

**AN OVERVIEW OF INFORMATION, KNOWLEDGE AND SCIENCE LITERACY OF
SOCIAL MEDIA USERS POST COVID-19 IN MALAYSIA: AN ISLAMIC ETHICS
APPROACH**

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Abstract	<p><i>The movement control order (MCO) announced by the government of Malaysia due to COVID-19 pandemic has definitely amplified the role of social media in the atmosphere of dissemination of information and knowledge. The virtual world of social media has been a space which feed users with experiences not only on exchange of thoughts and ideas but also substantial information and knowledge. This has led to the explosion of information due to overloaded and too much information. This caused an unfortunate culture of ‘infodemic’ as defined by World Health Organization (WHO) as spreading misinformation, inaccurate knowledge, baseless science and fake news. Subtly, social media has been a space of informal education which moulds one’s behaviour and stream of thought through easy access of information and knowledge. This study attempts to examine the concept of information, knowledge and science literacy and to analyse the effect of movement control order on information, knowledge and science literacy among social media users post covid-19 in Malaysia. This study employs qualitative methods through library-based research of journal articles, extracting data from internet sources, and other relevant literatures. In addition, this study elaborates the challenges of instilling of information, knowledge and science literacy among social media users. This study proposed Islamic values as a solution to instil one’s sense of responsibility and to provide intrinsic sense of obligation when one is dealing with any social media interactions particularly in assessing the information, knowledge and science literacy. Solutions and recommendations on the Islamic ethics of technology are offered as guidelines for one to access knowledge from the virtual realm.</i></p> <p>Keywords: <i>Social, Media, Fake, News, Ethics.</i></p>
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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic marks a significant impact in the course of history in which it has abruptly shifted the daily routine of everyone from across the globe. In most countries, lockdown has been imposed by the government to curb the spread of the virus. Alas, the catastrophe has caused a major change on people’s daily affairs, for instance, increasing workload on healthcare workers, disruption of daily businesses, closure of schools, non-essential service centres, and others (Haleem et al., 2020).

Throughout March 2020, Malaysia has recorded a gradually increasing number of positive cases which also involved a significant number of deaths due to the virus spread. The government took this alarming incident as a cue to enforce the Control Movement Order (MCO), which was commenced on 18th March 2020 to curb further spiking number of

COVID-19 cases (Tang, 2020). This phenomenon was the prime factor that has forced Malaysians to cater with the aftermath of having to conduct their daily affairs indoors, with less physical contact with others. Subsequently, social media rolled in as a connecting bridge for everyone to socialise, communicate, and to compensate the setbacks of physical lockdown. Be it professional work, education, public service announcements, and others, the ceaseless development of technology has paved the path of offering the people to conduct their affairs online.

The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commissions (MCMC) has reported a significant rising number of internet usage in Malaysia, during MCO period. During the first week of MCO, reports have witnessed an increasing number of internet traffic in Malaysia which amounts to 23.5% higher percentage compared the usual traffic prior to MCO. Following that, the second week of MCO presents similar pattern of increase in internet traffic by 8.6% (MCMC, 2020). The shift of focus towards the virtual platform has led us to another door of adversities which calls out to be addressed.

Apart from having to deal with the pandemic, we are also forced to tread on another phenomena, known as 'infodemic'. The World Health Organization (WHO) has coined the term 'infodemic' to address the virtual world phenomena or physical environment that feed people with false and misleading information that may lead to other excruciating repercussions involving risky behaviours (WHO, n.d). On July 2020, WHO organized the first global infodemiology conference to gather professionals and experts to share and brainstorm ideas to regulate guidelines in managing the effects of infodemic (WHO, 2021). WHO Director General Dr Tedros acknowledges that it appalling to fathom that the spread of misinformation online defeats the briskness of the spread of the virus (Depoux et al., 2020).

This is a crucial issue during the pandemic, particularly after the commencement of MCO due to COVID-19 pandemic, due to the fact that there is rapid shift of focus revolving social media platforms. The usage of social media or other media platforms are not only for casual daily interaction purposes, rather, public officials also utilize the same platform to communicate health measures which results in continuous urge to obtain information on health matter. Hence, due to the overload of information, it is necessary to develop a clear guidelines of social media usage (Farooq et al., 2020). This is to help people to regulate the information they receive from the online platform and rule out false information or pseudoscience.

METHODOLOGY

This paper employs a qualitative research approach and library-based research. Data and relevant information are collected from websites, journal articles, online newspapers, and other related sources to gather recent information on the 'fake news' trend on social media that occurs in Malaysia since the COVID-19 pandemic strikes. This research paper presents an analysis upon the literature collected to discuss the Islamic ethics approach in combating the issue of pseudoscience and fake news roaming around on the internet.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Definition: Information, Knowledge and Science Literacy of Social Media Users

Information, knowledge and science literacy is a required quality for social media users to monitor their conscience in order critically register information they retrieve from any online platforms. Similar to news and media literacy, it calls for the ability to meticulously evaluate news and contents on social media in response to the overflowing of information shared by users on social media platforms. Social media users are not only content providers, but they are also content consumers. Contents on social media present a disarray of credible news from authoritative sources, and false news created by irresponsible individuals. For this reason, experts arrived to a conclusion to enhance the importance of possessing adequate skills analyse and distinguish valid news from fake and fabricated news in the social media ecosystem (Vraga & Tully, 2021).

Information literacy refers to skills with the ability to evaluate information and knowledge in the accurate manner. The evaluation skill is pivotal in assessing the trustworthiness of visible information and knowledge. Due to the shift of the technological era and the new approaches of ethics, information literacy is undeniable significant parallel as to the importance of reading in the preceding generation (Bélisle (2006); Parrot (2018); & Royce (2021). Information literacy was identified as the most significant literacy influencing the ability of social media users to identify and ascertain fake news (Jones-Jang et al., 2021). Thus, information literacy is of utmost important especially in the new era of industrial revolution 4.0.

'Fake news' refers to the misleading news and information that are often sensational and deceitful, which may allure social media users to immediately consume the news, void of fact-checking routine. To elucidate further, fake news is displayed behind the semblance of facts that may either occur intentionally or unintentionally. Irresponsible parties who deliberately fabricate news pursue the intention to spread propaganda, incite hate, and instil fictitious belief, among others. They enjoy the delight of altering the mass' perceptions and identify themselves authoritative source of news (Waweru Muigai, 2019). The difficulty to recognise misleading news is caused by the fact that false news is often partially presented with correct information (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019). It has become a challenge to sift out deceitful news particularly if one is unfamiliar with the sensational news spreading trend and ecosystem on social media. This phenomenon is not a novel case as it has been roaming around since the upsurging usage of social media. The situation is worsen since the spread of COVID-19, whereby people are circulating news on COVID-19 without verifying its truth and the credibility of the sources (Apuke & Omar, 2021).

Spread of Misinformation in Malaysia During MCO

A research argued that the efficient mitigation of the virus spread is rooted from the people's protective behaviour, apart from the role of the government in enforcing safety measures. This protective behaviour is the fruition people's knowledge and understanding of the virus infection and the mechanism to prevent the spread. Following that, the government's active participation in leading the mitigation plays the role of an external motivation for the people to abide by the regulations implemented by the government. Due to the lockdown, people relied mainly on social media as a catalyst to retrieve information on COVID-19, as well as for other communication purposes. This proves social media as one of the major factors that contributes to shaping one's knowledge of the virus which eventually influences his behaviour in response to the virus infection. The government registered social media as an essential platform to disseminate information on safety measures to enhance people's awareness of the virus. The findings of this research also reported that compared to television, social media is the most preferred platform for people to gather latest news on COVID-19 (Mat Dawi et al., 2021).

Throughout the MCO period, social media has been a platform for both the public, and the authorities to communicate information on COVID-19. However, considering social media is an open site to share news and personal opinions, this has exacerbated the challenges to distinguish false information from valid and reliable news regarding COVID-19 resulting to wide spread of unsubstantiated information (Laato et al., 2020). The major concern was the leak of information on the COVID-19 patients' personal details which may lead to severe discrimination, and the false information spread which may cause unnecessary panic (Yusof et al., 2020).

In response to vaccines roll-out in Malaysia, people rushed to registration to be part of the immunisation plan. The vaccination plan runs on schedule regulated by phases according to prioritized recipients, led by health and non-health frontliners among the primary recipients (Chung, 2021). Due to the long queue, some are seen to eagerly find alternatives to be vaccinated ahead of the schedule. Irresponsible bodies started to offer alternatives which can be observed by the jumble of misleading information on counterfeit vaccines bombarding the online space. The government vigorously educated the public that

no private sectors are qualified for registered vaccines. Hence, the vaccine alternatives they found online are fraud. Disasters are intensified when these reckless parties seek revenue by selling fake vaccine passports online. The victims who fall prey to such scams are either among those who have selfish deceitful reasons, or those who are poorly informed online (Yeoh et al., 2021).

Responsible government bodies address the problem by scrutinizing the internet upheaval in order to make sure no one outstrip legal implications of committing such fraud. On April 2021, a news was published which raise the issue of the charge of anti-fake news laws towards those who spread misinformation on COVID-19. According to the Health Minister, Datuk Seri Dr. Adham Baba, people who are responsible of spreading false information on COVID-19 are pronounced as people who are trying to spur mass panic. Actions will be taken upon those who spread misinformation online, when they show no response towards retracting the news after they were given prior warning (Choong, 2021). Culprits will find themselves facing fine of as much as RM100,000, or a three-year prison term, with a daily fine up to RM1,000 for repeat offenders (Al-Jazeera, 2021). The government is currently working towards winning the public assurance towards the National Immunisation Programme. Any hint of fake news wafting online will swiftly reach the public, and it would proceed damages to the initiative.

Challenges of Instilling Information Knowledge and Science Literacy Among Social Media Users

Social media was created with the hardwired algorithm that fulfils the purpose of sharing and engaging with online contents among online mutuals. The share button at the tip of one's thumb exposes one to the instant sharing function which feeds pleasure to oneself for being among the people who are abreast of the current issues. Psychologically, the ability to share first-hand information to others motivates one's satisfaction conforming to social status, by perceiving oneself being elevated and acknowledged by the society for his intelligence (Bright, 2016). This may cause an unstoppable reaction of oneself to constantly seek social approval by persistently presents himself updated on every issue, to the extent that he no longer reflects on the importance of verifying the validity of a particular news or content before pursuing further dissemination online (Duffy et al., 2020).

It is advised for the people to know the distinction of the news that serve as public interest from the news that are deemed interesting to the public. Public interest news is information that are crucial to the knowledge of the public as it propels immediate effects to the welfare of the masses, such as information to guard the health of the people in the context of COVID-19. On the other hand, information that are interesting to the public are trivial insights that serve no benefit to the public, except for personal muse accompanied by rapid engagement among mutuals online. Internet users are encouraged to restrain themselves from spreading news that are only interesting to the public, because the probability of it creating a ripple effect due to further irresponsible circulation online is high. Severe consequences present themselves when the public misuse the information for personal interest or to manipulate others by igniting turmoil to the masses (Yusof et al., 2020).

Information, Knowledge and Science Literacy: An Islamic Ethics Approach

The teachings of Islam put an emphasis in glorifying true knowledge as our ultimate source of guidance. As stated in the Quran in Surah al-Baqarah, verse 2, *"This is the Book about which there is no doubt, a guidance for those conscious of Allah."* This particular verse reflects the characteristics of a true knowledge, which requires the omission of dubious facts. The Quran, as stated in the verse, fulfils the quality of the source of true knowledge for the guidance of all living creations of Allah.

Revealed knowledge and derived knowledge are two types of knowledge, with each category stands on different position. First, revealed knowledge is built on a firm foundation which qualifies itself as the ultimate source of true knowledge because it is the knowledge

received by the Prophet PBUH through divine revelation, void of sceptical elements or uncertainties. This knowledge can be absorbed by fellow human beings through reflections on the word and signs of Allah. Second, derived knowledge refers to knowledge acquired by human beings through their senses, equipped by a thorough process of deep thinking. This acquired knowledge may fall short of being true knowledge if one does not use the correct method guided by the Islamic teachings to obtain the knowledge (Azram, 2012).

Knowledge and information inhabit different ranks. Knowledge, the higher rank, refers to true knowledge based upon unquestionable objective reality. Juxtaposed with information, it reflects data and findings that are susceptible to error and misinterpretation, which may lead to misinformation. The latter is an example of false illusion that may occur in one's attention upon retrieving information from the internet. The illusion of authentic knowledge will take place when one is apathetic towards scrutinizing his capacity to distinguish false information from true knowledge (Parrott, 2019). This is in line with the findings of (Badron, 2009) on the demarcation between the concept of information and knowledge. Besides distinguishing information and knowledge, Badron also highlighted to continuously maintain the application of *hikmah* or wisdom in order to assess the information beforehand.

In ascertaining the accuracy of information and knowledge one is required to possess standard features of intellectual curiosity and humility as a life long learning process in comprehending any information and knowledge. It has also been emphasized that the information and knowledge is to be founded on beneficial grounds in absence of causing harm and danger to the society. For example, the wide spread information and pseudoscience of anti-vaccination group through social media has resulted to refusal and ignorant of the society to be vaccinated to establish the herd community. In the absence of the herd community, the war against COVID-19 will never end thus threatening the life of the people at large especial the high-risk categories (Parrott, 2018).

The life-long learning is basically emphasizing the continuous seeking of knowledge as to have the ability and necessary skill to comprehend information and knowledge especially in the rapid developing era of technology. While the concept of humility is significant as to maintain as person's status of not being boastful with the present knowledge that they own but to always improve and be updated with the latest development to ensure a possible valid evaluation of information and knowledge (Parrott, 2018).

Furthermore, the source of information or the authority of the information is another significant point to be discussed. Since the COVID-19 pandemic and the MCO, people are relying on non-credible sources which caused the inaccuracy of information and knowledge. The verse of the Quran in Surah al-Anbiya', verse 7 provided "If you do not know, ask people who know the Scripture". Based on this verse, clarification and verification from the expert of a particular field is very significant. Due to very wide access of expression, people are trying to be expert themselves by not seeking information and knowledge form the correct and reliable source (Parrott, 2018).

According to Janah & Yusuf (2020), *tabayyun* or clarification is a significant concept in the ethics of communication of social media especially in preventing misleading information which can result in disturbance and chaos of people at large. The verse in the Quran of Surah Al-Hujurat verse 6 mentioned "O you who have believed, if there comes to you a disobedient one with information, investigate, lest you harm a people out of ignorance and become, over what you have done, regretful." The Quran has provided a clear guideline on that one is to avoid of being hasty of accepting any information and knowledge despite from a trusted person. In addition, one is to avoid spreading information and knowledge of unknown and unclarified information and knowledge (Rafsanjani, 2018).

CONCLUSION

Due to the massive and widespread of information through social media, users should be guided with the correct interaction in accepting any kind of information and knowledge.

Despite recommendation on the possible method of curbing this phenomenon through the enforcement of law, it could not be denied that the conscience mind of the social media users is the determinants of controlling the wide spread of inaccurate and unverified information. The high magnitude of interaction through social media and the overloaded of information makes it far from possible to expect the legal enforcement as the counter measure to curb the spread fake news and inaccurate information. Thus, self-regulation and self-control is a possible counter measure by understanding the cardinal foundation of Islamic ethics on information and knowledge literacy especially the guidelines provided in the Quran. The features of Shariah as being relevant in every century of time is reflected in the available provisions which addresses the issue of information and knowledge literacy ahead of time.

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