

# Accessing News in the Digital Era: The Case of Sarawak, Malaysia

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**Abstract:** *Recent trends show that people around the world are increasingly accessing news via mobile devices and digital platforms such as search engines and social media. The study examined whether such trends were escalating in the contexts where a large number of people continued to access news from traditional media sources such as TV, news, and print. A survey of 512 respondents living in Sarawak, Malaysia was conducted (33.8% rural, 10% suburban, and 56.2% urban). The results showed that the mobile gadgets most commonly used to access news are smartphones (49%) and 29.5% of respondents used both smartphones and laptop computers to read the news. The streaming device most frequently used to get news was Chromecast with Google TV. A majority of the respondents read online newspapers but they mostly read free news. Only 21.7% subscribed to online news portals. A comparison showed that online newspaper was gaining popularity over printed newspapers, and the use of live news streaming, news video, and podcast was on the rise. The study revealed that 19.3% did not use any gadgets to read the news, and they relied on traditional forms such as TV, printed newspapers, and radio. The most popular TV news channels for the Sarawakians were TV3 Media Prima and the newly established TV Sarawak. Among pay TV, Astro was popular. The study showed the appeal of mainstream news outlets to satisfy the news needs of Sarawakian viewers for updates on daily news, local news, and breaking news in the digital era.*

**Keywords:** news, digital, social media, Sarawak, Malaysia

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## 1. Introduction

The decline of TV news (hereafter TV news) viewing among the masses has been attributed to the rise of digital media. Young audiences have shifted away from TV news and turned to digital media as their main source of news and information. While many have argued that this trend has already eroded TV news viewing and traditional TV viewing in general, one should not underestimate the power of distant events.

This is because TV consumption has increased dramatically in the past years due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with thousands of viewers tuned in to watch TV news broadcasts for the latest up-to-date news and reports on the deadly disease. One possible explanation is that traditional news sources such as TV and print news have become more credible sources of COVID-19 information compared to social media that have magnified the spread of misinformation about the deadly disease (Cinelli et al. 2020; Knowles, 2021; Sullivan & Molay, 2020). As the world is entering the post-COVID-19/endemic phase, questions

regarding TV news viewing remain: Will watching TV news become obsolete? Will people continue to watch TV news?

Answering these questions will enable us to understand TV news viewing among the general population of the country. This is because while recent trends show that people around the world are increasingly accessing news via mobile devices and digital platforms (e.g., search engines, social media), more needs to be known whether such trends exist in countries such as Malaysia where a large number of people continue to access news from traditional media outlets (e.g., TV, radio, print media).

Therefore, the present study aimed to examine TV news viewing among Malaysians, particularly living in the East Malaysian state of Sarawak. In support of this aim, the study sought to provide answers to the following two questions:

- i. How are Sarawakians accessing news in today's digital era?
- ii. Are Sarawakians ready for potential changes to the current format of news broadcasts?

Sarawak was chosen for the study mainly because a large number of its 2.9 million population (Sarawak Government, 2023) continue to access traditional news outlets in the digital era. One possible explanation for this is the technology penetration issue (e.g. Internet, smartphone) that many Sarawakians face, especially those living in rural areas. A study by Horn and Gifford (2022) revealed that people living in remote areas of Sarawak experienced limited infrastructure and limited or unreliable access to mobile and Internet connectivity. The study further revealed relatively low rates of internet use in these areas compared to the rates in urban parts of Sarawak and other parts of Malaysia. Another reason is accurate and credible reporting of news. The then-state director of the information department, Abang Sardon Abang Hasyim maintained that the Sarawak public still relies on traditional media such as TV and newspapers to access news because of its accurate and credible reporting (Borneo Post Online, 2015).

## **2. Literature Review**

Studies have shown that there has been a decline in TV news viewing among the masses, particularly young audiences who have gradually moved away from TV and turned to digital media as their main source of news and information. The decline has been attributed to many factors including the rise of digital media and its widespread use that not only supplemented but also supplanted traditional TV viewing (Nielsen & Sambrook, 2016).

A study by Galan, Osserman, Parker and Taylor that was commissioned by the Reuters Institute for the study of Journalism in 2019 revealed that younger audiences (under -35s) access news via social media, aggregators, and non-traditional media such as Twitter, Reddit, Instagram, and Facebook (Galan et al., 2019). One of the pull factors is the fact that people have greater access to more news sources in today's digital world given the boom of social media, influencers, blogs, and digital startups (Galan et al., 2019). Younger audiences do not necessarily view traditional media sources (e.g., TV, radio, print) as the only outlets to access news. Rather, they access news from various non-traditional media outlets (e.g., social media, online conversation, bloggers, and vloggers) to fulfil different personal and social needs (e.g., enjoyment, progress-related needs) (Galan, et al., 2019).

The last two years, however, have seen a remarkable rise in traditional TV viewing, with a significant number of people including young audiences turning towards TV news as a credible source of information during the COVID-19 pandemic (Nielsen, 2020). For example, at the

start of COVID-19 spread in the US (i.e., early Feb - early March), more people stayed at home and flocked to local TV news outlets to get the latest updates on the impact of the pandemic on their communities (Nielsen, 2020). A similar trend is evident during Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. A recent report by USAID/Internews revealed that the United News Telethon (i.e., live TV) was viewed by 96% of Ukrainians who relied on TV to get daily updates on the invasion (Internews, 2023). This was due to the fact the United News Telethon "enjoyed a high level of trust" among Ukrainian viewers who "found it emotionally pleasant to watch and less toxic than other sources" (Internews, 2023).

However, the trends of accessing news from non-traditional media outlets continue to escalate despite these recent turn of events. The same report by USAID/Interviews found that TV use of news has dropped from 85% in 2015 to 36% in 2022, with a large number of Ukrainians surveyed (74%) accessing news from social networks (Internews, 2023). The 2022 Reuters Digital News Report revealed that consumption of traditional media waned further in the global markets, while Facebook remains the most-used social media site for news and TikTok becomes the most thriving social network for news (Newman et al., 2022). The report also revealed findings from Asia Pacific countries including Malaysia where online news and social media remain the main sources of news (Nain, 2022). The use of traditional news sources such as print media declined further (from 45% in 2017 to 17% in 2022). Smartphones continued to be used by Malaysians to access news, while podcasting has become an essential feature for news dissemination among local digital radio and TV stations (Nain, 2022).

While this report presents the changing trends in TV news consumption globally and regionally, more needs to be known about whether such trends exist (i.e., escalating or otherwise) in contexts where a large number of people continue to get news from traditional media sources. This is true in the case of Malaysia despite the above-mentioned report. Malaysians, particularly older audiences "are still wedded to traditional TV" despite the downward trend among younger viewers (under -35s) (FTM, 2022). People living in Sarawak, in particular, still rely on traditional news outlets. According to the principal assistant director of Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM) Sarawak, Marill Chunggat, radio services continue to play a crucial role in reaching out to Sarawakians. This is due to two reasons: first, Sarawak's geographical and population factors that still require radio (and other traditional news sources) to disseminate news and messages, and second, those living in rural areas with little or no access to digital technologies can still be reached through receptions of bands, waves, or radio frequency transmission (Ten, 2022).

### **3. Methodology**

The present study employed a qualitative research approach as it allowed the researchers to investigate how Sarawakians accessed news and whether they were ready for potential changes to the current format of news broadcasts. The survey (i.e., questionnaire) was used to gather information from the respondents such as their characteristics, perceptions, opinions, and attitudes.

The target sample size was 500 and the non-probability sampling techniques (e.g., voluntary response and snowballing) were used to recruit the respondents from major districts in Sarawak such as Kuching, Kota Samarahan, Sibul, Bintulu, and Miri. The recruitment criteria were as follows: (1) aged between 18 and 64, and 65 and over; (2) of Malaysian nationality from various racial/ethnic groups or communities; and (3) may have some knowledge of TV news and TV news viewing.

The question items were adapted from those used in two previous studies: (1) a study by the Pew Research Center titled Measuring news consumption in the digital era (2020) and (2) a study by the Reuters Institute for Study of Journalism titled What is happening to TV news? Digital news project 2016 (2016). The questionnaire was made up of five sections: (1) demographic questions, (2) questions on knowledge of TV news and TV news viewing, (3) attitudes towards TV news and TV news viewing, (4) TV news viewing practices; and (5) views on openness to change the current formats of news broadcasts.

The survey was conducted from September 2022 to December 2022 using Google Forms with the link sent to the respondents who met the recruitment criteria via email and telephone, as well as social media such as Facebook and WhatsApp. Print/Paper-and pencil survey was used with respondents living in rural areas with little digital accessibility and low digital literacy levels. All respondents gave their informed consent either online or written before the data collection commenced. The collected data were analyzed descriptively and quantitatively to reveal the patterns of accessing news among the respondents and their readiness for change.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to assess the trend of accessing news among Malaysians in the digital era. The East Malaysian state of Sarawak was chosen as the research site on the basis that a large number of people continue to access news from traditional media sources such as TV, printed news, and radio.

Of the 512 respondents who completed the survey, 61.9% (n=317) were female and 38% (n=195) were male. More than half of the study population were the Indigenous Peoples of Sarawak (50.9% or n=261) and respondents of ages 16 - 23 were in majority (41.9% or n=215). Most of the respondents possessed a bachelor's degree (47% or n=241) and were employed (42.9% or n=220). 53.3% (n=273) respondents reported having no income and over half of the population surveyed resided in the urban (56.2% or n=288) and rural areas (33.7% or n=173). Table 1 below presents the details of the respondents.

**Table 1: Respondents' Demographic Profile**

Profile	Description	Number of responses	Percentage
Gender	Male	195	38
	Female	317	61.9
Age	16 - 23	215	41.9
	24 - 25	71	13.8
	26 - 35	66	12.8
	36 - 45	65	12.6
	46 - 59	49	9.5
	60 and above	46	8.9
Ethnicity	Sarawak Indigenous Peoples	261	50.9
	Malay	190	37.1
	Chinese	53	10.3
	Indian	8	1.5
Employment Status	Employed	220	42.9
	Unemployed/Retired	94	18.3
	Studying	198	38.6

Education	Primary 6 and below	36	7
	Form 3	18	3.5
	Form 5 and equivalent	103	20.1
	Form 6 and equivalent	64	12.5
	Bachelor's Degree	241	47
	Master's/PhD	48	9.3
Monthly Income	Not Working	273	53.3
	Below RM2000	128	25
	RM2000 - RM3999	51	9.9
	RM4001 - RM6000	24	4.6
	RM6000 - RM8000	20	3.9
	RM8001 - RM10000	8	1.5
	RM10001 and above	8	1.5
Locality*	Rural	173	33.7
	Suburban	51	9.9
	Urban	288	56.2

Locality\* - Rural (village or *kampung/pendalaman*); Suburban (e.g., Siniawan or places with less than 10,000), Urban (e.g., Betong, Bintangor, Tatau, Kuching 7th mile. 10th mile)

Mobile gadgets were reported to be the mediums through which the respondents accessed news. The commonly used mobile gadgets for news were smartphones at 49% (n=251), followed by smartphones and laptop computers at 29.4% (n=151) and tablets at 6.8% (n=35). The respondents also reported using streaming devices to access news which includes Chromecast with Google TV (30.6% or n=157), Evpad Free Streaming TV Box (1.7% or n=9) and Nvidia Shield TV (1.1% or n=6). The respondents also reported accessing news from Free and Pay TV such as Astro (81% or n=415) and UNIFI TV (38.8% or n=199), as well as my Freeview (Free-to-Air)(11.3% or n=58) and Sirius TV (Pay TV)(0.7% or n=4). Table 2 provides more detailed information.

**Table 2: Gadgets and Streaming Devices to Get News**

Gadgets	Number of responses	Streaming Devices	Number of responses
None	99	None	297
Smartphone	251	Roku streaming stick	3
Smartphone and laptop computer	151	Chromecast with Google TV	157
Tablet	35	Nvidia Shield TV	6
eReader	1	Apple TV 4K	3
Smartwatch	0	Evpad Free Streaming TV Box	9

A majority of the respondents read online newspapers but mostly read free news. The respondents reported accessing online news from local/independent news outlets daily (8.9% or n=46) and a few times a week (18% or n=96), and mainstream news outlets daily (9.3% or n=48) and a few times a week (21.8% or n=112). A comparison showed that online newspapers (70.7% or n=362) were gaining popularity over printed news (58.7% or n=301) and the use of live news streaming (36.1% or n=185), news video 26.3% (n=135), and podcast 41% (n=210) was on the rise. Accessing news from social network sites (e.g., WhatsApp) and search engines/news aggregator sites (e.g., Press Reader) was still gaining traction. The frequently used/visited platforms for news include Facebook (80.4% or n=412), Instagram (54.8% or n=281) and Twitter (36.1% or n=185). Table 3 provides more detailed information.



**Table 3: Frequency of Accessing News from Various Outlets**

How often do you read news from. . .	Not at all	A few times a year	A few times a month	A few times a week	Every day
Local/independent news outlets (e.g., Malaysiakini, The Malaysian Insider)	167	79	124	96	46
International news outlets (e.g., CNN, The New York Times, CAN)	258	79	77	76	22
Mainstream news outlets (e.g., The Star Online, Berita Harian Online)	152	71	129	112	48
Other local news platforms (e.g., Says.com, BuzzFeed, Cilisos)	283	69	77	61	22
Internet forum/Discussion boards (e.g., Quora, Reddit)	295	68	63	64	22
Instant messaging platforms (e.g., WhatsApp)	160	46	120	94	83
Search engines/new aggregator sites (e.g., Press Reader, Google/Yahoo News)	225	65	74	106	42

The study revealed that 19.3% (n=99) did not use any gadgets to access the news, and they relied on traditional forms such as TV, printed news, and radio. A substantial number of respondents continued to get news from TV despite using digital devices to do so. The most popular TV news channels for the respondents were TV3 Media Prima (67.1% or n=344) and the newly established TV Sarawak (67.5% or n=346). The most popular time to access TV news among the respondents was in the evening between 6-7 p.m. (8.39% or n=43), at night (21.2% or n=110) and at midnight (1.5% or n=8). 8 p.m. was frequently cited as the prime time to access news being shown on TV and the types of TV news the respondents regularly consumed were daily news (29.8% or n=153), local news (29.8% or n=153), breaking news (26.5% or n=136), and sports news (26.17% or n=134). Table 4 provides more detailed information.

**Table 4: Types of TV News and TV News Channels that the Respondents Watch Daily**

Types of news	Number of responses	News channels	Number of responses
Daily news	153	TV Sarawak	346
Local news	153	TV3 Media Prima	344
Breaking news	136	RTM TV1	169
Sports news	134	RTM TV2	81
Political news	121	Bernamea TV	53
Foreign news	121	Astro Prima	40
Opinion news	98	RTM TV Okey	39
Entertainment News	77	NTV7 Media Prima	23
Business news	40	UTV Media Prima	21
Historical news	30	TV9 Media Prima	24

The study revealed mixed responses among respondents about whether they were ready for potential changes to the current format of news in Malaysia. 46.2% (n=237) respondents were moderately open to change, while 40.2% (n=206) were very open about it. 13.4% (n=69) claimed otherwise as they preferred the traditional formats (e.g., TV news, print news, radio). When asked about their preferred alternative formats for broadcasting news in the future, most respondents cited the use of more infographics/illustrations (72.8% or n=373), on-the-ground videos (63.4% or n=325) and, audience input/participation (45.1% or n=231). The respondents also cited online news portals (80% or n=410) and non-broadcasting social media platforms such as Facebook (67.7% or n=347) and Instagram (47.2% or n=242) as the alternative through

which they would like to receive news in the future. Tables 5 and 6 provide more detailed information.

**Table 5: Preferred Alternative News Format in the Future**

Alternative news format	Number of responses
Using more infographics/illustrations	373
Using more videos (on the ground)	325
News with audience input/participation (LIVE)	231
Customisable news stories/topics	216
News talk show	184
Citizen journalist contributions	160
TV Magazine	72

**Table 6: Alternative Platforms for News in the Future**

Alternative platforms	Number of responses
Online news portals	410
Facebook	347
Instagram	242
TikTok	193
YouTube	178
Twitter	138
Mobile news app	103
Augmented reality	27
LinkedIn	26

The results presented here corroborate those of previous research in several ways: first, online news and social media were found to be sources of news for the respondents, and a similar pattern of consumption elsewhere in the world (Newman et al., 2022; Nain, 2022). Second, smartphones were found to be one of the main gadgets used by the respondents to access news, a similar usage pattern among news consumers globally (Newman et al., 2022; Nain, 2022). Third, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter were found to be the frequently used/visited platforms to access news among the respondents, a similar trend that can be observed in other countries (Newman et al., 2022; Nain, 2022).

The results, however, add additional perspectives on news consumption in the digital world. While news consumption trends have changed due to the explosion of social media, such trends may have differential effects in contexts where a large number of people continue to access news from TV and other traditional media outlets. The respondents who reported having no gadgets continued to access news from TV, radio and printed news. Other respondents reported accessing mainstream TV news channels for news at irregular times throughout the day.

One interesting finding is that many Sarawakians access news from TVS. TV Sarawak or TVS as shown in Figure 1 below is Sarawak's TV station that was established in 2018 (TVS, n.d.).



Figure 1: TVS Logo and News Anchors. Copyright 2023 by TVS.

It is a linear digital TV channel providing state-focused/oriented news and programs that can be accessed statewide and nationwide via Astro and my Freeview platforms. Thanks to these platforms (Astro in particular), TVS not only managed to attract Sarawak's population of 2.8 million but also audiences from West Malaysia and neighbouring countries such as Indonesia (Jee, 2022). One of the pull factors is that the news and programs are produced in Sarawak Malay and Iban, the languages that are spoken by many Sarawakians. These programs include those that promote inspiring local leaders, expressing oneself through local music, discovering Sarawak through people and food, as well as daily lifestyle and entertainment (TVS, n.d.). Another pull factor is other platforms through which TVS can be accessed by Sarawakians and those from West Malaysia and neighbouring countries. These platforms include TVS' official website and social media platforms. TVS' official Facebook page for example has 346, 324 followers and has garnered 231,537 likes (TVS, n.d.). Table 7 provides more detailed information.

Table 7: TVS' Social Media Sites

Social media sites	Uniform resource locator (URL)
Facebook	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/tvstvmy">https://www.facebook.com/tvstvmy</a>
Instagram	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/tvstvmy/">https://www.instagram.com/tvstvmy/</a>
YouTube	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/TVSTVMY">https://www.youtube.com/TVSTVMY</a>
Twitter	<a href="https://twitter.com/tvstvmy">https://twitter.com/tvstvmy</a>
TikTok	<a href="https://www.tiktok.com/@tvstvmy?lang=en">https://www.tiktok.com/@tvstvmy?lang=en</a>

To conclude, this study investigated the trend of accessing news among Malaysians, particularly those living in and originating from Sarawak. The survey method was used to gather information about how Malaysians/Sarawakians accessed news in today's digital world and whether they were ready for potential changes to the current format of news. The results revealed that a majority of the respondents used mobile gadgets to access news. Most of this news was accessed from local/independent and mainstream online news outlets. The study also revealed that the respondents were generally ready for potential changes to the current format of news. This was evidenced in their preferred alternative news formats involving the use of more infographics/illustrations and the alternative platforms to access/receive news in the future such as online news portals and non-broadcasting social media.



The results have at least two implications. First, they suggest the Internet has the potential to be the main news medium for many Malaysians. This should be explored further by future researchers because the Internet, while it can be a great source of news, is also capable of spreading misleading content and information. Second, the results suggest that digital news has the potential to be the new news format that meets the needs of many Malaysians. Future research can delve into this further by exploring how digital news media (e.g., online journalism, digital photojournalism, and social media) should be used/consumed by Malaysians given the rise of online platforms and the growing spread of mis-and disinformation. Finally, the followings are some of the recommendations for implementing a liberalised delivery of news programming outside of “prime time” broadcasting slots:

- i. Retain 8 p.m. prime time for TV news but consider extending it to midnight because nighttime is the most popular time to access news.
- ii. Continue to broadcast TV news on national and state channels because viewers trust the reliability of these news sources (TV Sarawak, TV3 Media Prima, RTM TV1).
- iii. Produce shorter news segments because of the short attention span (5-10 minutes) among viewers
- iv. Enable TV news to be watched on mobile phones and computers at other times after broadcast slots (most viewers often used gadgets for accessing news nowadays).
- v. Change the format of news by using more graphics, illustrations, videos (on the ground), news with audience input/participation (LIVE), and customisable news stories or topics.
- vi. Experiment with adding an online newspaper to the national and state TV channels (e.g., Astro online news which has traction).

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