

Do You Still Watch the News on TV? Examining TV News Viewing among Malaysians Today

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Abstract: *Television has long been recognized as a significant source of news for the mass public. Research has shown the rise and fall in the public viewing of news on television due to the advancement of digital technologies. Younger audiences, in particular, have turned to social media to access news and this trend is rapidly growing. The current study sought to ascertain if this was the case for people who may continue to watch television news despite the said technological advances. Interviews with 40 individuals from the East Malaysian state of Sarawak were conducted to gather their views on whether people living in Malaysia still watch television news and the factors contributing to this trend. The findings show that television remains an integral part of the participants' everyday lives and that it continues to be an important medium for disseminating news. While the younger participants reported that they regularly accessed news on social media, they still turned to television as a more reliable and trustworthy news source. The findings revealed several factors that contributed to television news viewing among the participants: the social-familial, the situational-environmental, the personal, and the technological. The findings shed useful insights into the current trend of television news viewing among the mass public as the world is gradually ending the COVID-19 pandemic and transitioning into endemic while experiencing news consumption on digital media.*

Keywords: television, news, digital technologies, COVID-19

1. Introduction

Traditional TV watching has become a staple in the lives of many people throughout the world. One of the many reasons for this situation is the drive or need to watch TV news broadcasts to stay regularly updated with the latest news, events, and happenings at local, national, regional, and/or international levels. TV news viewing, and so is traditional TV viewing, experienced and continues to experience a decline among the masses due to the rise of digital media. More and more people, particularly young viewers, are moving away from television and gravitating towards digital media as a source of news and information. This is hardly surprising as the digital environment in which we live has become a key component in how we access and keep up with the latest news and information. The current generation of young people often referred to as the "digital savants" or "digital natives", continue to change the way TV news and other forms of news media are consumed given their ability to master new technology quickly compared to other generations. TV news viewing looked like it was going to become obsolete. However, unpredictable future events may affect the way we consume TV news. The COVID-

19 pandemic, for example, has brought about unexpected changes to the world in all aspects of life. TV viewing during lockdowns and movement restrictions rose exponentially as more people shifted to TV news to get the latest information about the pandemic. Based on the study conducted by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism in 2020, there was a surge among the people of the United Kingdom who turned to their TV sets for news during the pandemic (ITV, 2020). The research revealed that older generations over 55s constituted the highest number of TV news viewers while the younger generation showed increasing interest in getting news from this traditional news source compared to their fellow countrymen and women under 35s (ITV, 2020). The research further revealed the pandemic also witnessed a surge in the number of people, especially those aged between 18-24, who obtained news from social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok (ITV, 2020).

While many people continue to access social media for the same kind of news, there are seeds of doubt in their minds because the information from social media cannot be verified and trusted under certain situations. An investigation into this situation or circumstance may provide insights and relevancy for researchers, local authorities, and policymakers, as well as TV news providers and audiences, to better understand TV news viewing in today's context - the post-COVID-19 digital era. The study presented in this article aimed to investigate TV news viewing among Malaysians, particularly those living in the East Malaysian state of Sarawak. Based on its initial hypothesis that people in Sarawak still watch TV news despite the rise of digital media use (e.g., Sarawak's streaming television channel/station called TV Sarawak or TVS) and the experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Sarawak pride itself with its ways of handling the disease outbreak), the study sought to explore:

- i. Sarawakians' knowledge, attitudes, and practices toward TV news viewing
- ii. the factors that contribute to this knowledge, attitudes, and practices

2. Literature Review

Numerous studies have demonstrated a decline in traditional television viewing, particularly TV news viewing among the public. A study by the Pew Research Center from 2016 to 2017 found that many Americans showed less dependence on TV news, with younger adults being less likely than older adults to obtain news through various TV platforms (e.g., local, network, cable) (Matsa, 2018). The same trend was found in a recent study by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Data obtained from six participating countries (UK, USA, Germany, Spain, South Korea, Argentina) showed that both TV and print news had experienced continued declines in their consumption, particularly among the younger audiences (Newman, 2020).

A key contributing factor to this decline was the rise of digital media and its use among the public. Again, studies by the above-mentioned research institutes are worthy of mention. According to the Pew Research Centre, the digital environment plays a major role in determining how Americans obtain and keep themselves updated with the latest news and information about the world. Surveys conducted between 2019 and 2020 showed that many Americans preferred to get their local news through the internet, with 48% of the participants surveyed aged between 18-29 obtaining the latest news (i.e., political) from social media (Mitchell, Jurkowitz, Oliphant, & Shearer, 2020). The Reuters Institute for Study of Journalism also reported similar trends among younger people. For instance, almost half of the participants aged 18-24 in Argentina (49%) and Germany (38%) accessed the latest news (e.g., COVID-19) via Instagram, while one in ten of the participants in the same age group from the U.S. obtained the latest news via TikTok (Newman, 2020).

However, an increasing number of studies have demonstrated that TV viewing, particularly TV news viewing, rose exponentially during the COVID-19 pandemic. A recent study by Nielson (2020) – the global leader in audience insights, data, and analytics – found that local news viewing experienced sharp increases at the start of the disease outbreak as more and more Americans shifted towards local news outlets for the latest news regarding the disease. Interestingly, the sharp increase in TV news viewing was also evident among younger Americans, aged 2-17. Similar patterns were observed by Nielson (2020) in North Asian countries. Television audiences in Taiwan, for instance, grew by 1 million during the first three weeks of February, with TV news being ranked the top TV genre (121% ratings) compared to the same period a year earlier Nielson (2020). TV viewing also increased among viewers in Mainland China between 70 minutes to 7 hours and 40 minutes per day, with TV news and drama being ranked the top TV genres during this period of increased TV viewing Nielson (2020). This was hardly surprising because people turned to rather than moved away from television and TV news to get the latest news and updates on the deadly disease during lockdowns and movement restrictions. One explanation for this is that traditional news sources such as television and print news have become more credible sources of COVID-19 information compared to social media which have helped amplify the spread of misinformation about the disease (Cinelli et al. 2020; Knowles, 2021; Sullivan & Molay, 2020;).

While these above-reviewed studies are significant in demonstrating the fluctuating trends in TV news viewing shaped by a host of factors (e.g., social, technological, public health), more needs to be known about the subject matter of today's context - the post-COVID-19 digital era. Questions abound and need to be considered: "Are people still watching TV news?", "Will people continue to watch TV news?". These questions are not baseless because a majority of people nowadays remain skeptical about news on social media (Southern, 2021) and therefore have mixed feelings and familiarity with new and evolving forms of news (Barthel, Mitchell, Asare-Marfo, Kennedy & Worde, 2020). Addressing these questions may help us understand the current trend of TV news viewing among the masses as the world is gradually ending the pandemic and transitioning into endemic while witnessing digital media consumption that has reached new heights - the likes of which we have never seen before. Moreover, the studies reviewed here have shown that there has been a decline in TV news viewing among the masses, particularly younger viewers who have gradually moved away from television and turned to digital media as a 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 television viewing (Nielson & Sambrook, 2016). The last two years, however, have seen a remarkable rise in traditional television viewing, with a significant number of people including young viewers turning towards TV news as a credible source of information during the COVID-19 pandemic (Nielson, 2020). The trend may be changing as people are now entering the post-COVID-19 era where digital media have rapidly become more important than traditional media (Shearer & Mitchell, 2021). While there have been some global and regional studies on the changing trends in TV news viewing, more information concerning such trends in Malaysia is needed to understand what drives viewers to watch or turn away from television news in different specific contexts. Therefore, the study presented in this paper aimed to examine television news viewing among Malaysians by exploring their knowledge, attitudes, and practices towards TV news viewing as a source of information in the post-COVID-19 digital era.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of the study is drawn from the Knowledge, Attitude, and Practices (KAP) model that is often used to inform and guide survey research. According to Launiala (2009), KAP which is also known as knowledge, attitude, behavior, and practice (KABP) emerged from the field of family planning and population studies in the 1950s. Earlier surveys that were designed based on the KAP model were designed to measure the extent to which an obvious hostility to the idea and organization of family planning existed among diverse populations and to provide information on the knowledge, attitudes, and practices in family planning that could be used for prog purposes across the world (Launiala, 2009). The attractiveness of a survey designed using the KAP model lies in its basic characteristics: an easy design, quantifiable data, ease of interpretation and concise presentation of results, generalizability of small sample results to a wider population, cross-cultural comparability, speed of implementation, and the ease with which one can train numerators (Launiala, 2009). This explains the popularity of KAP-based surveys in various fields of study, especially in healthcare research (Andrade, Menon, Ameen, & Praharaj 2020). Furthermore, information in the KAP survey is usually gathered by researchers through a structured, standardized questionnaire that may include both quantitative and qualitative data (World Health Organization, 2014). Open-ended interviews and focus groups may complement the KAP survey to allow further exploration of a situation or problem, and/or to highlight aspects that are not yet known (SPRING, 2018). The study presented in this paper employed this approach to elicit information on the knowledge, attitudes, and practices about TV news viewing among Malaysians in Sarawak. Figure 1 shows how the KAP model was used to inform and guide the proposed study in gathering rich information that may include participants' awareness and familiarity with, attitudes and perceptions towards the topic of the study, and practices or current actions taken because of the knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions towards the said topic.

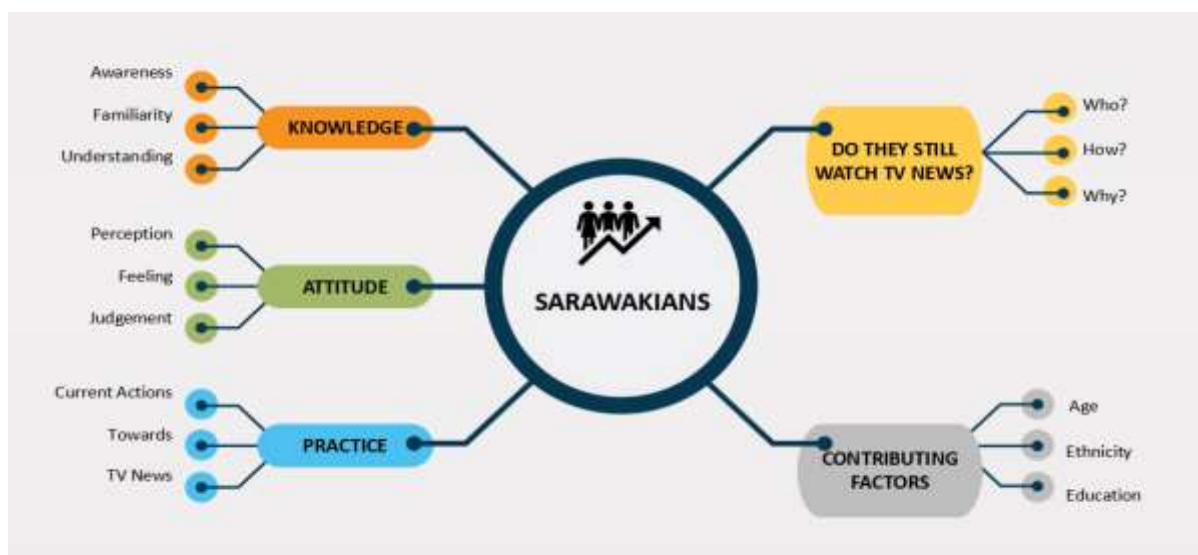


Figure 1: The Theoretical Framework of the Study

Taking Andrade et al.'s (2020) cue on their reasons for using KAP, the study sought to identify the baseline knowledge, myths, misconceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours about the topic under research, to understand, analyse, and communicate about the situation of interest in the field, to provide information on needs, issues, and barriers related to the development of effective, locally and regionally relevant measures to improve our understanding of the human

and social factors, which affects and contributes to the adoption and usage of digital technologies and services.

4. Methodology

The study presented in this article was part of a larger research conducted by a group of researchers from a public university in Sarawak. One of the research methods employed was the interview. The method was chosen on the basis that "it is motivated by the aim of eliciting information useful to a study. The interviewer in a qualitative research study enters the interviewee's world and perspectives and wants them to talk about their internal states and tell their stories, including obtaining here-and-now constructions of persons, events, organizations, feelings, motivations, claims, concerns, and other entities" (Cypress, 2022, p. 56).

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 television news? Digital news project 2016* (2016). The interview questions were divided into five main parts:

- i. demographic questions.
- ii. questions on knowledge of TV news and TV news viewing.
- iii. attitudes towards TV news and TV news viewing.
- iv. TV news viewing practices; and
- v. factors affecting these knowledge, attitudes, and practices.

The targeted sample consisted of 40 participants. This figure corresponds with Daniel's (2012) recommendation for "typical sample sizes for various types of research designs" that use non-probability sampling – "20 to 150 participants" for exploratory research (p. 243). The participants are from various districts in Sarawak and were recruited through several means including personal networks and snowballing sampling technique. To be selected for the interview, the participants should fulfill the following criteria: (1) aged between 18 and 64, and 65 and over; (2) of Malaysian nationality, (3) citizen of Sarawak, and (4) may have some knowledge of TV news and TV news viewing. The interview was conducted through several methods: (1) in person (with observed SOPs), (2) by telephone, and (3) electronically (i.e., Zoom, Webex). The interview participants were informed of the purpose of the study, and their consent was obtained before the data collection. The study performed a thematic analysis of interview data that includes identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data that allow for minimal data organization and rich data description (Braun & Clarke, 2012). To enhance validity, the interview guide was piloted with two participants. These procedures are important as they help "establish the content validity of an instrument and to improve questions, format, and scales" and to ensure whether "the items measure the content they were intended to measure" (Creswell, 2013, p. 149-150). Data validation in this study was conducted using Creswell's (2013) validity strategy, namely member checking to reduce bias and ensure the accuracy of the findings.

5. Findings and Discussion

A total number of 40 participants took part in the interviews. The participants comprised largely young Sarawakians in their early 20s (N=20 or 50%) who were still studying at a public university in Sarawak. Most of the participants were from Kuching (N=30 or 75%) and resided in urban areas (N=40 or 100%) at the time of the study. The participants cited the smartphone

as the main mobile gadget that they currently owned, which they used to access news compared to others devices (e.g., tablet, laptop). When asked about their knowledge of TV news, the participants reported that they were familiar with the types of news featured on TV including breaking news, sports news, and entertainment news. When it comes to TV news programmes, the participants cited Bulletin Utama TV3 and TV Sarawak as the most-watched TV news programmes in the last 3 months and Astro (Free TV and Pay TV) as the most subscribed TV news provider. The participants also cited other sources of news such as ERA FM Sarawak and HITZ FM Sarawak as the most listened to and most familiar radio news platforms, followed by Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter as the most visited and most familiar online news platforms.

When asked about their attitudes and practices towards TV news, the participants reported that they enjoyed watching the news on TV and claimed that it was important for them to get news based on the topics of their interest. Many of them watched TV news, especially those aired or broadcasted on TV news channels such as TV3 Media Prima, TV Sarawak, and RTM TV1. Many reported spending between 5-10 minutes daily over irregular or 'unfixed' hours. When the participants watched TV news, they did so in varying ways, particularly in terms of the types of news they watched, ranging from breaking news to business news, from sports news to political news. In addition to watching TV news, the participants also reported getting news from the radio (a few times a week) and social media platforms (every day). Not only did the participants report that they obtained news online, but they also shared this news through various social media sites and apps such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp.

Several factors contributed to and shaped the participants' knowledge, attitudes, and practices towards TV news and TV news viewing among Sarawakians. Figure 2 below illustrates the key factors that were generated from the thematic analysis of the interview data.

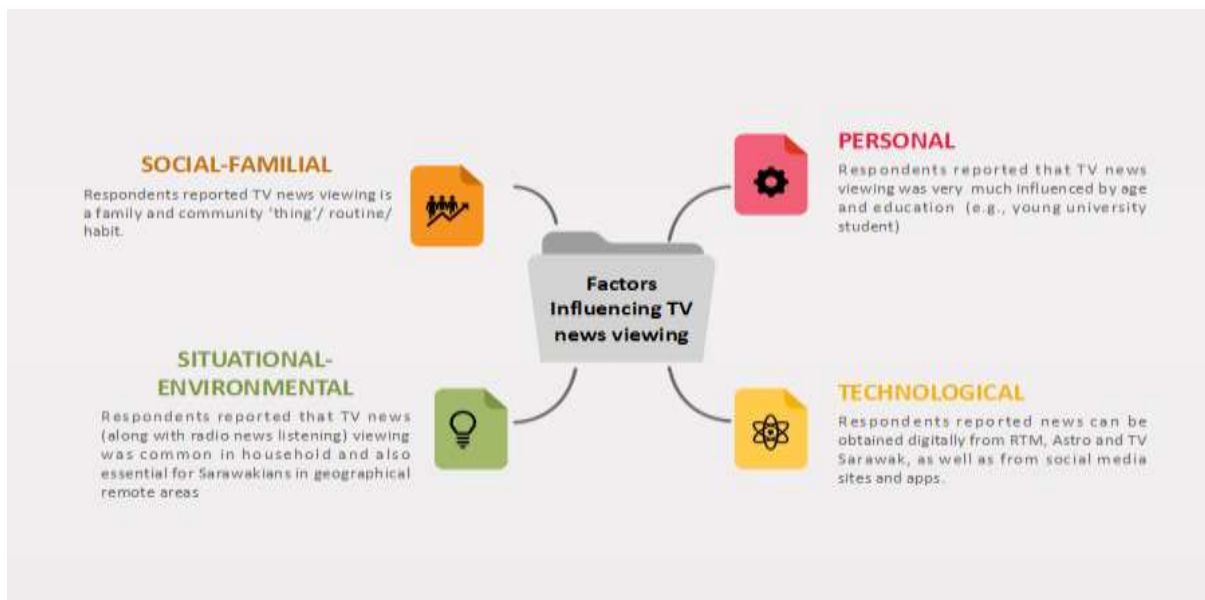


Figure 2: Factors Influencing TV News Viewing among Sarawakians

The participants reported that Sarawakians still watch TV news today when the world is going through the post-COVID-19 period. Despite the advancement of digital technologies that affected the ways news is produced and disseminated, many participants argued that the traditional news sources such as TV, radio, and print continued to be consumed by many people of Sarawak during the pre-, while, and post-COVID-19 phases.

One of the key contributing factors is that watching TV news is a social-familial thing to do. Some of the participants claimed that the act of watching TV news was a routine or a habit that could not be easily removed from their everyday life - they watched breaking news on TV with family members in the living room of their homes, and watched sports news on TV with their friends at fast food eateries. Watching TV news was also influenced by personal factors such as age and educational background. The younger participants reported that their parents and grandparents were so accustomed to getting news from the TV set and the radio because these had been their usual and traditional news sources. The younger participants (most of whom are university students) mostly accessed news from social media through their mobile devices. However, they did not completely abandon the routine or habit of watching the news on TV whenever they returned to their hometowns for the holidays or at the weekend. Furthermore, the younger participants argued that although they regularly accessed news on social media, they still turned to television as a more reliable and trustworthy news source. Social media, as these participants explained, tended to disseminate fake news for various reasons (e.g., personal, political, ideological). The interview participants also reported that Sarawakians still watched TV news due to situational-environmental and technological factors: the former was evidenced by the fact that traditional news sources such as TV and radio were common fixtures in Sarawakian households (e.g., the TV set and/or radio could be found in many households in urban areas, as well as in geographically remote areas) while the latter was evidenced by the fact that news could be obtained digitally from RTM, Astro, and TV Sarawak.

The findings are to some extent contrary to the existing body of literature examining the trends in TV news viewing. The extant literature shows that there has been a decline in TV news viewing among the masses, particularly younger viewers who have gradually moved away from television and turned to digital media as a source of news and information (Nielson & Sambrook, 2016). The current generation of young people often referred to as the “digital savants” or “digital natives”, continue to change the way TV news and other forms of news media are consumed given their ability to master new technology quickly compared to other generations. TV news viewing looked like it was going to become obsolete. This is hardly surprising as the digital environment in which people live has become a key component in how they access and keep up with the latest news and information. The findings of the current study revealed the opposite. The interview participants, most of whom were in their early 20s, obtained news from TV (particularly mainstream TV channels and providers) in addition to social media sites and apps (particularly the mainstream ones such as Facebook and WhatsApp).

The extant literature also shows that there has been a remarkable rise in traditional news viewing where a significant number of people including young audiences turned towards TV news as a credible source of news during the COVID-19 pandemic (Nielson, 2020). This trend has changed as the world has entered the post-COVID-19 pandemic where digital media becomes more important than traditional media in conveying news and information (Shearer & Mitchell, 2021). The findings of the current study indicated otherwise. The interview participants - both young and old - obtained news from TV particularly mainstream TV channels and providers in all three stages of the disease outbreak: the pre-, while- and post-COVID-19 pandemic. Although the participants agreed that online news has become more widespread during the endemic period due to the rise of digital media (i.e., online news on mainstream social media sites and apps), they argued that they still relied on TV news. They felt that TV news was more reliable than those disseminated online given the fake news that are abound on social media. It can be said then that TV news viewing continues to as a source of information among Sarawakians in the post-COVID-19 digital era.

6. Conclusion

The study presented in this article investigated TV news viewing among Malaysians, particularly those living in Sarawak. The study was primarily guided by the two key questions that arise from the extant literature in the field: (1) Are people still watching TV news? and (2) Will people continue to watch TV news? The findings showed that Sarawakians continue to watch TV and will continue to do so for some reasons including social-familial and situational-environmental factors (e.g., TV news viewing is a family and community 'thing'/routine/habit), as well as the reliability and accessibility of TV news through mainstream TV news channels and providers. The two key questions are not baseless because many people today remain skeptical about news on social media and as a result have mixed feelings and familiarity with new and evolving forms of news. Sarawakian, especially those who were involved in the current study, expressed the same views but with more optimism. They turned (back) to TV news whenever they felt uncertain about the news they obtained from social media. Moreover, the findings add to the literature on current TV news viewing among the masses as the world is gradually ending the pandemic and transitioning into endemic while witnessing digital media consumption that has reached new heights: Sarawakians still watch TV news and will continue to do so, despite the rise of news on digital media. It is hoped that the findings focusing on the knowledge, attitudes, and practices towards TV news viewing among Sarawakians, and the contributing factors help provide the baseline data needed for local TV news providers, local authorities, and governing bodies to promote and improve current understanding of the phenomenon under study.

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