

Navigating Truth in the Digital Era: Exploring the Challenges Confronting Journalists in Verifying Social Media Content for News Production in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

In today's digital era, journalists often use social media as a source of information and for verification. This has made the verification of the authenticity of social media content for news production challenging for journalists because of the large volume of online information and the rapid spread of fake news. The issue of disinformation has emerged as one with the most far-reaching implications for journalism and society. So, the research seeks to explore how this phenomenon occurs in Malaysia, as the challenges of social media content verification for news production in Malaysia have not been researched extensively. The study's main objective is to explore the internal and external challenges journalists from mainstream newspapers experience while verifying content on social media for news production. This research was conducted through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with seven news editors and senior journalists from three prominent mainstream newspapers: Harian Metro, Berita Harian, and Sin Chew Daily. The findings show that journalists encounter challenges verifying content from social media platforms. These challenges comprise internal challenges related to personality traits, the media's organisational environment, and routine verification practices, as well as external challenges associated with societal and systemic factors. Undoubtedly, time constraints and speed when verifying information are the most significant challenges to ensuring information accuracy. In addition, Malaysian journalists affirm that there are no clear guidelines for verifying content on social media. Further, government and political influences also add to the complication of information verification among journalists.

Keywords: *Journalists, verification, challenges, social media content, news production.*

INTRODUCTION

The advent of the digital era has completely transformed the field of journalism, fundamentally changing the methods by which news is created, distributed, and consumed. The main driver for this transformation is the rapid progress of digital technologies and the widespread adoption of social media platforms. Today, social media is a part of news production, as it presents opportunities and challenges for journalists. Social media has become a dominant force that has changed the way information is disseminated for news production. According to Zhang and Li (2020), journalists often use social media as a source of information and verification, with over 80% of news organisations surveyed in 2019 stating that they share their content via social media platforms (Khan et al., 2023). Verification is a fundamental aspect of journalists' professional identity, and it has a complex and crucial role in journalism (Shapiro et al., 2016). However, the sheer volume of online information makes verifying social media content more challenging than ever. News organisations frequently use user-generated videos, eyewitness reports, and breaking news, necessitating rigorous

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verification to maintain accuracy and credibility (Baharom et al., 2023a). This is particularly crucial in the digital age, where the rapid spread of fake news and online disinformation poses significant problems for journalism and society (Giomelakis et al., 2021), and one of the main concerns is content verification (Reis, 2023).

Journalists in Malaysia face unique challenges in the digital era, specifically regarding verifying social media content. An exemplary case is the dissemination of inaccurate information amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. During the initial phases of the pandemic, misinformation regarding cures and preventative measures spread extensively on social media. Malaysian journalists exerted diligent efforts to verify information and provide accurate updates to the public despite the challenge of changing facts and widespread dissemination of disinformation. This can be explained by studies conducted by Schuldt (2021), who found that 79% of fake news sources in Malaysia come from social media, highlighting the immense challenge Malaysian journalists face in verifying the authenticity of information (Kamarulbaid et al., 2022). The overwhelming amount of content makes it difficult for journalists to sort through and identify reliable information, a task that is both complex and time-consuming but essential for maintaining the news industry's credibility.

Recent scholarship on journalistic verification has examined both technological and professional dimensions of the practice, including algorithmic and machine-assisted approaches (Castellón, 2021; Hornmoen et al., 2017; Kunert et al., 2022; Picha Edwardsson et al., 2021) as well as verification techniques used by journalists (Gadzekpo et al., 2023; Schapals & Harb, 2021). Within Malaysia, however, research has largely concentrated on broader challenges facing newspapers (Nor, 2022; Othman et al., 2019), technological adaptation and disinformation (Daud & Ghani Azmi, 2021; Hamzah & Esa, 2020), fact-checking (Schuldt, 2021), and user-generated content (Othman, 2023). Taken together, these studies provide important insights into journalism in the digital environment, but offer limited understanding of the specific challenges journalists encounter when verifying social media content as part of news production.

Addressing this gap, the present study explores the internal and external challenges experienced by mainstream media journalists when verifying social media content for news production in Malaysia. By examining journalists' experiences of verification within newsroom practices and the wider media environment, the study seeks to provide a context-specific understanding of the factors that complicate the verification process. The findings may contribute to journalistic practice and policy while extending understanding of verification within contemporary Malaysian journalism.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the internal and external challenges journalists face in the mainstream media when verifying social media content for news production in Malaysia. Overall, this study hopes to provide a clear picture of the challenges that journalists in Malaysia face in verification, especially in publishing news, with the dumping of fake news and inaccurate information that needs to be verified before the news is disseminated and shared with the public. This study provides valuable insights that can inform journalistic practices, policies, and a broader understanding of contemporary media dynamics. The research is presented through a literature review, applied methodologies, results, discussions, and conclusions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media in News Production

The news production process involves several stages, including selecting relevant sources, identifying newsworthy information, collaboratively verifying facts, and preparing news stories (Hernández-Fuentes & Monnier, 2020). Social media has become increasingly integrated into these journalistic routines (Jerónimo et al., 2022), providing journalists with opportunities to develop stories (Alzyoud et al., 2023), remain informed about emerging issues, identify potential topics, and connect with news sources (Hernández-Fuentes & Monnier, 2020). Despite these professional benefits, journalists do not necessarily regard social media as a reliable source of news, even when they recognise its contribution to work productivity (Zhang & Li, 2020). Features such as accessibility, connectivity, and anonymity can create difficulties in establishing the credibility of information obtained through these platforms. Thus, although social media has become important to news gathering, its use also introduces challenges to professional verification. Using social media as an information source may therefore complicate verification practices and raise concerns regarding news professionalism (Christensen & Khalil, 2021; Zhang & Li, 2020).

Although previous studies have examined the veracity of traditional news media, including newspapers, television, and magazines, online media have received comparatively less attention (Emeraldien et al., 2021). This gap highlights the importance of examining journalists' verification practices when social media content is incorporated into news production.

The influence of social media on news production can also be understood through the Hierarchy of Influences Model, which comprises five levels: individual, communication routines, organisational, social institutional, and social system. The individual level concerns journalists' personal characteristics, while the communication routines level relates to established practices and procedures within news organisations. The organisational level reflects the influence of organisational structures, goals, and policies, whereas the social institutional level involves influences originating outside media organisations. At the broader social system level, journalistic practices are situated within prevailing ideological and societal norms. The model therefore demonstrates that journalists' attitudes and behaviours may influence news content at the individual level (Reese, 2019; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). Social media, however, operates across several levels of this hierarchy. It has become embedded in journalists' everyday routines, while media organisations increasingly expect journalists to incorporate these platforms into their professional activities. Social media also enables external actors and audiences to introduce information and story ideas into the news production process. These interconnected influences demonstrate that social media has become an important component of contemporary news production, while simultaneously increasing the need for journalists to verify information obtained through these platforms.

Challenges in Verifying Social Media Content

Journalists face considerable challenges when verifying social media content for news production, particularly because misinformation can circulate rapidly across digital platforms. The widespread dissemination of misinformation has consequently emerged as a significant concern for contemporary journalism (López-Marcos & Vicente-Fernández, 2021). This concern is also reflected among journalists, who identify misinformation as a major difficulty when using social media in news production (Alzyoud et al., 2023). The challenge becomes

more demanding when verification must be undertaken alongside journalists' existing reporting responsibilities, as online information requires careful assessment before it can be considered accurate. Thus, the incorporation of social media into news production has added further complexity to professional verification practices (Fletcher et al., 2020).

The importance of verification has increased as social media and other digital sources have expanded the amount and speed of information available to journalists. However, the pressure to produce news rapidly can conflict with the professional responsibility to ensure accuracy. This creates a tension between speed and accuracy, particularly when journalists must make immediate decisions while working within strict deadlines (Schapals & Harb, 2021). Under these conditions, information and sources obtained through social media require careful evaluation before being incorporated into news stories. Although digital practices are increasingly integrated into contemporary journalism, traditional verification approaches remain important to investigative work and continue to support journalistic objectives (Kunert et al., 2022). Verification may also be complicated by excessive dependence on political sources and selected authoritative voices, which can affect journalistic independence and the verification process (Spyridou et al., 2023). These challenges demonstrate the importance of journalists developing the skills and knowledge required to assess information obtained from multiple sources, including social media platforms.

Journalists employ both manual approaches and digital technologies to verify content and assess different types of information (Sushmita, 2021). However, the adoption of new verification practices may be constrained by journalists' limited time and experience. Introducing digital tools alone may therefore be insufficient to strengthen verification practices. Newsroom management also needs to provide journalists with adequate time to develop the competencies required to use these tools effectively through training (Picha Edwardsson et al., 2021).

Contemporary news production increasingly requires journalists to develop new professional competencies, including the ability to analyse databases, use digital tools, and obtain information from diverse sources (Rodriguez-Perez & Seibt, 2022). Such competencies are particularly important for verification because the accuracy of online journalism depends partly on journalists' ability to evaluate digital information. At the same time, trust and credibility remain fundamental to journalism from a media ethics perspective and should be maintained throughout the news production process (Zilic Fiser & Caks, 2023). The development of digital and verification competencies, however, is influenced by both structural and individual factors (Kunert et al., 2022). At the individual level, characteristics such as gender, education, training, and attitudes may influence news reporting practices (Jamil & Appiah-Adjei, 2020). Journalists must therefore continue developing technical competencies and adapting to changing trends and audiences (Bautista, 2021; Thomson et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the adoption of new verification routines may remain difficult when journalists lack sufficient skills, time, and knowledge (Gregory, 2022; Picha Edwardsson et al., 2021).

Age has also been identified as an important factor influencing the pressures experienced in journalistic practice (Rodriguez-Perez & Seibt, 2022). At the individual level, differences in age may influence how journalists adapt to digital technologies used to verify social media content during news production.

Organisational conditions can further shape journalists' ability to respond to verification challenges. Technological disparities, media ownership, organisational regulations, and internal practices have been identified as factors affecting news production (Salaudeen, 2021). These challenges may become more pronounced when media organisations face economic pressures arising from declining revenues and increasing competition, which can restrict investment in technologies required for verification. Organisational constraints may also affect journalists' capacity to address misinformation and fake news. In particular, limited financial, technological, and logistical resources, together with job insecurity and inadequate guidelines and training, have been identified as significant organisational challenges (Jamil & Appiah-Adjei, 2020). Developing teams with diverse and relevant professional competencies may therefore help news organisations respond more effectively to resource constraints.

Newsroom culture and media ownership can influence how journalists respond to verification in the digital environment, and these organisational factors may have greater influence on changing verification practices than technological development alone (Picha Edwardsson et al., 2021). In the Malaysian context, journalistic practices operate within a media environment shaped by political, cultural, and economic influences. Government regulation and patterns of media ownership may consequently affect the circulation of information and editorial decision-making. Although political ownership does not necessarily determine journalists' professional values directly, it may indirectly influence interventionist practices within newsrooms (Ekayanti & Xiaoming, 2018).

External institutional influences may also complicate journalists' ability to independently verify information, particularly when verification involves government institutions or politically sensitive information. Such conditions can restrict the extent to which journalists and fact-checkers are able to independently confirm false or disputed information (Haque et al. & Hassan, 2020). These challenges illustrate how verification may be shaped not only by journalists' individual practices and newsroom conditions but also by the wider institutional and regulatory environment in which journalism operates.

News organisations have introduced and revised policies to guide professional conduct and verification practices. However, existing policies may not adequately address emerging challenges associated with digital journalism, including the protection of user-generated information and the management of cyber risks (Adornato & Frisch, 2022). Clear verification guidelines are therefore important in supporting journalists when assessing social media content. Nevertheless, routine verification of digital sources and information obtained through social media and websites remains limited in some newsrooms (Picha Edwardsson et al., 2021). These conditions suggest that verification challenges operate across multiple levels and require more than individual journalistic responsibility. Effective verification also depends on journalists having appropriate skills, knowledge, and resources, together with organisational and managerial support. Specialised training in verification tools and techniques may further strengthen journalists' ability to evaluate the reliability of social media content.

Overall, the literature indicates that effective social media verification requires support at both individual and organisational levels. Journalists need appropriate competencies and resources to evaluate digital information, while news organisations need verification practices that can respond to the changing characteristics of social media environments. These interconnected factors demonstrate that verification challenges extend

beyond the technical assessment of online information and are shaped by broader professional, organisational, and institutional conditions. Examining these influences is therefore important for understanding the challenges journalists encounter when verifying social media content for news production.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory approach using semi-structured, in-depth interviews to obtain detailed information from the informants. Seven editors and senior journalists from three Malaysian mainstream newspapers—Harian Metro, Berita Harian, and Sin Chew Daily—participated in the study. The three newspapers were selected based on their position among the newspapers with the highest readership circulation in Malaysia (Adqrate, 2023). Harian Metro, a Malay-language tabloid established on 25 March 1991 by The New Straits Times Press (M) Bhd, recorded a circulation of 4,568,000 readers (Adqrate, 2023). Berita Harian, first published on 1 July 1957, is a major Malay-language newspaper published by The New Straits Times Press (M) Bhd, with a readership of 1,491,000 (Adqrate, 2023). Sin Chew Daily, formerly known as Sin Chew Jit Poh, is a leading Chinese-language daily that was first published in Singapore on 15 January 1929 and is currently owned by Sin Chew Media Corporation Berhad. Its reported circulation was 1,390,000 readers (Adqrate, 2023). Readership circulation in this study refers to audiences accessing these newspapers through traditional, online, and digital formats.

The informants comprised editors and senior journalists with at least ten years of professional experience. Three informants represented Berita Harian, two represented Harian Metro, and two represented Sin Chew Daily. Their selection was primarily based on their experience in verifying social media content for print or online news production and their knowledge of news production processes. Editors and senior journalists were considered appropriate informants because their professional responsibilities include evaluating and fact-checking news stories, although not all editors are directly involved in verifying social media content before publication.

Table 1: List of informants for this study

Informants	Newspaper	Designation	Years of experience
BH1	Berita Harian	Senior journalist	23
HM1	Harian Metro	Senior journalist	14
SC1	Sin Chew	Senior journalist	10
BH2	Berita Harian	Editor	33
HM2	Harian Metro	Editor	27
SC2	Sin Chew	Senior journalist	10
HM3	Harian Metro	Editor	28

Although other established newspapers operate in Malaysia, the three newspapers included in this study were also selected according to their willingness to participate. Such willingness was important for obtaining rich descriptions within the phenomenological approach. Purposive sampling was employed because participants were selected according to their ability to provide relevant information and their knowledge of the population under investigation (Van Wyk & Carbonatto, 2016). Accordingly, the selection criteria considered the informants' knowledge, professional experience, and involvement in the research topic, particularly their capacity to provide detailed, context-specific accounts of journalists' practices in verifying social media content.

Data collection continued until saturation was reached, which occurred following the seventh interview. In this study, saturation was considered to have been achieved when the collection and analysis of additional data yielded little or no new information relevant to answering the research question (Guest et al., 2020). The use of in-depth interviews was intended to develop a detailed understanding of participants' experiences, perspectives, and perceptions rather than to achieve statistical generalisability. This emphasis on depth of understanding supports the use of a relatively small sample in qualitative interview research (Rosenthal, 2016).

Data collection commenced in May 2023 following approval from the Universiti Putra Malaysia Research Ethics Committee and concluded in July 2023. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via Zoom and lasted between 50 and 80 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The resulting transcripts were subsequently analysed thematically using ATLAS.ti to identify significant themes within the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings revealed three main themes concerning the challenges journalists encounter when verifying social media content for news production. The internal challenges comprise (1) journalists' personality traits and (2) the media organisational environment and routine verification practices, while the external challenges are represented by (3) societal and systemic factors. Collectively, these themes demonstrate that verification practices are influenced by factors associated with individual journalists, media organisations, and the broader social environment in Malaysia.

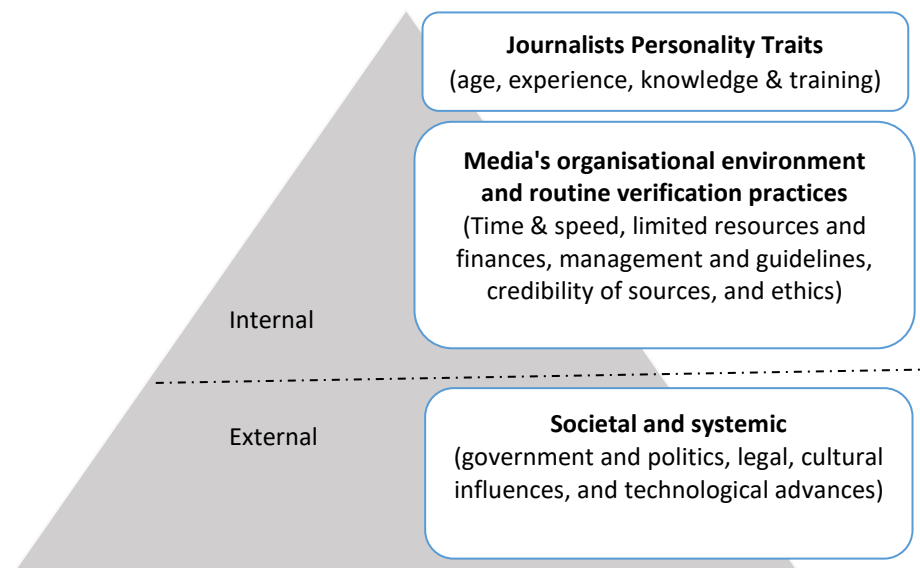


Figure 1: The journalist's challenges in verifying social media content for news production

Journalists' Personality Traits

The findings identified two sub-themes associated with journalists' personality traits that influence the verification of social media content: (1) age and (2) experience, knowledge, and training. These factors illustrate how journalists' individual characteristics and professional backgrounds may shape their ability to undertake verification.

a. Age Influences Verification Skills

Most informants perceived age as an important factor influencing journalists' ability to use technology for social media verification. Their responses indicated differences between younger and older journalists in adapting to the technological skills required for verification. Informant BH2, for example, observed that younger journalists tend to be more familiar with technology, whereas older journalists may require more time to acquire new technological skills:

The new journalism is all about skills. You need to know about broadcasting, video, and IT. Tools, skills, and age change the challenge. It takes a long time and is hard to teach the older ones (Informant BH2).

This finding is consistent with Castellón (2021), who emphasised the importance of technological skills in journalism. The interviews further indicate that age may affect journalists differently when adapting to technologies used for social media verification. While older journalists may encounter difficulties in acquiring new technological skills, younger journalists may face additional responsibilities associated with digital and multitasking demands. Informant HM1 described this experience as follows:

Age influences the ability to adapt to technology because it burdens young journalists and their organisations. I am the one who multitasks more (Informant HM1).

Age may also influence journalists' acceptance and use of emerging communication technologies. Younger journalists involved in social media verification have been found to demonstrate greater confidence in verifying digital content (Picha Edwardsson et al., 2021). This familiarity with digital technologies may support their ability to undertake multiple tasks associated with contemporary news production. Informant SC2 similarly highlighted the importance of continuously developing verification skills:

I think the personal challenge is [that] we want to get updated skills from time to time. This means we required further professional expertise to validate the news. Usually, juniors are responsible for the verification, not seniors (Informant SC2).

Overall, the findings suggest that younger journalists tend to demonstrate greater confidence in using digital technologies for verification, whereas older journalists may approach digital content more cautiously. This observation is consistent with Picha Edwardsson et al. (2021), who found differences in confidence between younger and older journalists when verifying digital content. As contemporary journalists increasingly perform multiple roles, familiarity with social media and digital verification tools can facilitate the process of confirming online information. These differences should also be understood within the broader technological transformation of journalism, which has reshaped professional practices and introduced new journalistic roles and competencies (Splendore & Iannelli, 2022).

b. Journalists' Experience, Knowledge and Training

Most of the journalists interviewed also agreed that the experience was a challenge in terms of the skills needed to perform content verification on social media. Most interviewees with ten years or more of journalism experience concur that experienced journalists have their ways and resources for verifying information, especially on topics that go viral on social media. Their expertise helps them recognise the source of information more accurately and effectively than young journalists who are not as well versed in the intricacies of journalism, as informant SC1 explained:

A journalist's ability to properly verify social media content mostly depends on experience and knowledge. Experienced journalists have developed a network of sources and know the kinds of content that those sources provide. It enables them to find trustworthy sources quickly and confirm information more successfully (Informant SC1).

The study by Beckers et al. (2021) shows that more experienced journalists are better at assessing public opinion than junior journalists. Informant BH1 also agrees that knowledge and experience about a viral topic and who should be contacted are crucial for quick and practical verification of content on social media.

Verifying an issue or incident also depends on knowledge of laws, rules, policies, and related matters. It allows people or organisations to be contacted for certainty and explanation (Informant BH1).

At the same time, informant BH1 states that networking between individuals or organisations and journalists affects selected information where only certain journalists are privileged with information on a story and that other journalists must ultimately use their skills and experience by using various sources to verify content on social media. That is to ensure journalists disseminate credible information (Munoriyarwa & Chambwera, 2020).

Training in fact-checking methods is also required to verify material and conduct research beyond the initial stages of primary source verification. For example, journalists need to know how to analyse fake news online, especially on social media and viral news, which often causes the public to worry about the validity of a story because social media has also influenced professional norms and transparency among journalists (Adibah Ismail, 2020). Based on the experience of informant SC2, who is directly involved in fake news verification, knowledge of fake news verification technologies and systems is essential for journalists today to provide accurate information to the public, and it is crucial to know the tools for verifying content on social media. He stated the following:

Professional training is excellent at a mess level, particularly for journalists equipped with fact-checking system knowledge and skills. Last year, I went by myself to the Facebook and Google fake news summit. If they are not in charge of the fake news, they are unaware of that (Informant SC2).

Based on the above statement, it is clear that the journalist's experience, knowledge, and training make the verification of social media content, which is peppered with fake news, a challenge. The same applies to journalists' knowledge of verification tools and awareness of the use of technology. That is consistent with the study on the importance of new knowledge for journalists, which states that journalists need to improve their media literacy and technical skills to verify and debunk errors using digital tools (Thomson et al., 2022). Therefore, the findings agree with Ullah and Jan (2021) that a journalist's professional training and experience influence their judgement of the newsworthiness of an event.

Media Organisational Environment Challenges and Routine Verification Practices

In addition, the media organisational environment and verification routines have presented journalists with challenges when verifying social media content for news production. 1) Time and speed, 2) limited resources and finances, 3) management and guidelines, 4) credibility of sources, and 5) ethics affect journalists' verification practices on an organisational and routine level.

a. Time and Speed

All journalists agreed that time and speed in verifying social media content are major challenges for news production, especially when it comes to publishing news ahead of the competition. Informant SC1, for example, said:

Time pressure. Once we have the data from social media, we have to act fast in news verification and might feel under pressure to cover breaking events before our rivals. For most media organisations, verification still comes first, even with time constraints (Informant SC1).

Similarly, informant BH2 agrees that lack of time and speed in verifying social media content are the biggest challenges for journalists in the story production process, and this concurs with a study by Picha Edwardsson et al. (2021) that lack of time is the barrier to adopting new verification routines and affects errors in reporting, as journalists have to produce their reports within the set deadlines, as informant SC1 stated:

In addition, we have short deadlines that make it hard for us to verify the information. This can lead journalists to report things in a rush and with errors. If there is time, we can wait to see if the source answers before the deadline (Informant SC1).

The conflict between speed and the need for verification is as old as journalism (Picha Edwardsson et al., 2021). When it comes to verification, journalists need to move with the times, and when it comes to verifying content, sources must be checked quickly.

b. Source Credibility

According to informant SC1, the obstacles caused by the difficulty of locating primary sources and the cases in which politicians or sources refuse to verify information hinder the production of accurate and objective news.

False information is sometimes spread to mislead people, and it is not always easy to find where the information came from in the first place. Sometimes, we might not be able to get to particular sources or information. This can make it hard for us to verify information, which can cause reports to be missing essential details (Informant SC1).

Furthermore, the BH2 reporters agreed that verifying information before it is published and shared on social media is a major challenge in addition to the time challenge of finding credible sources. Journalists work in real-time, are bound by deadlines and make quick decisions. The credibility of the source and the quality of the information were identified as the two most influential factors in determining whether or not an online message is accepted (Yushairi et al., 2023), as well as awareness and experience with the skills required to recognise trustworthy sources (Wunderlich et al., 2022).

According to the interviewees, source verification is a challenge, and time and speed are the biggest routine barriers to validating social media content. By providing accessible data and novel methods, digital technologies improved existing verification procedures (Christensen & Khalil, 2021). According to Schapals and Harb (2021), numerous studies demonstrate journalists' heavy reliance on reputable, elite sources.

c. Limited Resources and Finances

Staff shortages are putting a strain on the dwindling number of journalists, especially those responsible for validating content on social media. News should be published quickly and verified before publication, increasing the pressure on journalists and organisations to compete with other media organisations. Informant HM3 explained:

Cost-cutting results in staff reduction. So, it takes time since it has to be released immediately when much information comes. Should we be slow, we will miss that day. News has to come up quickly (Informant HM3).

That is in line with the study by Moreno-gil et al. (2022). According to the study, the main internal obstacle common to all endeavours is the lack of resources, which limits the scope and variety of services to be provided. The efficiency of verification methods is directly affected by staff shortages and funding constraints, which can lead to problems and delays in dealing with information overload.

In addition, most informants agreed that cost constraints hinder the adoption of new technologies needed for reliable verification because media does not have such capabilities due to the cost of these activities (Vizoso et al., 2021). Nevertheless, Malaysian journalists manage to conduct a verification process despite these restrictions. Informant BH2 explained:

One of the main technological obstacles is financial limitations; nevertheless, large companies can invest. Digital is absolutely central in new journalism. Digital is related to information technology. Money drives technology. AI can complicate reporting for our journalists. If you fall behind in technological developments, you will be behind. Despite limited resources, we are doing well (Informant BH2).

The statement concurs with Vizoso et al. (2021), who stated that cost prevents media organisations from using technology and challenges journalists to verify information on a digital platform. These studies provide collective evidence to support the assertion that the verification process for journalists is significantly affected by financial constraints and resource limitations, especially concerning social media content.

d. Management and Guidelines

The lack of clear guidelines and a fact-checking team within the newsroom can complicate the journalists' verification process. Most informants agreed that no clear guidelines for fact-checking on social media exist. Journalists may lack standardised standards for determining the veracity of information, especially for content on social media. Informant HM2 explained:

Our primary principle is to adhere to the journalistic work ethic that is to be maintained. There is currently no established procedure or specific guideline for social media verification (Informant HM2).

The reliance on traditional editorial leadership to enforce verification methods underlines the importance of clear guidelines and established fact-checking mechanisms within news organisations. Furthermore, the success of verification methods depends on the discipline of newsroom management to enforce source authentication before disseminating news across various media platforms. According to informant BH1, "the attitude of a media organisation's management influences journalists in fact-checking or topic verification". She added that news verification depends on whether the newsroom management intends to keep their news authentic or cares less about the topic.

Rodríguez-Pérez et al. (2023) emphasise the value of establishing verification procedures and the need for fact-checking to consolidate the media landscape to gain audience trust. The interference of social media in the work of online media journalists highlights the difficulties posed by the ever-changing digital environment (Wahyudi et al., 2022). The findings emphasise the need for clear guidelines and a dedicated verification team to overcome the challenges of verifying social media content for news production. However, Tejedor and Vila (2021) introduce a concept of "exo-journalism" that proposes a hybrid formula between journalism and artificial intelligence (AI) to improve journalists' skills in news production. Exo-journalism combines the strengths of AI and human expertise to improve journalists' professional practice by using AI to invent and personalise journalistic material. The fundamental concept is that AI supports and complements reporters, thus enhancing their efficiency and the quality of news production. AI tools can aid in fact-checking and data verification, reducing the potential for spreading false information and enhancing the accuracy and reliability of news content. Thus, the lack of clear guidelines and fact-checking teams in newsrooms makes verifying social media content challenging for Malaysian journalists.

e. Ethics

The results of the study show that there are ethical challenges in the verification of social media content for news production. Journalists can face a dilemma without clear guidelines for fact-checking and verification in newsrooms. Interviewees emphasised the importance of

adhering to media ethics, especially when it comes to protecting sources and ensuring the accuracy of the information, as informant BH2 explained:

Another issue is that keeping the source safe is important, which is the challenge. Since ethics is a part of journalism, we should protect our sources (Informant BH2).

Preserving the ethical principle of source protection while verifying social media requires careful consideration to confirm the information's validity without jeopardising the sources' confidentiality. This ethical dilemma highlights journalists' difficulties managing the verification process while maintaining professional standards. Wahyudi et al. (2022) reinforce this argument by addressing online media journalists' challenges in applying journalistic codes of ethics and emphasising the complications in maintaining ethical standards in the digital environment.

The interviewees emphasised the ethical responsibility of not sharing unverified material that could harm individuals. This ethical stance is consistent with journalists' commitment to responsible reporting and avoiding unjustified harm. The evolution of journalistic practices in the new information arena emphasises the ethical implications of the post-media dynamic and its impact on the quality standards of news reporting (Tariq et al., 2022). According to informant HM2, journalists in media organisations always follow ethical guidelines when producing news.

The study's analysis provides insightful information about the ethical challenges journalists face as they navigate the changing media landscape in verifying content on social media.

Societal and Systemic Challenges

The external challenges that influence the verification of journalists are government and politics, which impact the verification process, emphasising the importance of government oversight and the challenges posed by controversial issues. Significant systemic challenges were identified, such as the bureaucratic process of government agencies and the delayed verification of information related to government and private companies. Informant BH1 emphasised that it is difficult to go through multiple levels of verification, from media representatives to high-level officials, which can hinder the timely and efficient verification of information.

Bureaucratic constraints frequently make verification difficult. Even though the issue has gone viral on social media, some individuals, including politicians and government agencies, prefer to remain mute (Informant BH1).

Informant HM3 made the same point that government and politics influence journalists in verification, especially for high-profile cases:

Yes, it has a major impact on verification. If the cases are sensitive, their high profile will make verification with the authorities difficult (Informant HM3).

Furthermore, the legal implications of content verification were emphasised. Interviewees expressed concern about possible legal consequences for sharing false material. This legal aspect complicates the verification process and emphasises the importance of thorough fact-checking to mitigate legal risks. Most informants believed compliance with laws such as the Official Secrets Act (OSA) and defamation laws heavily influence the content that can be published, leading to restrictions and requiring thorough vetting before dissemination. This statement is noted by informant SC2:

Legal issues also played a role in my decision to verify since people could sue me for inaccurate content (Informant SC2).

Technological advances and the development of digital platforms have changed the way news is consumed, transmitted and validated, making it difficult to verify the information. Silvestre and Frazão (2022) address the problems that data and technology bring to journalism, emphasising the complexity of processing huge amounts of data and turning it into journalistic content. The challenge posed by fake media content on social media burdens journalists and undermines public trust. That is because, in the Malaysian culture, social focus is on entertainment and fashion rather than verifying the story. Informant SC2 explained:

Malaysian culture focuses on entertainment and fashion. NGOs consult on fact-checking in Malaysia but focus more on education to raise awareness of fact-news from primary to secondary school. The mainstream media does not have a research centre for fact-checking (Informant SC2).

Informant HM1 further explained that her verification practices and commitment to reporting integrity are influenced by the culture and ideology of journalists who uphold religious principles. Such journalists strive to earn decent salaries while adhering to the journalistic code of ethics and ensuring the truth and accuracy of news reporting.

The interview findings highlight the challenges of vetting social media content for news production, including political and governmental factors, legal and cultural influences, and technological advances. The study aligns with Salaudeen (2021), who notes that technological disparities, media ownership, organisational regulations and in-house cultures are some challenges that impact news production.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study show that all levels of individual, routine, organisational, and societal institutions and systems affect the challenges of verifying journalists' content on social media in Malaysia. Journalists' personality traits, media organisational environment, and routine verification practices contribute to internal challenges, and societal and systemic challenges affect the external challenges in verifying social media content by journalists. In terms of internal challenges, all journalists in the study agreed that the age of journalists is a challenge to their ability to adapt to the latest technology when verifying information on social media. Experience, knowledge, and training in fake news and new technologies are challenges that often affect journalists' verification today. Addressing these challenges requires journalists to strengthen their media literacy and develop practical competencies in the use of verification tools. The relevance of verification practices is particularly evident in

Malaysia, where internet penetration reached 96.8% of the population in 2023 (Baharom et al., 2023b), enabling information to be accessed and circulated rapidly.

In terms of challenges at an organisational and routine level, there is no doubt that time and speed are the biggest challenges when verifying information on social media. The speed of information in this digital age forces journalists to produce news quickly to be seen as credible. However, the accuracy of information is vital to present a credible picture to the public. Credible sources are a challenge; journalists usually still rely on the source elite, such as politicians and governments. They agree that the task for journalists today is more complicated than ever. The reason for this is the large number of viral issues that require fact-verification to avoid the spread of defamation to the public. Resource and financial constraints are also a problem and a challenge in managing the flood of information and using technology in information verification, as technology is related to money.

Furthermore, journalists in Malaysia confirm that there are no clear guidelines for social media content verification. The study aligns with results from Picha Edwardsson et al. (2021), which show that many newsrooms lack clear procedures and guidelines for validating digital and social media content. Thus, this can lead to ambiguity when verifying information on social media. Nevertheless, journalists in Malaysia consistently uphold journalistic ethics in news production.

The societal and systemic challenges affect the external challenges of information verification on social media, including government, politics, culture, law, and technological advancement. In the Malaysian context, bureaucracy in government and politics affects journalists' verification of information. The bureaucracy in the government makes the vetting process very slow and difficult in cases involving politicians and sensitive issues. The government and political authorities indirectly influence news writing, and the relevant laws are still binding on journalists. Journalists in Malaysia still adhere to the ethics of journalism when disseminating information to the public, and the culture of religious beliefs to write without defamation is still a foothold for verifying information before it is disseminated.

FUTURE STUDY

Future studies may consider including more samples in the research. The study sample should also be expanded to include journalists from other languages, such as English-language newspapers and various media platforms, and not just be limited to mainstream newspapers. In addition, researchers may also consider conducting mixed-methods studies that include questionnaire surveys that can be conducted online, including on social media applications. In addition, the main topic of social media content verification can be considered the main subject of the study, which is related to the strategy of using data journalism in the media verification process in Malaysia. These areas may extend future research on journalistic verification and contribute to understanding underexplored verification practices within non-Western media contexts.

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