1, 2 and 6.
- Fulk, J., Steinfield, C., Schmitz, J., & Power, J. (1987). A social information processing model of media use in organizations. *Communication Research*, 14(5), 529-552.
- Gelfert, A. (2018). Fake news: A definition. *Information Logic*, 38(1), 84-117.
- Golan, G. (2010). News perspectives on media credibility research. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 54(1), 3-7. doi:10.1177/0002764210376307
- Greensdale, R. (2016, November 23). Here's the truth: 'fake news' is not social media's fault. *The Guardian International Edition* - online. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/media/greenslade/2016/nov/23/heres-the-truth-fake-news-is-not-social-medias-fault>
- Hamid, N. A., Ishak, M. S., Ismail, S. A., & Yazam, S. S. N. M. (2013). Social media use among university students in Malaysia. In B. Patrut, M. Patrut & C. Cmeclu (Eds.) pp 244-255. *Social Media and the New Academic Environment: Pedgogical Challenges*. Hershey, PA: IGI Global. doi: 10.4018978-1-4606-2851-9.ch012
- Humprecht, E. (2018). Where 'fake news' flourishes: A comparison across four Western democracies. *Information, Communication and Society*, 21, 1-16. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2018.1474241>
- Ike Picone, S. U., & Smets, K. (2017). *Fake news, old news?* Retrieved from <http://aej-belgium.eu/fake-news-old-news/>
- Karlsson, M., Clerwall, C., & Norld, L. (2014). You aint seen nothing yet: Transparency's (lack of) effect on source and message credibility. *Journalism Studies*, 15(5), 668-678.

- Khaldarova, I., & Pantti, M. (2016). Fake news: The narrative battle over the Ukrainian conflict. *Journalism Practice*, 10(7), 1-11. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2016.1163237>
- Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission. (2014). *Media matters: Networks media content research*. Putrajaya: Author.
- Marchi, R. (2012). With Facebook, blogs, and fake news, teens reject journalistic 'objectivity'. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 34(4), 246-262. doi:10.1177/0196859912458700
- Metzger, M., & Flanagin, A. (2013). Credibility and trust of information in online environments: The use of cognitive heuristics. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 59, 210-220. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2013.07.012>
- Morris, M., Counts, S., Roseway, A., Hoff, A., & Schwarz, J. (2012). Tweeting is believing? Understanding microblog credibility perceptions. *Computer Supported Cooperative Work* (pp. 1-10). Washington: ACM. doi:10.1145/2145204.2145274
- McQuail, D. (2000). *McQuail's mass communication theory* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA, USA: Sage Publications.
- McQuail, D. (2010). *McQuail's mass communication theory* (6th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA, USA: Sage.
- Nik Anis, M. (2018, March 22). Bill against fake news set to be tabled next week. *The Star*, p. 2.
- Nik Saleh, N. S. (2018). Fake news from a legal perspective. *Forum on socio, legal and political landscape: media literacy and fake news*. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: International Islamic University Malaysia.
- Patwardhan, P., & Yan, J. (2003). Internet dependency relations and online consumer behavior: A media systems dependency theory perspective on why people shop, chat and read news online. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 3(2), 57-69. Retrieved from <http://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2003.10722074>
- Rini, R. (2017). Fake news and partisan epistemology. *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal*, 27(S2), 43-64. doi:10.1353/ken.2017.0025
- Sivanandam, H., Carvalho, M., Rahim, R., & Shagar, L. K. (2018, August 16). Parliament passes bill to repeal anti-fake news law. *The Star Online*. Retrieved from <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2018/08/16/parliament-passes-bill-to-repeal-anti-fake-news-bill/>
- Sivanandam, H., Tan, T., & Koh, P. (2018, March 27). Heavy penalty for fake news: Offenders could be fined up to RM500,000 or jailed up to 10 years. *The Star*, pp. 1, 4 and 6.
- Sivanandam, H., Zainal, H., & Tan, T. (2018, April 3). Halt to malicious fakes. *The Star*, p. 1 and 4.

- S'wak BN reps backing proposed Fake News Act. (2018a, March 13). *The Star*, p. 4.
- Statista. (2018). *Media usage*. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/markets/417/topic/1005/media-usage>
- Tandoc, E. C., Lim, Z. W. & Ling, R. (2017). Defining 'fake news': A typology o scholarly definitions. *Digital Journalism*, 6(2), 137-153. doi: 10.1080.21670811.2017.1360143
- Thomas, T. (2018). *The draconian Anti-fake News Bill 2018*. Retrieved from http://www.malaysianbar.org.my/members_opinions_and_comments/not_only_draconian_anti_fake_news_bill_is_unconstitutional.html
- Westerman, D., Spence, P., & Van Der Heide, B. (2014). Social Media as an information source: Recency of updates and credibility of information. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 19(2), 171-183. doi:10.1111/jcc4.12041
- Wilson, S., Leong, P., Nge, C., & Hong, N. (2011). Trust and credibility of urban youth on online news media. *Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 27(2), 97-120.
- Wok, S., & Hashim, J. (2014). Communication networks, organisational contacts and communication power in grooming professionals for career success. *Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 30 (Special Issue), 219-242. Retrieved from <http://www.ukm.my/jkom/journal/volumes/volume30-S-2014.html>
- Wok, S., & Wan Mohd Ghazali, W. (2011). *New and traditional media influence of Muslim students' perceptions on selected Islamic issues: A comparative study*. Paper presented at National Seminar on New Media and Islamic Studies: Challenges and Opportunities. CERDAS & ISTAC, Kuala Lumpur.