# INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM ASSESSMENT
## MALAYSIA

Aspirations and challenges among youths and marginalised communities

# Acknowledgments ■

# IEA Malaysia 2020 Team ■

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Advocating free media and access to information

# Content ■

# Executive Summary ■

Recent political, social and economic developments in Malaysia have also brought about a new set of challenges and opportunities in the country's media landscape. The last few years have been an exciting period for Malaysian youths who make up 28 per cent of the total population. In 2019, the Malaysian Parliament passed a Constitutional Amendment to lower the voting age from 21 to 18, charting more paths for the youths to shape the direction of the country. Moreover, the new information landscape is being shaped by digital/online platforms which are gaining popularity in the country. Online news consumption and the use of social media are driven largely by younger information consumers, a trend that has spilled over to the rural population. This growth translates into the way Malaysians are choosing a variety of channels to receive and convey information. Notably, these online spaces allow for Malaysians to express their views more freely, ushering in significant social and political changes.

However, these developments are set against a change in government in March 2020 and amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to an increasingly volatile media environment which is grappling to guarantee freedom of expression and opinion. Other challenges include draconian laws that suppress media freedom, the legacy of media ownership by establishment actors and publication-related legal restrictions and state censorship, elimination of pro-government reporting bias and suppression of alternative voices, among others. The media in Malaysia would also need to take more steps to ensure the protection of media workers' welfare and physical safety, safeguard their rights to factual reporting and publication as well as find sustainable models for the long-term survival and financial security of media outlets.

Worryingly as well is the proliferation of false information or "infodemic", in which more and more Malaysians are continuously exposed to misinformation in their daily online interactions. Hence, the public must decide which information or media outlets they believe are credible and more trustworthy. Likewise, online platforms have made it possible for the distribution of information to be in the hands of various new actors, including citizens. Central to this development is to further distinguish the age/generational and gender difference among users as well as the potential of hyper-local media and citizen journalists to channel local issues and amplify the voices of marginalised, rural and indigenous groups. Issues threatening their self-determination include unsustainable development, struggle for land rights and under-representation of their communities in the media landscape.

Accordingly, concerted efforts to understand how people and communities in Malaysia find, share, value, trust and produce information in their own local contexts should be carried out parallel to addressing the challenges to freedom of expression and opinion. Thus, Internews with local partner, Centre of Independent Journalism, jointly undertook this work from August until October 2020 through an Information Ecosystem Assessment (IEA) – the first of its kind in the country. IEA is an Internews analytical framework that focuses on local information and a human-centred approach that can capture all dimensions of the relationship between information consumers and information supply. The IEA framework was further contextualised to address the Malaysian landscape and analysis.

"The Information Ecosystem Assessment Internews carried out in Gua Musang (Kelantan) is the first ever assessment done with the Temiar community which involved 100 per cent planning, participation and input from community members".

**Mustafa Bin Along,
IEA Resource Person from
the Temiar tribe**

The Malaysian IEA was conducted in three states (Sabah, Sarawak, Kelantan) and nationwide (for the youths assessment) which involved **623 participants**. Locally, the project was led by local resource persons and community researchers. This IEA sought to identify the information needs, gaps, dynamics and impact for target beneficiaries who consist of youths and rural/indigenous communities (with emphasis on women and youths). These segments of the population are most likely to be disadvantaged in the current information ecosystem where infrastructure and facilities remain as communication roadblocks.

Overarching themes identified from the findings:

- **Lack of basic infrastructure** such as electricity cuts and poor/non-existent internet coverage, is a major barrier to accessing information.

- **Pusat Internet 1Malaysia** is highly in demand in rural communities.

- **TV is the most trusted source of information** across all locations and age groups despite digital media growth.

- **Locally relevant news on health and community/land rights issues** are the most needed information.

- **High distrust in political news/information and politicians**

- **Fake news is a major problem** across all media and communication platforms.

- **Influencers** such as politicians, religious leaders and village chiefs affect the effectiveness in providing information to the public.

- **Self-determination and empowerment** of communities can be achieved by using hyper-local news outlets/mediums.

"Such a project (community media) would surely raise our standard of living so we can be at the same level as the other communities around us."

**Kg Datong (Sabah) respondent, 18 years old**

Based on the IEA findings, it is recommended that the gaps be addressed through bottom-up feedback to cultivate trust and transparency. This would facilitate effective communication of the changes required within these communities and reasons why they need to be made. These should be done with the hopes of increasing inclusivity in capacity-building and in community leadership. Indeed, the new media landscape in the country will be led by youths who represent almost 30 per cent of Malaysia's population and the findings underscore the media's role as an agent for social change and nation-building. Marginalised groups such as indigenous communities need the media to present their aspirations and views to authorities whose decisions affect their lives and environment. Their struggles to be heard by those who have direct power over their circumstances is a matter of physical and cultural survival. Underrepresentation is found amongst women and youths who express their wish to be more involved in decision-making processes and leadership opportunities. Influence remain important issues, and the rural communities are wanting to gain knowledge and skills to mitigate the circulation of fake news in their circles, and to produce their own community media platforms to communicate as they wish, about whatever subject they wish and whenever they wish.

# INFORMATION LANDSCAPE

## Popularity & accessibility do not translate to trust

TV is still is the most trusted source of information across all locations and age groups, despite digital (new) media gains traction

**66%** of respondents cited social media as the primary source of information

**7%** of respondents believed social media is the most trusted source

### YOUTHS ARE MORE LIKELY TO USE MEDIA THAT IS EASILY ACCESSIBLE

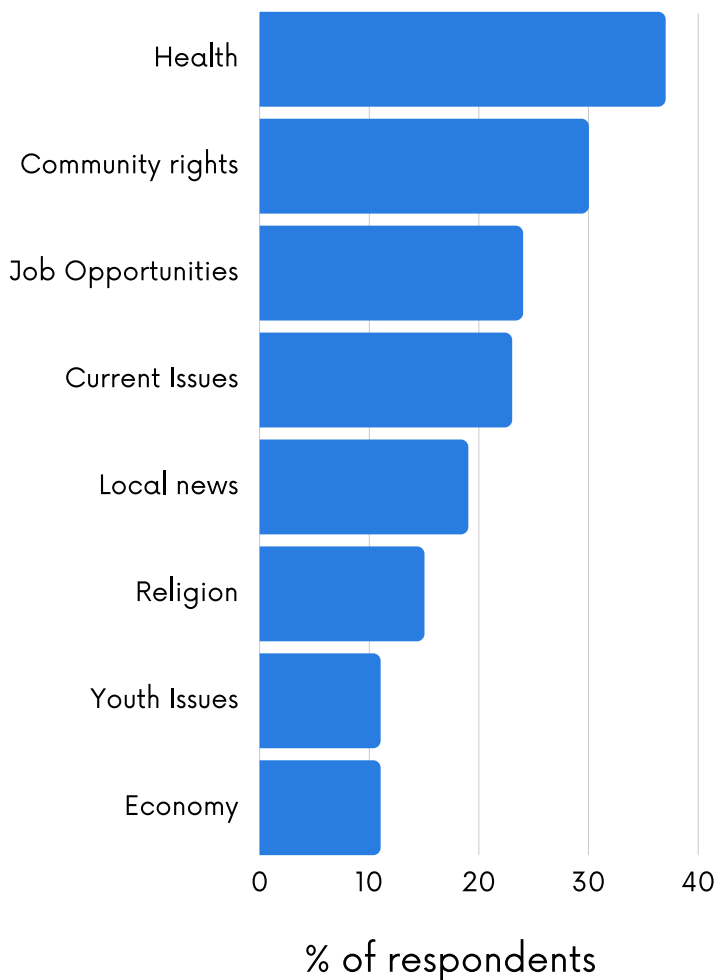**68%** do not subscribe nor have access to newspapers

**2 OUT OF 5** cited unstable or lack of internet access are barriers to accessing information

## DISTANCE AND SERVICE RELIABILITY MATTER

The closer to town, the better access to information. With more content disseminated exclusively on digital platforms, remote areas are missing important information if they do not have stable mobile phone connection.

# INFORMATION NEEDS

## MOST NEEDED INFORMATION



Health
Community rights
Job Opportunities
Current Issues
Local news
Religion
Youth Issues
Economy

0    10    20    30    40

% of respondents

## LOCAL NEWS RELEVANT TO COMMUNITY ARE IN DEMAND

Each target group's information need to be closely tied to their situation and their priorities. Temiar tribes fighting for their native rights needs knowledge and updates on their native rights, while residents of Melangkap & Pitas want to address bread-and-butter issues. Sarawak respondents and youths from urban areas call for more local news

# PRODUCTION & MOVEMENT

## CONVERGENCE OF FACE-TO-FACE, TRADITIONAL & DIGITAL

content produced and flow, usually passing the gate-keepers such as heads of communities. In rural Malaysia, information exchange mostly happens through word-of-mouth and community meetings But digitalization is disrupting this status quo. It flattens the hierarchy as user-generated content and WhatsApp communication become the norm

## 51%

think media is censored all the time

# INFORMATION USE

## "FORWARDING CULTURE"
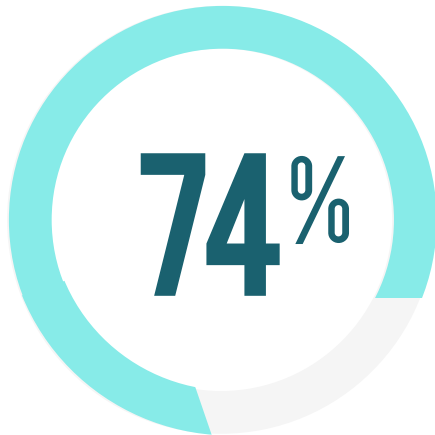
**74%** of respondents forward information they receive, either with or without personal comments or by summarizing it . Reasons are purely benevolent : they think the information is useful or they need to verify it with someone else.

## INFLUENCERS

### WOMEN AND MEN HEED THE WORDS OF THEIR COMMUNITY LEADERS

BUT ALMOST

**50%**

of youth respondents look up to Members of Parliament or ADUNs, or in the case of Malay youths, religious figures

### UNDER-REPRESENTED

women & youths want to have more voice in community meetings & decision-making process. Youths believe they are not empowered to choose their own leaders. Young females in Temiar tribe want to develop their own pool of activists and leaders

# SOCIAL TRUST

Generally, women and youth are less trusting towards information from word-of-mouth. Respondents note the strongest point about digital media is freedom of information they can enjoy. But they are concerned about the proliferation of unreliable information and how content in digital media can be influenced by many stakeholders to serve their self-interest

**56%** of respondents in rural communities have high trust in security-related news such as court cases, crimes and police statement

**40%** of respondents in IEA Youths have high trust in economy and job opportunity information

# INFORMATION IMPACT

**87%** acknowledge information they receive has impact on them. Rural areas get less relevant information, and Covid-19 is not a pressing issue compared to economic opportunities

For women & youths, the type of information with most impact: **social & education**

# TRUST DEFICIT : ANYTHING POLITICAL

**72%** distrust political information. Most consider content, whether published in new or traditional media, is biased. This belief leads to apathy and disdain

- Too many political news; it is hard to differentiate between facts and fake-news

- There is wide perception that media practices censorship to serve political or business interest; this has resulted in youths practicing self-censorship

- Respondents view political information from political parties as propaganda or meant to incite hatred

- A number of youth believe the political interference had denied them the opportunity to select their own leaders

## COMMUNITY MEDIA

rural respondents prefer Pusat Internet 1Malaysia (1Malaysia Internet Centre) to be their platform, followed by community radio and community TV. Youth in general want internet-based community media. Majority of respondents think high-quality internet connection is a key success factor.

## OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES

# 77%

prefer current issues & local news content in community media.

### RESOURCES NEEDED
- Technical know-how
- Government's commitment (financial support)
- Community buy-in
- Understanding legal constraints

**Community disinterest & political interference threatens the sustainability of community media**

# About Internews ■

Internews, an international non-profit organisation, empowers people worldwide with the trustworthy, high-quality news and information they need to make informed decisions, participate in their communities, and hold power to account. We seek to realise the potential of a digitally connected world: a world in which evidence-based information advances human progress, enables broad opportunity and accountability, and fuels vibrant civic debate.

For more than 35 years, in more than 100 countries, Internews has worked to build healthy media and information environments where they are most needed. We have proudly incubated hundreds of sustainable organisations, bolstered the skills of thousands of media professionals, activists, and citizens, and helped these partners reach millions of people with quality, local information.

Internews operates from administrative centres in California, Washington DC, London and Paris, as well as regional hubs in Bangkok and Nairobi. Formed in 1982, Internews has worked in more than 100 countries and currently has offices in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Latin America and North America.

# Internews in Malaysia ■

Internews aspires to work with stakeholders towards a healthier information ecosystem in Malaysia. This is done by nurturing value-based relationships with our partners and beneficiaries. We place great emphasis on having participatory processes with inputs from all stakeholders, in line with Internews' core values of listening and learning continuously. Malaysia came in 43rd in the Democracy [1]Index of 2019 hence it can benefit from a more diverse and representative landscape of ideas which is one of the building blocks of a progressive, inclusive and just society.

As of 2020, in partnership with local and regional organisations, three programmes have been implemented in this country:

**1**   **Ayuh Belia** – The goal of this project was to advance the Freedom of Expression (FoE) in the country by increasing young leaders' understanding of their role as stakeholders in advocating for FoE. It also aimed to strengthen the capacity and collaboration between civil societies and youths so they could contribute constructively to public discourses and advocacy campaigns.

**2**   **Suara Masyarakat** – The objective of this project was to strengthen the capacity of the media as a key player in promoting good governance, transparency and accountability. To achieve this goal, Internews and partners collaborated to increase the capacity of Malaysian journalists in delivering high quality investigative, mobile and data journalism. The project also aimed to develop community information media to improve local governance by providing two-way communication between citizens and local authorities.

**3**   **Diverse Voices** - This project ran concurrently in Malaysia and Indonesia with the aim to strengthen the capacity of journalists for accurate, balanced and responsible reporting of religious minorities' issues. By amplifying the voices of marginalised communities as well as promoting mutual understanding, positive portrayals and unity, Internews believes that this will enhance tolerance and harmony in multi-cultural societies.

# About the Centre for Independent Journalism ■

The Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ) is a feminist, non-profit organisation that aspires for a society that is democratic, just and free where all peoples will enjoy free media and the freedom to express, seek, and impart information. We are amongst the leading groups in media freedom advocacy and other freedom of expression issues in Malaysia. CIJ spearheaded the community media project in Malaysia in 2001 through its Radiq Radio platform and expended its reach through engagement with its counterpart in Indonesia.

CIJ actively advocates for a broader space for expression and views, and openness of information in Malaysia. This is done through law and policy advocacy, media monitoring and action, providing regular analysis and briefs on the situation in Malaysia, and ongoing and long-standing outreach and campaigns around the repeal of restrictive laws and enactment of new laws in its place. CIJ and its local partners initiated the advocacy on freedom of information (FOE) legislation which eventually led to the adoption of the FOI Enactments at the state level in Penang and Selangor. Engagement on a federal level legislation on right to information is ongoing. Currently, CIJ co-chairs the Freedom of Expression (FOE) coalition of civil society organisations in Malaysia. Representatives of CIJ also sits on the Pro-tem committee set up by the Ministry of Communications and Multimedia on the establishment of a Malaysian Media Council.

# List of Abbreviations ■

| | |
|---|---|
| FGD | Focus Group Discussion |
| MCMC | Malaysia Communication & Multimedia Commission |
| MCO | Movement Control Order |
| MPKK | Majlis Pengurusan Komuniti Kampung |
| PI1M | Pusat Internet 1Malaysia |
| RTM | Radio Televisyen Malaysia |
| SOP | Standard Operating Procedure |

# IEA Malaysia Methodology ■

A n Information Ecosystem Assessment (IEA) is an analytical framework that can capture all dimensions of the relationship between information consumers and information supply. Through this approach, an IEA is intended to surface 'deeply local information,' which lies at the heart of Internews' mission. Internews' approach then, is to seek a *human-centred* understanding of how people and communities find, share, value, trust and produce information in their own local contexts.

Internews' appraisal of Information Ecosystems goes beyond the traditional 'supply-side', which usually composes of the physical and institutional infrastructure, including media capacity (tools, human resource, producers, consumer data, curators, and sharers) – with user-generated content  is shared with global audience on the Internet . For the 'demand-side' perspective, Internews considers the human factor as being critical to a full understanding of any Information Ecosystem.

Information Ecosystems are more than a network of news, media and information channels; they include informal, personal, civic, community and trust-based information flow that may or may not be influenced by news or media. For IEA Malaysia 2020, we assess respective target group's Information Ecosystem through these dimensions: **information needs, information landscape, production and movement, dynamic of access, information use, impact of information, social trust and influencers**.

Most importantly, Information Ecosystems are uniquely defined by the 'information behaviour' of the human beings who live in them. In the constant quest of human beings to connect with information, the ways in which they consume, produce, contribute to, interact with and behave around their information supply are the things that make information ecosystems dynamic, diverse and sometimes quirky and unpredictable.
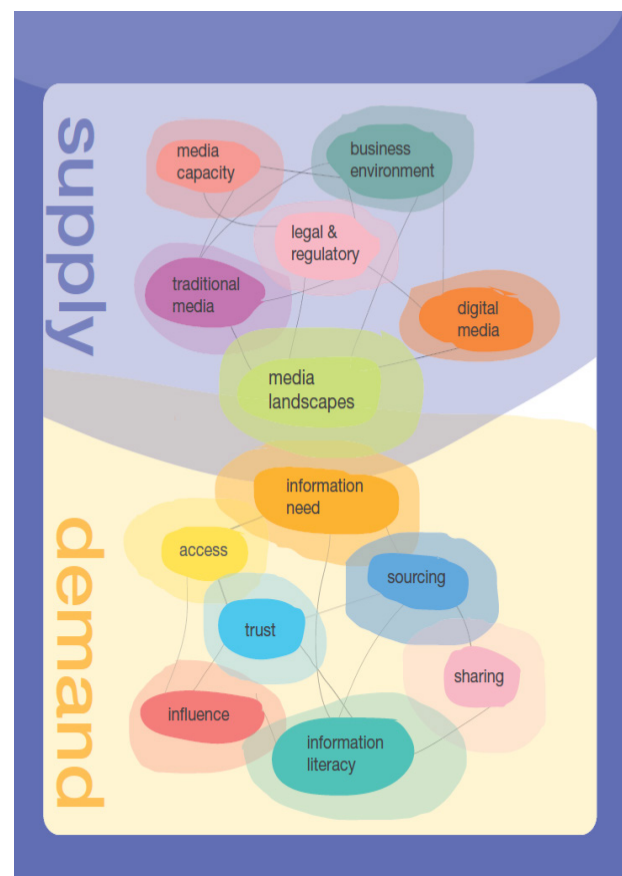
# Previous Information Ecosystem Assessments by Internews
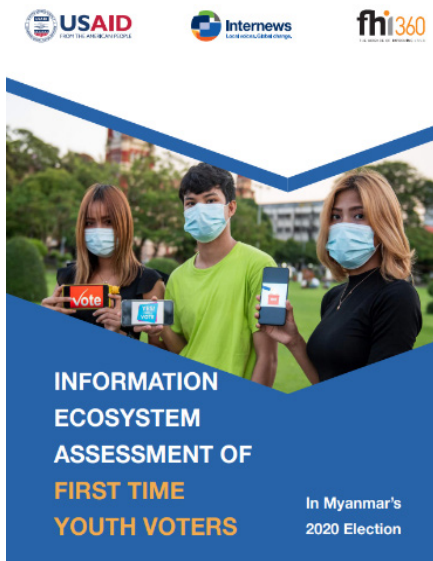
In Myanmar, an IEA was conducted in August 2020 to better understand information needs, access, flow and trusted sources of information among First Time Youths Voters (FTYV)[2]. The findings informed political actors, information providers and policymakers to design suitable programmes with the aim to maximise the political participation of young voters across Myanmar. This assessment's findings are drawn from a nationwide online survey and in-depth discussions with FTYV in Myanmar about how they get their information, how they engage and share information with their peers and what or who is influencing their choices for the different types of news and information sources.

In 2016, Internews commissioned a mapping of information ecosystems in three areas of Afghanistan[3]. This study was vital in forming a thorough understanding on how Afghans make decisions about everything from personal security to health, migration, and livelihoods. The study highlighted a great need for local news coverage and the persisting value of public spaces such as markets and barbershop in information exchanges despite the increasing proliferation of digital media.

## A. Objectives

**1** To understand the pertinent information flow and dynamics of target beneficiaries in order to design programmatic activities of Internews in Malaysia.

**2** To identify the information needs, gaps and impact of youths across Malaysia plus women and youths living in rural communities; those most likely to be disadvantaged in the current information ecosystem.

**3** To recognise challenges and opportunities in promoting community media within respective communities.

## B. IEA Design

The IEA aims to understand the information ecosystem for youths throughout Malaysia and rural communities, with emphasis on women and youths. These communities are further than what we typically see in more developed parts of the country such as the Klang Valley or Penang; in the interior locations of Kelantan, Sabah and Sarawak, where infrastructure and facilities remain stagnant as information ecosystem roadblocks were identified.

As such, the design of the IEA emphasised on a qualitative approach which involved ethnographic participant interaction and in-depth consultation with local resource teams about the cultural acceptance of conducting interviews and surveys amongst their community members. Qualitative data collection, be it via physical or digital space, serves as the basis of discussion for key informant interviews and focus group discussions in which respondents can yield richer narratives about their information needs and habits.

Need assessment was carried out prior to the actual assessment to understand the logistics and feasibility of the study. Internews team, local partner CIJ and community researchers travelled to meet with communities in Kedah, Kelantan, Sabah and Sarawak to discuss research instruments, recruit Local Resource Persons and community researchers, gauge community acceptance and project scope.

Because IEA is relatively a new assessment framework in Malaysia, Internews arranged for its expert, Rafiq Copeland, to conduct a training on IEA methodology and framework for the Centre of Independent Journalism (CIJ) and Resource Persons between 15th and 17th February, 2020. Resource Persons played an important role in facilitating the assessment, transferring knowledge to community researchers and conducting validation exercises with the target communities.

The national framework for this IEA was developed in collaboration with CIJ and Resource Persons, taking into account the issues and challenges of target groups in Malaysia, as well as gender-mainstreaming in survey questions. It should be acknowledged that this IEA was not an exhaustive research nor did it offer a significant sample size similar to the ones needed for a quantitative dataset. Internews aimed for sufficient representation of the IEA findings especially from its qualitative data to draw meaningful insights on the context of the existing information dynamics, networks, practices, and socio-economic challenges of all target groups.



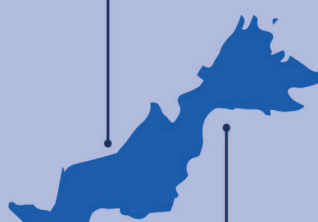*Internews Staff Rafiq Copeland is leading the IEA training*

**IEA MALAYSIA**
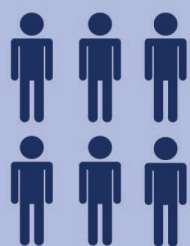
Total of **623** respondents participated in the first IEA of the country

**17** community researchers

**65%** female

**71% youths** (15-30 years old)

# C. Data Collection

Due to Covid-19's travel restrictions, the methods of data collection varied in order to adapt to each community's circumstances and requests. The planned face-to-face fieldwork at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) and northern Kedah was pivoted into an online survey, two online focus group discussions (FGD) and two physical FGDs. The Temiar communities in Gua Musang, Kelantan, preferred a communal FGD rather than a house-to-house survey. Fieldwork was also subjected to consent from the head of respective communities. The village chief of Nanga Bekatan, Sarawak even travelled to Julau town to learn the purpose of the IEA from the Resource Person and community researchers before allowing them to carry out the assessment on his community.

## Surveys:

A survey questionnaire was developed based on eight critical dimensions of IEA and the realities of target communities, which include socio-economic, cultural and information concerns. The questionnaire was translated to Malay language or the local native language and then disseminated online while the printed copy was used by community researchers. The Resource Person also consulted with community researchers on the appropriate construct and survey designs. For example, Sabah community researchers

were able to conduct house-to-house surveys and personal interviews with respondents. As for the IEA of Malaysian youths, the Resource Person called for participants via online surveys through social media platforms.

## Focus Group Discussions:

For the youths groups in Sabah and Sarawak communities, FGDs were conducted after preliminary analysis of quantitative survey findings. For the Temiar community in Kelantan, qualitative surveys and focus groups were carried out simultaneously. In this session, respondents were divided into small groups and voted their answers by a show of hands. This was followed by directed discussions to form a nuanced understanding of individual answers.

Covid-19 posed a good challenge to our plan in conducting focus group discussions for youths respondents from various states. We coped by offering Internet data subsidy to online FGD participants, since each of the FGD lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. This required those without Wi-Fi to have uninterrupted mobile connection so engagement and participation could be maximised.

## Key Informant Interviews:

Internews performed interviews with community leaders, youths representatives and other stakeholders who offered interesting perspectives related to the key research themes. Their experiences and insights provided contextual information that helped triangulate respondents' attitudes and perspectives on information flow, production and needs. Interviews were transcribed and reported back to the Resource Person for further analysis.

## Mapping:

In Kelantan, the respondents were asked to map out information flows between themselves and external groups such as teachers, traders and the media. Internews conducted this exercise at the end of each FGD. With this approach, there were further insights into which information is priority and the direction of information obtained.

Information mapping also served to validate findings from the surveys and FGDs. It also explained the differences between men and women in the community in terms of who they exchange news with, as well as what news they usually consume and produce in their social circles.

## Desktop Research:

Desktop research was conducted to identify data and information that are publicly available. Reviewing additional literatures and reports of similar studies were done to produce a more nuanced examination of the information ecosystem of target communities. This phase was also complemented by synthesis sessions with Internews staff, IEA experts, CIJ and Resource Persons to discuss, analyse and interpret collected data.



*IEA participants from each state: Sabah, Kelantan and Kedah have the highest number of participants.*

# D. Data Analysis

Data was coded and compiled for descriptive and thematic analysis to identify prevalent information patterns among respondents. Internews acknowledged that the identified communities have distinctive socio-economies, infrastructures, cultures and issues, thus additional responses for certain questions were allowed. This contributed to a richer bottom-up approach of analysing the eight dimensions of the Information Ecosystem of youths and marginalised communities.

# E. Challenges and Biases

### Covid-19:

The IEA was carried out during the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic. Travel restrictions as well as Standard Operating Procedures of social distancing were adhered to, but that put a limit on fieldwork and data collection. When the Movement Control Order (MCO) was lifted/relaxed and the communities were more comfortable to host IEA activities, only then did the Resource Person and community researchers conducted face-to-face sessions.

### Challenging Conditions:

Rain as well as road conditions that lead to communities in Sabah, Sarawak and Kelantan also affected the operation of the IEA. For example, in Pitas and Gua Musang, it rained almost every evening, thus house-to-house interviews could only be done in the morning. The Resource Person in Sarawak took a seven-hour bus trip from Kuching, capital of Sarawak, to Sibu before travelling to Julau the next day. Long travel times coupled with small windows of opportunities in between MCO durations limit the number of people who can be interviewed by community researchers. Those conducting fieldwork in remote areas experienced badly damaged or unpaved roads during the rainy season before they could reach the settlements.

### Representation of Youths & Women:

Although careful consideration was given regarding the inclusion of youths and females for the IEA, limitations surfaced when we reached the villages. At the time when we conducted the fieldwork, many women and youths were out to work or needed to attend to their families. Some school-age youths stayed in dormitories or a relative's house and only came back on weekends. These factors limit the participation of more youths in the assessment.

### Language:

Some respondents in Sabah and Sarawak do not speak the national language (Malay) and reported that survey questions written in Malay is confusing. Thus, translators and community researchers had to explain the questions to the respondents in the respondents' native language.

### Human bias:

Biases also took place when Resource Persons or community researchers asked questions in a way that influenced the respondents' answers. The presence of the Internews team who remained neutral during FGDs managed to minimise this occurrence by reframing questions or soliciting individual comments based on their body language. Triangulations were also carried out with additional research and outreach to key informants.

# National Media Landscape Review

**M**alaysia consists of 13 states and one federal territory. It practices federal constitutional monarchy with parliamentary democracy. It had experienced rapid growth and structural changes in the last three decades. It has successfully diversified its economy from primarily agriculture and commodity-based, to manufacturing and service sectors. The country is expected to achieve its transition from an upper middle-income economy to a high-income economy by 2024. But behind the glossy headlines of economic growth and prosperity, there is much to be improved on in the space of reforms in the media[4], income inequality[5],transparency and accountability as well as corruption.

In terms of the sustainable development in Malaysia, progress had been made pertaining to health and education. However, there are worrying trends of social inequality. The national income gap in Malaysia between the top 20 percent of households and the remaining 80 percent, had doubled from 1995 to 2016. Minorities such as underprivileged

of media currently consist of conventional and digital media. The rapid rate of urbanisation and migration from rural to urban areas affects the pattern of consumption among Malaysians where electricity and Internet coverage are available. 78.4 per cent of 31 million Malaysians live in urban areas. It was reported that 98.2 per cent of ICT are accessed by households while 97.1 per cent of Malaysians participate in social media to exchange information.[8]

This near-universal ICT access in Malaysia via mobile phones provides alternative and diverse platforms for information. Media-savvy netizens have been mobilised in using social media, undercutting the government's control over more traditional media outlets. However, mobile Internet coverage is still lacking especially in remote areas in Peninsular and East Malaysia. The 3G/4G coverage is still concentrated in coastal and urban areas[9].

Thus, communities in remote areas have the disadvantage of being information-poor. This

## Best Available Signal in Malaysia
### Speedtest® Data | Q3-Q4 2019
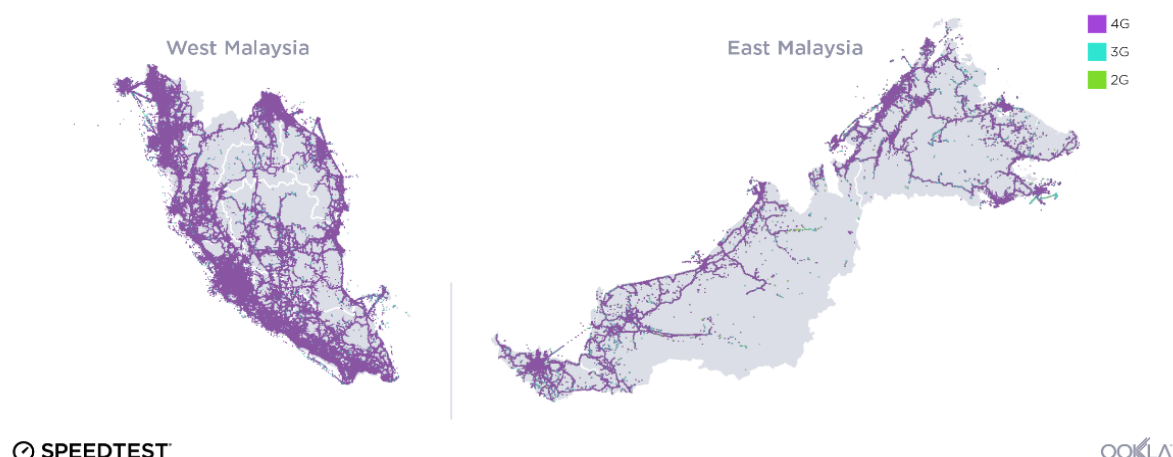


*Mobile coverage represented in Speedtest 2019 data*

Indians [6]and Orang Asli[7] were affected by environmental degradation and experienced consistent drop-out rates from secondary schools.

Demographic shifts and advancement in technology are reflected in the evolution of the information landscape of the country. The choices

usually fits the profile of communities with lack of access to electricity, clean water and health services. Majority of communities in these areas are Orang Asli, Orang Asal (indigenous) and impoverished Malay communities.

# Traditional Media

## Television

The media expansion in Malaysia post-independence started with government-related TV channels and radios. The Federal Government has a ministry that oversees broadcasting, national TV channels, licensing, media, postal services and telecommunications. In 1984, the first private-owned TV channel setup (Tv3) was launched. Following that was a proliferation of commercial radios such as THR and SuriaFM. In the 1990s, the first satellite-TV service, ASTRO, launched with great success. It continued to monopolise the paid media services in Malaysia until Telekom Malaysia gained the market share by launching Hypp TV (later rebranded as UnifiTV). This was offered through optical fiber network or mobile subscriptions.

In 2019, Malaysia terrestrial TV transited from analog to digital. Malaysians could now receive digital TV broadcast using UHF aerial and decoder. Free decoders were distributed to two million households from the B40 (low-income) category. Currently, there are 22 channels (TV and radio) on this free-to-air service while ASTRO offers 206 channels free (NJOI) as well as for purchase.

## National television channels:

**TV1:** The primary TV channel in Malay, operated by government agency Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM). The channel offers news, local documentaries, drama series and children's programmes.

**TV3:** The most watched free-to-air channel. Buletin Utama, the primetime news segment of this channel garnered 5.3 million viewers[18]. TV3 has morning talk shows, popular TV-magazine programmes (Majalah 3) and drama slots. Occasionally, the station screens Tamil, Bollywood and Chinese drama or movies.

**Astro Awani:** Under ASTRO, this channel offers current affairs, lifestyle shows, documentaries and interviews. It gained prominence after the 14th General Election for its timely, unbiased and reliable news coverage.

**TV OKEY:** Launched in March 2018, it is dedicated to East Malaysians and urban youths. Programmes are aired in Malay, English, Iban, Kadazan, Dusun and Bajau. Recently, it also incorporated educational programmes to assist school-going children, especially those without Internet, to study during Movement Control Order.

Government news sources such as RTM, continue to be trusted by the public over the years. In a 2019 survey by the Reuters Institute of Journalism, RTM still tops other media as the most trusted news brand and in 2020, it came second after Astro Awani. Its Director-General of Broadcasting, Abdul Muis Shefii, attributed the findings to high-quality news coverage and greater emphasis on information accuracy rather than speed[10]. However, the same survey also found that general trust in Malaysian media is amongst the lowest (25% of respondents) compared to other countries, which indicates that popularity of a media does not necessarily translate into trust.
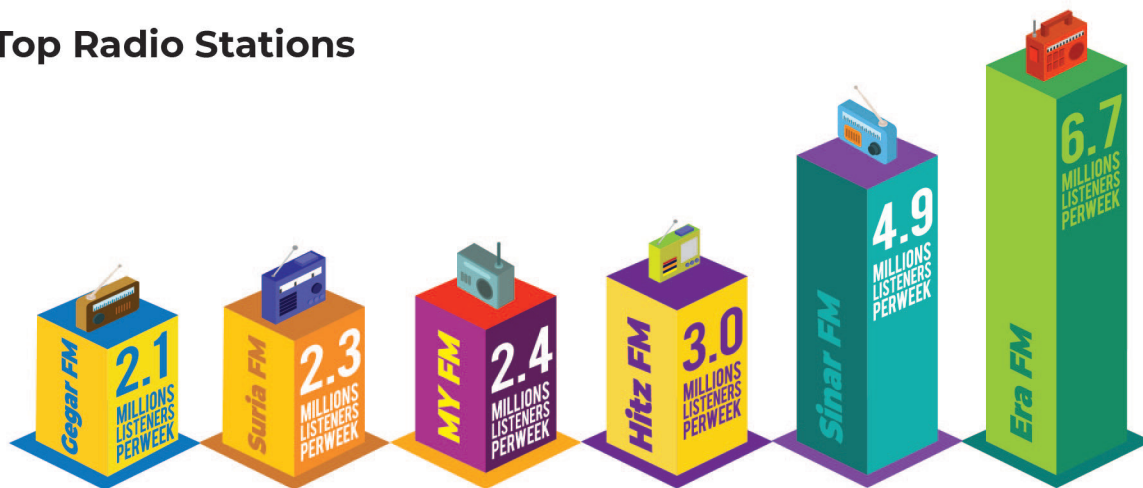
## Radio

In total, there are 44 government-owned radio stations including state or regional radios (e.g.: Johor FM and Tawau FM) and Asyik FM for Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia[11]. Thirty private radio channels operate with licenses from MCMC. Similar to TV, radios are broadcasted in Malay, English, Chinese and Tamil languages to cater to different races. It is further segmentised into multiple verticals, for example: GoXuan FM targets Generation-Z of the Malaysian Chinese community and TV Al-Hijrah fulfils the increasing demand of locally produced Islamic programmes. For East Malaysia, Radio Sabah and Sarawak broadcast in various languages including Dusun, Kadazan, Murut and Bidayuh.

Radio listenership in Peninsular Malaysia is around 20.6 million listeners every week, according to Radio Audience Measurement 2019[12]. From the subsequent Radio Insight Study, it was found that more than half of radio listeners browse the Internet while listening to the radio.

Although most radio channels have migrated to digital platforms or are included in the ASTRO NJOI package, not all rural households have these decoders. Those who reside temporarily on their farm or in the jungle for

## Top Radio Stations



Cegar FM — 2.1 MILLIONS LISTENERS PERWEEK
Suria FM — 2.3 MILLIONS LISTENERS PERWEEK
MY FM — 2.4 MILLIONS LISTENERS PERWEEK
Hitz FM — 3.0 MILLIONS LISTENERS PERWEEK
Sinar FM — 4.9 MILLIONS LISTENERS PERWEEK
Era FM — 6.7 MILLIONS LISTENERS PERWEEK

subsistence, find it easier to have a small portable radio that can receive FM/AM. Therefore, it is important to address any gaps in reception areas especially for stations such as Asyik FM which is effective as a low-cost platform to disseminate important updates such as Covid-19.

Community radio, which is still in the nascent phase in Malaysia, comes under the purview of MCMC. Operators have to register and apply for relevant licenses under the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 as long as the station is not operating for profit. The first community radio is Bario Radio for the Kelabit community in Sarawak.

## Newspaper

The information platforms in Malaysia are inherently vernacular. There are about 50 newspapers in Malaysia. Sixteen of them are published in English, 13 in Bahasa Malaysia, 19 in Chinese and two in Tamil[16] . Both print and digital vernacular newspapers concentrate on events and discourses that are significant to only their respective communities. Newspapers are also segmented along political affiliation – examples are Harakah, SelangorKini and RoketKini. Sabah and Sarawak have their own dailies notably Borneo Post, New Sabah Times and Utusan Borneo.

## Newspaper Circulation in Malaysia YoY



| | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 3814199 | 3797613 | 3419503 | 3031523 | 2664595 | 2385297 | 2078316 |

All Malay, English, Chinese paid newspaper daily circulation in Malaysia, sampled within Jan to Jun each year, data from Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC), compiled by Silver Mouse.

SILVER MOUSE                                    made with infogram

*Credit to Silvemouse website[17] . The newspaper circulation numbers are audited and verified by Audit Bureau of Circulation.*

Newspapers such as The Star and Berita Harian have a special pull-out for education, where content is based on the national syllabus with news on scholarship opportunities. Sinar Harian used to have eight editions focusing on eight states but was forced to trim down the scope to four regional editions. Ultimately, in 2019, only one national edition remained. This was largely due to newspaper print circulation, as expected, which has been declining across the board in the last decade.

Despite media practitioners' sober outlook on the future of traditional media, the public is more optimistic. According to the 2019 Survey18 by

Vase.ai , 62 per cent of Malaysians believe offline media will still be relevant in the next five years. Another observation worth mentioning is that when media companies of Malaysia struggles financially, trims down their workforce and reduces footprints, among the casualties are local newspapers that cover events and issues related to a specific state or district.

## Pure Digital Media

There are 26.69 million Internet users in Malaysia. According to a report by Data Reportal[19], 97 percent of Malaysians aged 16 to 64 years own smartphones

forwarded without being verified. Arguably, social media is used extensively to circumvent mainstream media discourse[23] and for citizens to make their voices heard. It is also used for mobilising political movements and conducting businesses. Blogs are very popular[24] although influencers have moved their content to Facebook, YouTube and TikTok. Malaysians blog about politics, cooking recipes, product reviews, daily life, fashion and financial advice, among others.

Almost all the newspapers, radios and TV channels in Malaysia stream their content on the Internet,

**Exhibit 3: Internet Activities by Individuals, Malaysia, 2019**

| Participating in social networks | Telephoning over the Internet/VoIP | Downloading images, movies, videos or music; playing or downloading games | Downloading software or applications | Finding information about goods or services |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2019 : 97.1% | 2019 : 77.4% | 2019 : 84.7% | 2019 : 77.1% | 2019 : 83.5% |
| 2018 : 96.5% | 2018 : 70.0% | 2018 : 81.7% | 2018 : 76.5% | 2018 : 83.1% |

*Infographics from Malaysia Department of Statistics on ICT access and Internet activities.*

of various models. Smartphones can be as cheap as RM399. A 3G data package comes in both post-paid and pre-paid. The price wars among telcos make it possible for Malaysians to enjoy 3G/4G post-paid services starting at RM68[20] and a pre-paid top-up starting at RM10. Broadband internet costs RM0.20/Mbps to RM2.97/Mbps for an unlimited plan[21] (on average, that is equal to USD 0.39/Mbps) and available only in big cities.

The most popular activity on the Internet is participating in social media. On average, Malaysians spend two hours and 45 minutes daily perusing social media. This is higher than the global average. The most popular social media is WhatsApp followed by Facebook and Instagram. However, there is trust deficit in social media as a reliable source of information. Thirty-three percent of Malaysians are concerned about WhatsApp being a source of false and misleading information[22]. Chat groups are set up to connect with family, friends and co-workers but it can also be a space for misinformation or fake news. These are most likely

through official websites, YouTube or Facebook. Digital content is no longer an alternative to on-air broadcasting. It has become the primary distribution channel for many, so much so that TV3's YouTube Channel[25.] disclosed their number of viewers to an average total of 150 million viewers monthly. This demonstrates that by leveraging on technology and consumer demands, mainstream media can still be relevant despite facing fierce competition from social media, alternative media and the growing pool of independent content creators.

The Internet certainly accelerates the speed and virality of information. Nowadays, it is faster to directly reach politicians, government agencies and authorities via their social media page or their mobile or hotline number. Numerous swift actions that had been taken by the authorities were initiated by videos or photos that had gone viral. The feedback loop is shorter than before. This has spurred ministries such as the Ministry of Health to retract controversial social media posts that drew criticism from netizens[26.]

## Business Environment for Media

In line with worldwide trends, circulations and readership for traditional media have dropped due to digital disruptions. Journalists were furloughed while newspapers and TV stations were put out of business. Among those companies was BluInc, a magazine publisher that had to shut down its operation of more than 20 magazines in Q1 2020 after some 40 years in the industry. Malaysia's oldest Malay newspaper — Utusan Melayu was delisted and subsequently ceased operations in October 2019. However, it returned to circulation under a new company linked to a business tycoon, Tan Sri Syed Mokhtar Al-Bukhary[27]. He also owns stakes in Media Prima, one of the biggest media conglomerates in Malaysia besides ASTRO and The Star Media Group. Another tycoon, Tan Sri Datuk Tiong Hiew King chairs a corporation in which a number of newspapers merged under Media Chinese International Limited[28]. These include Sin Chew Daily, Nanyang Siang Pau, China Press and Guang Ming Daily; major Chinese national dailies in the country.

Advertisers shift their spending to digital space, where targeted leads and increasing viewership of user-generated content on YouTube are more appealing to businesses. In this challenging market condition, digital segments gain traction from media conglomerates. Star Media saw an 18 per cent increase in digital revenue[29] as well as traffic across their digital platforms. Malaysian Newspaper Publishers Association (MNPA) demanded the government to force Facebook and Google to share their revenue with publishers in the country[30].

Telecommunication sector in Malaysia is competitive although there have been talks of mergers and acquisitions among major players in the anticipation of 5G roll-outs and hefty spectrum fees. For mobile market share, competition is a tussle between Maxis, Celcom Axiata and Digi. Telekom Malaysia dominates broadband Internet with 2.23 million subscribers. However, Maxis, TIME and other small players try to capitalise on attractive offerings including a free TV set.

Covid-19 exacerbates the challenges in financial sustainability and more importantly, the capacity of media to offer quality and quantity information. Journalists who experience exhaustion from covering the pandemic, collide with a constant demand to cover precarious political situations at the national and state levels. They assess the uncertainty of their future in media companies. The President of Sabah Journalists Association, Datuk Mugunthan Vanar even noted that most local papers are understaffed and lack adequate training in research, source-gathering, and fact-checking[31].

## Legal and FoE Landscape

The Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 (CMA) gives the Ministry of Communications and Multimedia through the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC), a range of authority including the power to grant  or cancel licenses, regulate telecommunications rates imposed on the public and regulate offensive content. MCMC has been known to fine companies for unsatisfactory quality of services and dubious SIM card registrations.

Printed press is regulated under Printing Press and Publication Act (PPPA), which media practitioners and human rights activists have called to be repealed, along with other legislations that have been abused to fetter the freedom of expression in Malaysia. In 2015, the Ministry of Home Affairs suspended the publication of The Edge Weekly and The Edge Financial Daily for three months on the grounds that their reporting on 1MDB violated Section 7(1) of PPPA.

The right to information in Malaysia is bounded by laws such as the Official Secrets Act 1972, as well as institutional measures, namely the General Orders and Administrative Guidelines for civil servants that prevent them from revealing information to the public without written approvals. Quantity and quality of data and information of public interest vary depending on agencies and states. Since 2014, the central agency, MAMPU (Malaysian Administrative Modernisation and Management Planning Unit) has been spearheading initiatives for open government data to enhance service delivery for citizens and to increase its transparency. Civic tech non-profit organisation,

Sinar Project, plays a critical role in pushing for a transparent parliament and greater access to information of elected representatives. However, this bears little impact on rural communities as they are not aware of the availability of data and do not fully recognise its significance to their well-being. Lack of consultation with Orang Asli and other underserved communities of which datasets are needed to improve their lives, also hinders their active participation in improving information access.

Historically, media ownership is linked to Barisan Nasional political coalition or businessmen with close ties with leaders from both sides of the political spectrums. During Pakatan Harapan government that lasted for 22 months, media practitioners experienced more freedom and could look forward to the establishment of the self-regulated Media Council. There was also the dropping of sedition charges against journalists in the country. The more relaxed media environment was reflected by Malaysia, climbing up 22 places for two consecutive years, in 2019 and 2020 World Press Freedom Index. However, this progress was seen as short-lived. After the abrupt change of the Federal Government in early 2020, it was observed that there were more intimidation tactics imposed on any media reporting unfavourable views. Notable example is Al-Jazeera that did a special coverage on the authority's treatment of illegal migrants during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. The onslaught of the pandemic coupled with unstable political and economic situation in Malaysia has put a stress on the media industry – either through higher workloads or retrenchments.

## Non-media Information Supply

The information ecosystem is much more than just media. Information flows in and out through one-on-one human interactions, billboards, books, discussions taking place in schools, places of worships, coffee shops or family gatherings, political rallies, films and gameplays. The factors influencing the usefulness of information depend on the receiver's preference, socio-economic status and current situation. Passive receivers like those in rural areas who consume traditional media, have little control of what they can receive. It is different with people in big cities who have arrays of TV stations, newspapers and magazines to choose from. Those who can afford it, enjoy access to Netflix and pay-per-view channels, with options to vist bookstores.

One information that all Malaysians find very important is the latest price of petrol. The statistics of Covid-19 cases that are disclosed daily by the Ministry of Health, help Malaysians in their day-to-day decisions nowadays. Google Search Trends for the country recorded 1.8x growth in loan-related searches, 19.1x growth for mask n95 and 18x for 'bubble tea near me'[32]. An analysis[33] noted the difference between metro and non-metro (sub-urban and rural) Google users in terms of their keyword search trends: metro users are keen to learn about functionality, shopping and lifestyle options, while non-metro care about product affordability, news content and entertainment.

Information also flows through networks of sharing and forwarding in social circles. As WhatsApp and social media platforms become the primary means of communication while the forwarding culture takes hold in society, fake news, misinformation and disinformation continue to proliferate the information ecosystem of the country. Many have fallen as victims of fake news, including business entities[34][35]. An IPSOS 2018 research shows that 50 percent of Malaysians admit that they discover about the fake information after they believe them to be true[36]. In the wake of fake news, government and CSOs run programmes to encourage verification prior to fully trusting any information or the passing of such information to others.



*Petrol stations show the comparison of petrol and diesel price with other ASEAN countries. Credit:gohedgostan.com*

# Youths

In the history of Malaysia, the youths have been at the frontlines of the tide of change, starting with the fight for national independence. Back then, the founders of this nation mobilised grassroots and public support through the pens of intellectuals, as well as rousing articles from journalists such as Ibrahim Yaacob. Fast forward to Malaysia in 2020, where the information landscape is abundant, albeit riddled with 'infodemic', youths: the biggest segment of the population should have what it takes to take charge. With this in mind, the IEA Youths was conducted to understand information needs and gaps for youths (belia) to foment a better information ecosystem for young Malaysians to lead their communities in this challenging era.

## 74%
of respondents identify digital media as popular information sources

## POPULARITY & ACCESSIBILITY DO NOT TRANSLATE TO TRUST

Although digital (new) media is more accessible and comes with freedom of information, youths are concerned about unreliable information and influence of self-serving on content on digital platform.

## HOWEVER
## 35%
deemed digital media as trustworthy

## YOUTHS ARE MORE LIKELY TO USE MEDIA THAT IS EASILY ACCESSIBLE

## 68%
do not subscribe nor have access to newspapers

## 45%
cited their unstable Internet connection hindering them from accessing media

## HEALTH INFORMATION IS THE MOST NEEDED. BUT LOCALITY MATTERS

**34%** of respondents choose health as the most important topic. However, youths from suburbs & rural areas also prioritise on economy-related information while urban youths indicated information priority on local news.

**8 OUT OF 10** practice self-censorship. Respondents' perception that existing media practice censorship to serve political or business interest has led to them to do self-censorship

**57%** share information with family & friends with or without editing. An Internet site such as ,sebenarnya.my is often used to verify information.

**71%** distrust political information. Most consider this type of content, whether published in new or traditional media, is biased.

## INFORMATION THAT HAS MOST IMPACT ON YOUTHS: SOCIAL & EDUCATION

Aspects of social life include social relations, social problems in the society, quality of life and community development.

## COMMUNITY MEDIA SHOULD BE NON-PARTISAN & RELIABLE

**73%** are concerned about political interference as well as no community buy-in

**85%** believe information filtering can make community media more trusted. Others think there should be no political funding nor political information.

## YOUTHS PREFER TO ESTABLISH COMMUNITY MEDIA ON DIGITAL PLATFORMS

Stable internet connection, political will & commitment by the government are important factors. This should include supportive laws on right to information and freedom of information

Preferred community media content:

- CURRENT ISSUES
- LOCAL ISSUES
- JOB OPPORTUNITIES
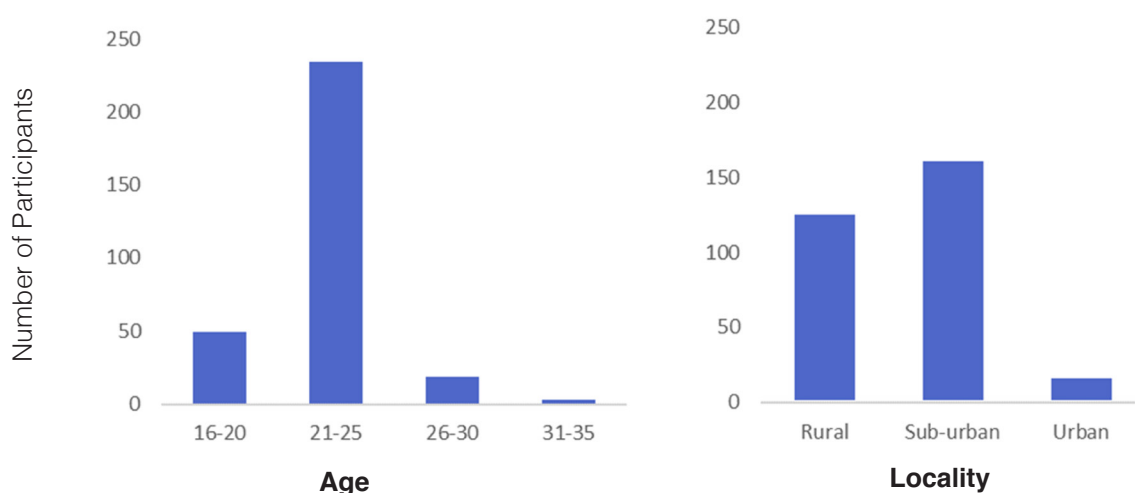- YOUTH ISSUES
- RELIGIOUS ISSUES

*Focus Group Discussions held physically and virtually with Dr. Khairie Ahmad, Resource Person for IEA Youths*
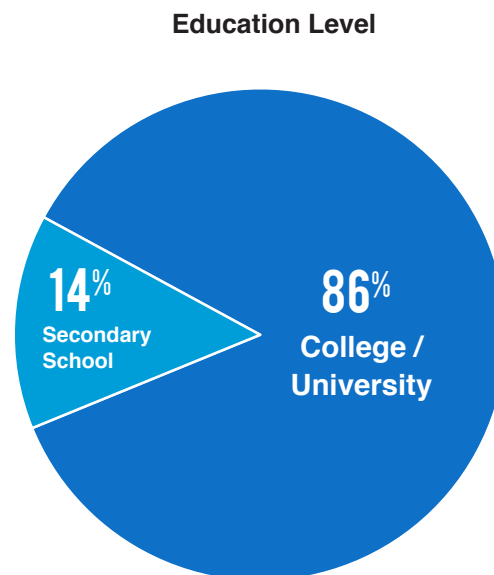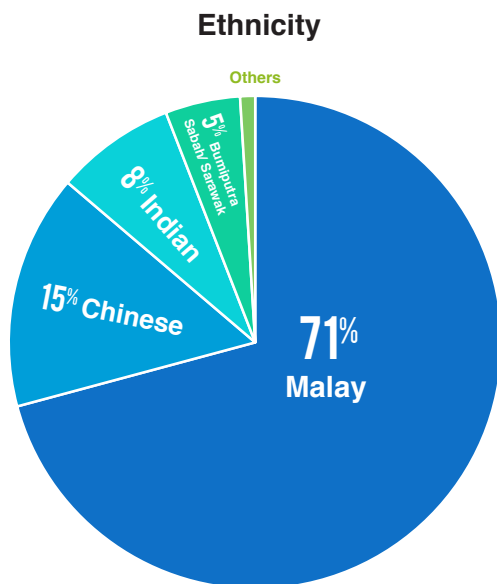
## Methodology

Set against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic, the IEA Youths used quantitative and qualitative data collection comprising an online survey questionnaire with closed-ended questions and open-ended questions for 20 days. Invitations for youths all across Malaysia to participate in this IEA were sent through social media. Random sampling was employed in the survey. Physical meetings to collect data were also held on a limited scale to adhere to the Standard Operating Procedures set by the health authorities. At the end, Resource Person received 305 completed questionnairs.

After the data was coded and analysed using Statistical Packages for Social Sciences, Resource Person met with Internews and CIJ to present preliminary findings. Four focus group discussions (FGDs) were then held in person or online for participants who had completed the questionnaire. Purposive sampling was carried out at this phase to ensure the response pool had a diverse range of age, gender, ethnicity and locality. For participants who participated in online FGDs, subsidy for Internet data was provided to ensure an uninterrupted session. FGDs included questions that were formed based on the outcome of quantitative analysis. The audio of the discussions was transcribed, coded and analysed using NVivo. Resource Person performed a thematic analysis technique to finalise the findings.

*The demographics of survey respondents (140 male, 165 female) are as follows:*

**Ethnicity**

71% Malay
15% Chinese
8% Indian
5% Bumiputra Sabah/ Sarawak
Others

**Education Level**

14% Secondary School
86% College / University

# Information Ecosystem

## A. Macro Environment

Malaysia's median age is 29.2 years, with a 9.5 million strong youths population[37]. The official definition of youths was revised to 15 to30 years old. Voting age was also lowered to 18 years old so we expect eight million new young voters to be the force to be reckoned with in the next General Election. The states of Sabah and Terengganu recently passed a legislation to allow electoral candidates as young as 18 years old to contest[38][39].

Education in Malaysia was reported to achieve 97.88 per cent and 86.46 per cent enrolment rate for primary and upper secondary levels, respectively. However, there is a vexing issue of unemployment due to a mismatch between the youths' expectations, employees' expectations, and the labour market[40]. As of 2019, 79.1 per cent (about 402,240) of unemployed Malaysians were -youths[41]. In a 2018 survey of young working adults, only 24 per cent can survive up to three months with their own savings and only 10 per cent can remain unemployed within six months[42]. Covid-19 posed debilitating challenges in terms of the survivability of youths and their well-being. Several studies[43][44] pointed out a considerable level of anxiety and depression experienced by youths regardless whether they are in school, college or the workforce.

## Information Landscape

The respondents of IEA Youths are millennials (born in the 1990s) who have been introduced to both traditional and new (digital) media from infancy. The information landscape for Malaysian youths is shaped by their social-emotional development, their community and locality, where mass media, social hierarchy, influencers and digital media intertwine to varying degrees.

Mass media targeted at youths' needs started back in 1970s with TV Pendidikan that broadcasted the national education syllabus. It has been hosted by various TV channels, from government station's TV1, ASTRO and then evolved to EduwebTV.com. Various TV shows designed for the young population, segmentised according to multiple demographic groups and languages. Those who have constant access to TV and radio were spoilt for choice with a wide variety of programmes.
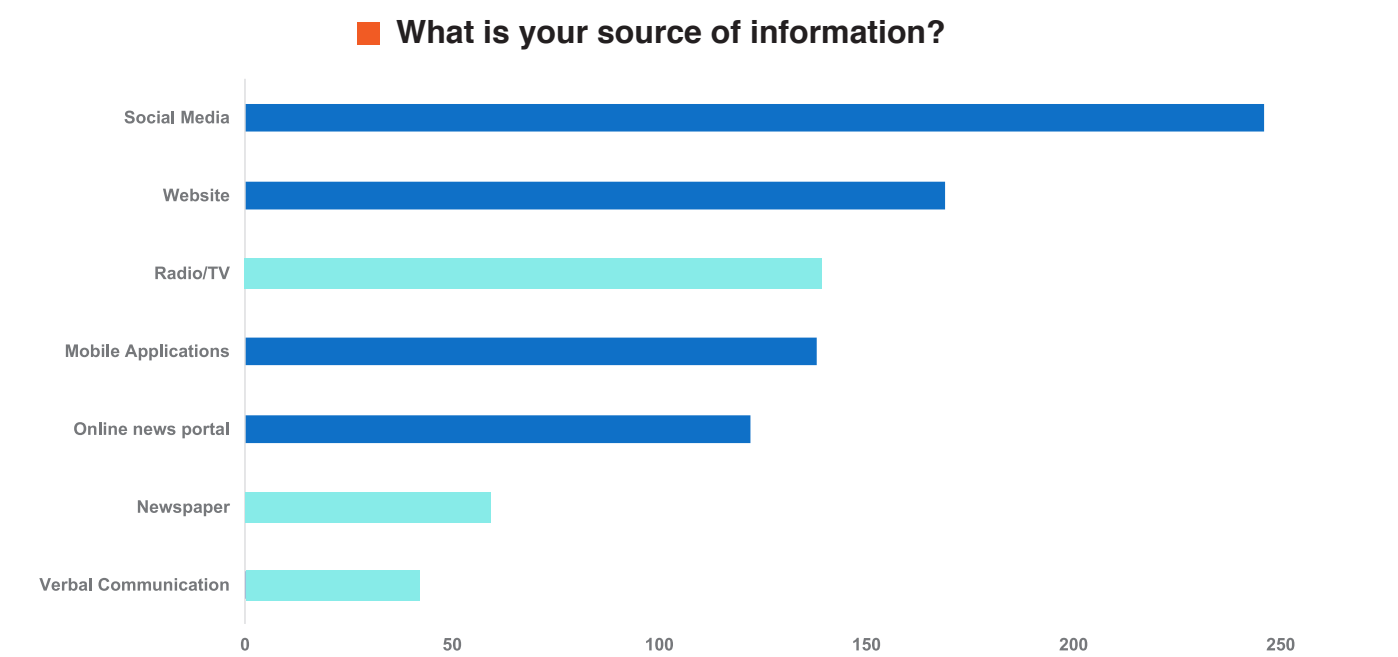
Radio is still attractive to youths, recording an increase in listenership in 2018 to 4.46 million weekly listeners from 20 to 29 age group. Young Malaysians enjoy the interconnectivity with digital content as they browse social media or the Internet while listening to the radio. The most popular radio station for youths is ERA FM, whose winning formula of bringing together latest hits, jovial and entertaining deejays as well as a breakfast segment filled with humour appeals to youths.

In Malaysia, one of the well-known information infrastructures is cybercafe. It was very popular before the advent of affordable smartphones and Internet home package. Since it has stable Internet connection, it serves as a place for university students and working adults to do their assignments and search for information, as well as for youths to play electronic games. The demand for cyber access is so great that most libraries in the country started to provide internet terminals for their patrons, especially youths who can be considered digital natives.

The IEA Youths found that **74 per cent of respondents identified digital (new) media such as social media, websites, mobile applications and online news portals as their major information sources. Social media is the most popular source of information.** There is no discernible difference between gender and ethnicity.

*A typical cybercafe with printing and photocopy services. Credit to Teratak Bonda Resources*

### What is your source of information?

| Source | Value |
|---|---|
| Social Media | ~245 |
| Website | ~168 |
| Radio/TV | ~140 |
| Mobile Applications | ~138 |
| Online news portal | ~122 |
| Newspaper | ~60 |
| Verbal Communication | ~42 |

Most respondents have the required necessities to enjoy digital media. One hundred per cent of survey respondents in urban, sub-urban and rural areas were reported to have electricity and broadcast TV services. Exactly 98.4 per cent of respondents have telephone services (mobile or landline) and 74.4 per cent mentioned they have Internet connection.

## Dynamic of Access

Youths' access to information is influenced by their socio-economic status, availability of Internet connection and external actors, primarily the government. There has been no shutdown of Internet access, but the government occasionally asked social media platforms or technology companies to take down accounts or websites. The latest is Twitter account BermanaTV[45] which parodies Malaysia News Agency (Bernama). Information channels and mediums are vernacularised so much so that information received by one ethnicity might be packaged or consumed differently compared to others. English literacy is not universal, thus any important news delivered in English will not necessarily reach its intended audience.

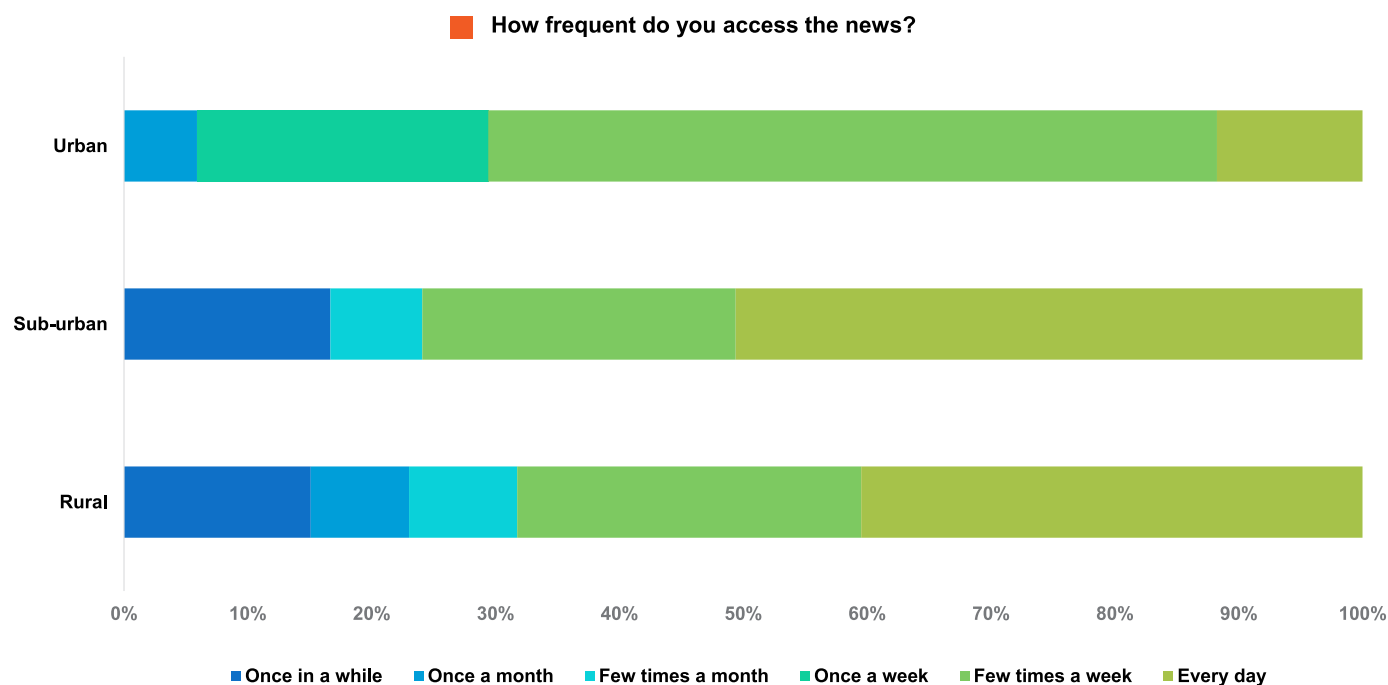Access also boils down to the lifestyle and preference of youths as millennials. Those highly connected to the Internet have developed a hypertext mind and enjoy perusing different information channels at the same time. They can be information-seekers who use multiple information sources either to make a decision or to understand a phenomenon. Community news is circulated in a community meeting, which usually have youths representatives youths (*wakil belia*) or face-to-face interactions.

**This IEA reveals that youths are more likely to use media that is deemed easily accessible**. That explains why respondents prefer TV and radio to physical newspapers. They have to go out, buy a copy of newspaper and then read it for information access. Hence, 68 per cent of the respondents do not subscribe nor have access to newspapers. **Not being concerned about politics/current issues and time constraint are also considerable factors that hinder youths from accessing information.**

■ **What are your issues in acccessing media? (by ethnicity)**
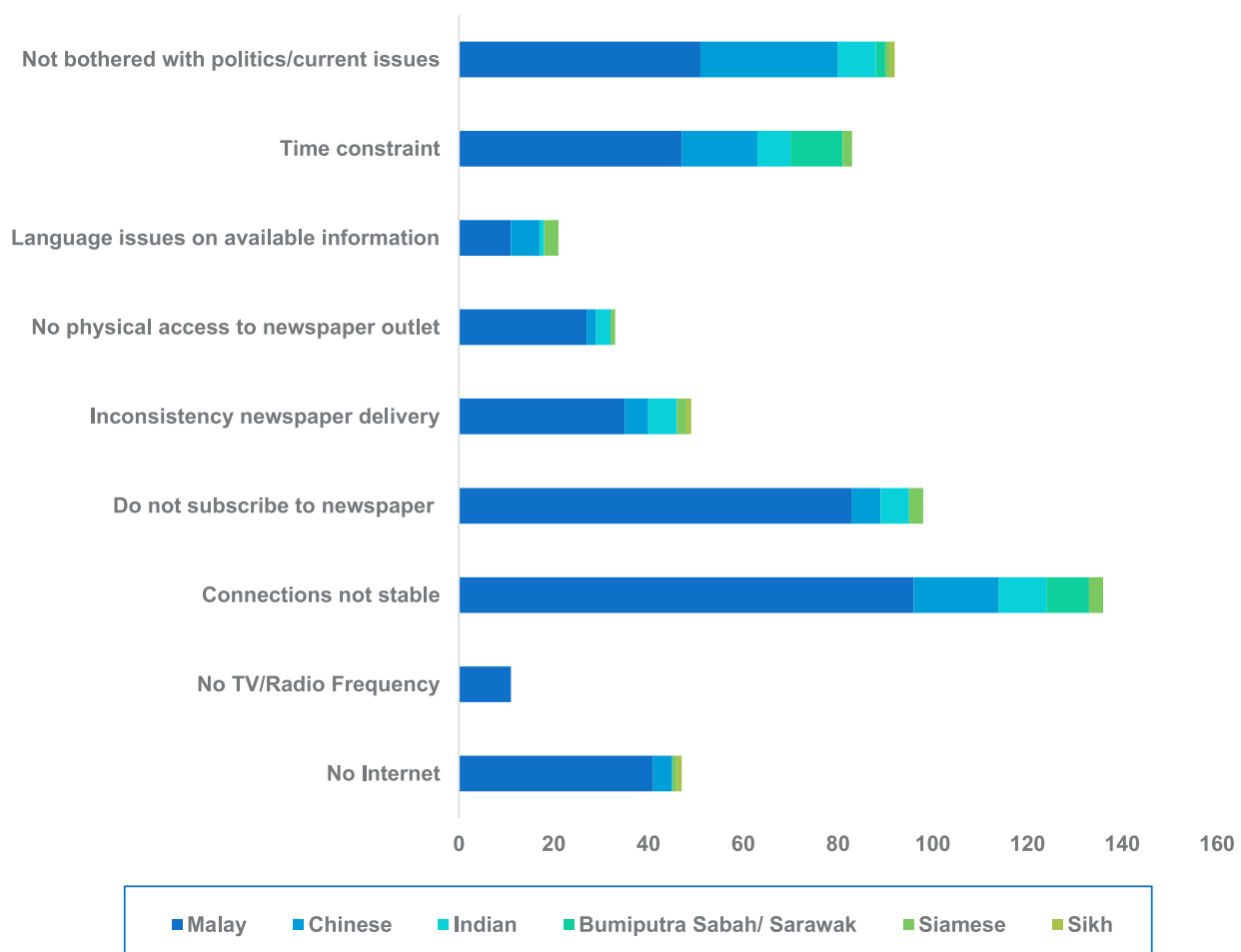
In addition, some of the youths cited that they have issues in accessing information from digital media. **Fifteen per cent, with a majority coming from rural areas, said they do not have Internet subscription or coverage. Meanwhile, another 45 per cent stated problems related to unstable Internet networks.** Malay, Indian and Bumiputra Sabah/Sarawak participants have a higher incidence of unstable network connection compared to other ethnicities. A number of respondents of Chinese and Siamese-descent think that there is a lack of information available in their mother-tongue.

**How frequent do you access the news?**



Legend: ■ Once in a while  ■ Once a month  ■ Few times a month  ■ Once a week  ■ Few times a week  ■ Every day

Forty-four per cent of 305 survey participants reported they read, listen or watch news every day. Those living in the suburbs and rural areas tend to access news every day or a few times a week, compared to their peers in the metropolitans.

# B. Content Distribution and Environment
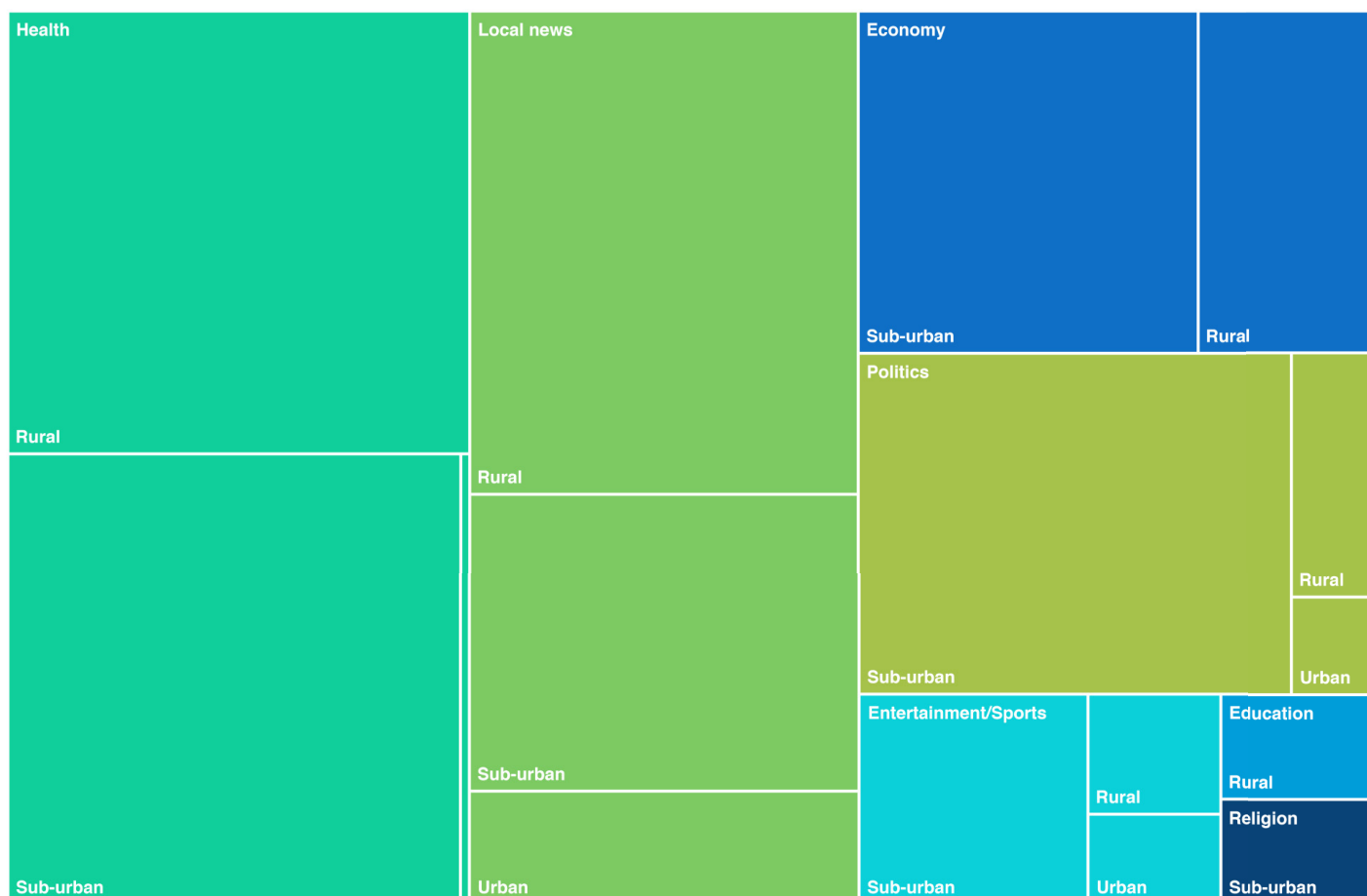
## Information Needs

There were efforts to evaluate the aspiration and needs of Malaysian youths. To name a few: Transformasi Nasional 2050 (TN50) dialogues, online surveys and academic studies. TN50 findings showed that youths envision Malaysia in the year 2050 as having progressive values such as sustainable development, governance without corruption and inclusivity.

 youths are in the phase of learning and forming their world views. They need to cope with expectations of a work-life balance while being financially savvy and politically mature. Some Malaysian youths report that although they can engage more freely

online, their knowledge of politics is confined to their social media groups, which lacks diversity and aligns with their own values, ethics and interests[46]. Nonetheless, a study found that greater interest in politics and more media diversity can reduce the likelihood of being in an echo chamber[47].

During the Covid-19 pandemic, youths also bear the brunt of economic and public health crisis: they are at risk of unemployment. They also get frustrated by online classes with unstable Internet, plus having to face restrictions on travels and social gatherings.

## Information Needs



| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Health | Local news | Economy | |
| | | Sub-urban | Rural |
| Rural | Rural | Politics | |
| | | | Rural |
| | Sub-urban | Sub-urban | Urban |
| | | Entertainment/Sports | Education |
| | | | Rural |
| | | Rural | Religion |
| Sub-urban | Urban | Sub-urban | Urban | Sub-urban |

**Thirty-four per cent of the survey participants think health is the most needed information for this assessment period**. Even the survey that was carried out between the first and second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic showed that health, local news and politics are considered more pressing compared to economy or employment news. Respondents in the suburbs and rural areas prioritise health-related information, while respondents in urban areas indicated that their information priority as is local news.

### What is the most important issue to you? (by gender)



■ Health  ■ Local news  ■ Politics  ■ Economy  ■ Entertainment/Sports  ■ Religion  ■ Education
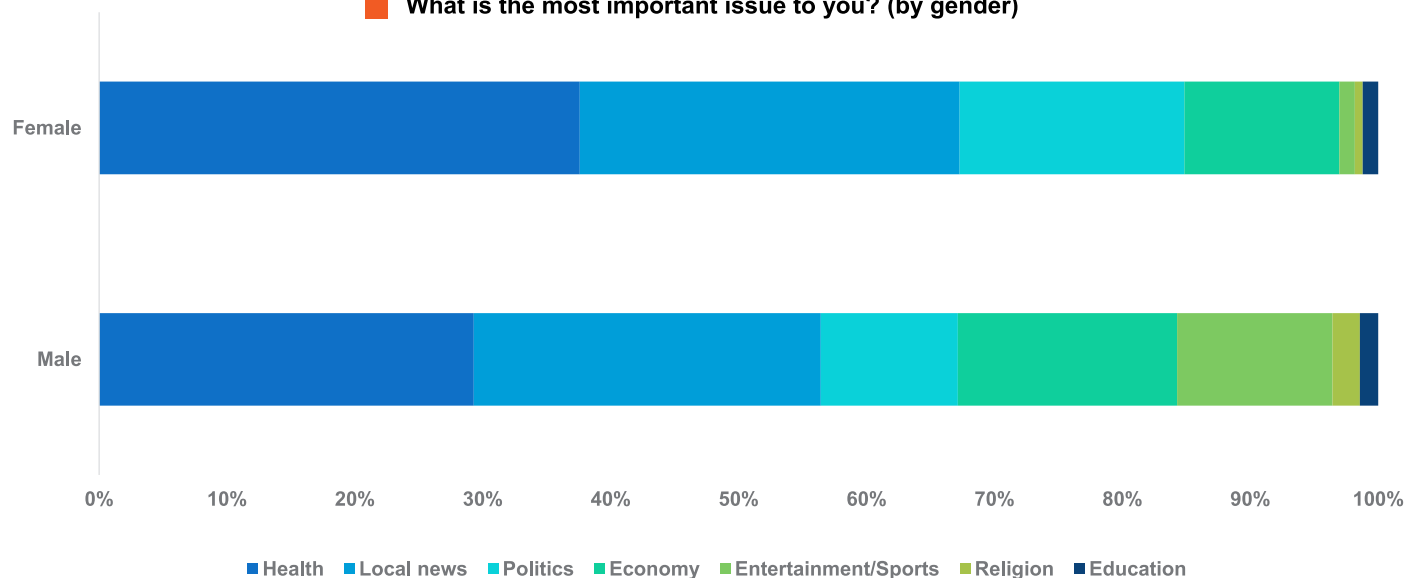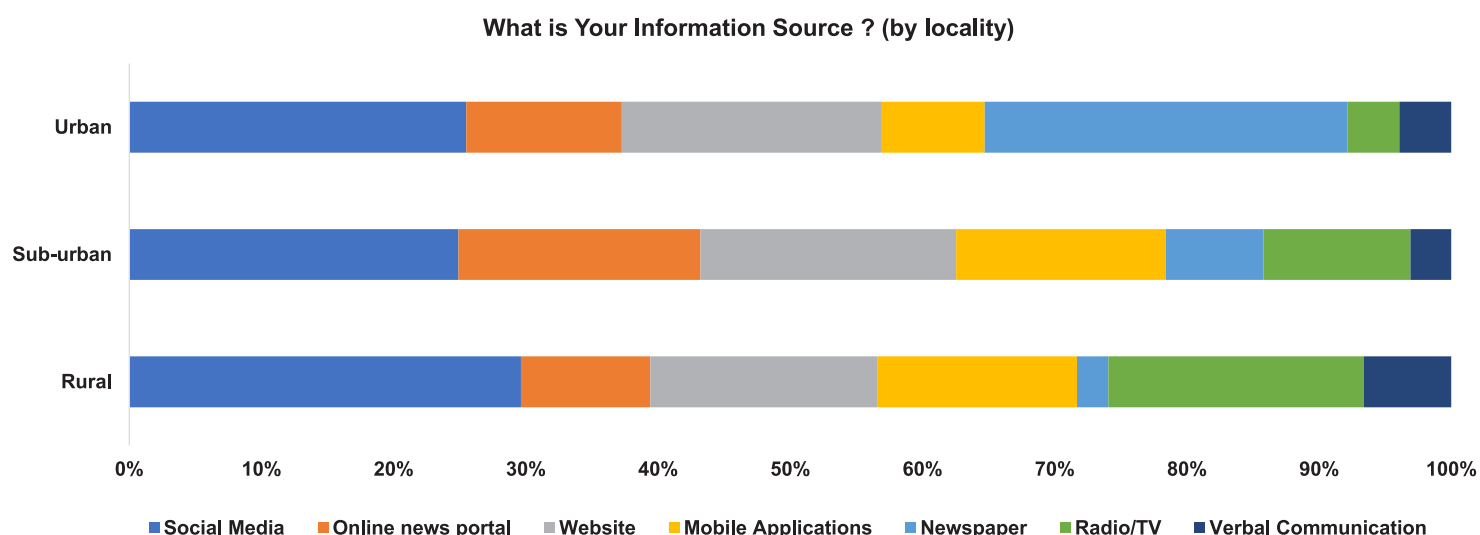
Employing gender lens in the information need assessment. It was observed that **a higher proportion of female respondents demand for health and political information. Male respondents' need of economic, entertainment and sports information are greater than that of female respondents**.

## Production and Movement

In a society that is dominated by traditional media and interpersonal interaction, information moves through hierarchical and formalised channels, with community members sharing information among each other. In contrast, the digitalised society, social media and web portal flatten that hierarchy. For instance, a teenager can report an incident to her community's WhatsApp group, after which her report is picked up by a local journalist or goes viral.

**Our finding mirrors this hypothesis that information production and movement vary among localities. Urban youths have better access to printed newspapers, while some rural youths depend on radio/TV broadcast as sources of information.** Rural respondents also reported a higher percentage of having mouth-to-mouth (verbal communication) as an information source compared to their counterparts in sub-urban and urban.

**What is Your Information Source ? (by locality)**



Legend: ■ Social Media  ■ Online news portal  ■ Website  ■ Mobile Applications  ■ Newspaper  ■ Radio/TV  ■ Verbal Communication

Recent studies in the communication field offer interesting perspective of how digital media is used by young adults to develop their self-presentation (through social media, mobile application or Internet forum account) as well as self-disclosure[48]. Self-disclosure is about expressing thoughts, needs, preferences and lifestyle, forming connection with friends or other Internet users. This is manifested by the rise of user-generated content by young Malaysians on platforms such as YouTube and Facebook. In a Crowdriff 2019 survey, 84 per cent of youths stated that their purchase was driven by customer reviews or content from the Internet[49.]

Today's youths process information quite differently from other generations. They are comfortable getting information from one format, repackage it and then disseminate the repurposed information through another medium. For example, a latest happening from newspapers can be converted into a meme used as social commentary in their Twitter account. Nonetheless, self-censorship is common in both online and traditional media with regards to sensitive issues in the society. Consequentially, the movement of information and creative expression can be restricted if they are done in an 'unsafe' manner.

**What does our IEA finding says about censorship? Sixty-eight per cent of respondents believe that the content in the media go through a censorship process. Meanwhile, 32 per cent of respondents believe otherwise**.



Do you practise self-censorship?

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Yes | Male | Female |
| No | Male | Female |
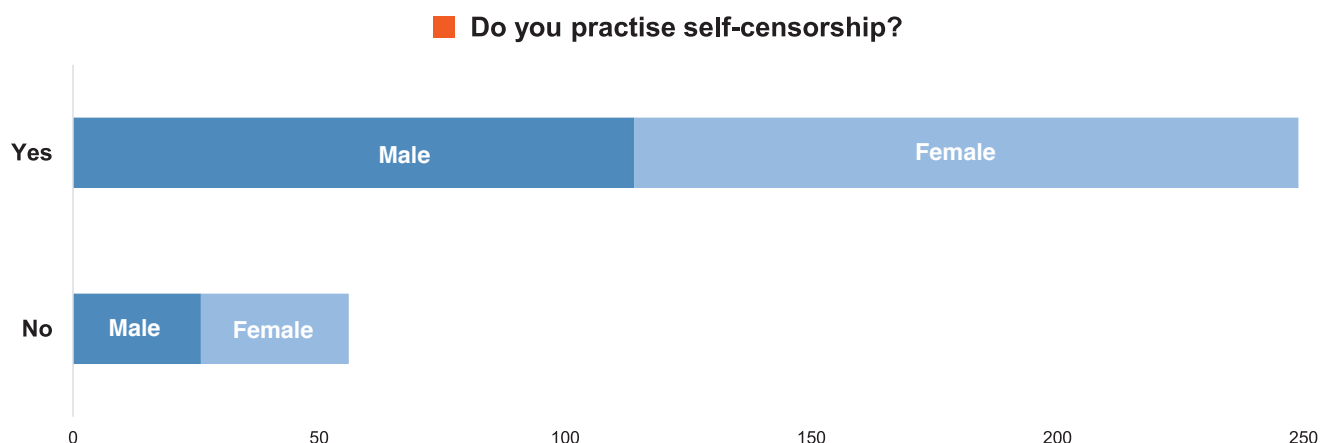
Comparing the perception of censorship into their behaviours, 82 per cent reported that they practice self-censorship in producing or reproducing content. FGD participants cited they assume the media, conventional or new, is controlled by stakeholders such as political parties and their proxies. Therefore, self-censorship is normal because it is deemed as a personal effort to counter distrust in content by the media. **Respondents' perception that media practices censorship to serve political or business interest has led to them to practice self-censorship.**
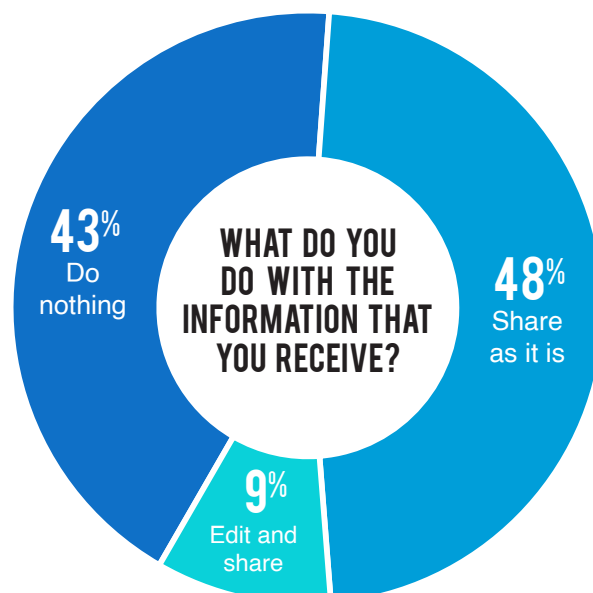
## Information Use

Sifting through information overload from consuming both traditional and digital media,the youths must be selective in choosing which information is useful for them. Dispositional factors determine the usefulness of information and whether it should be shared with their peers. Millennials are learning to be their own information gatekeepers, compared to older generations who are more used to receiving news that have been fact-checked by trained journalists and editor.

Media literacy is not taught in school. Experts have been calling for a media literacy module to be embedded in the national education curriculum. This module can be added to existing information literacy programmes carried out by the Ministry of Education and National Library which are more on techniques of acquiring data from library and official
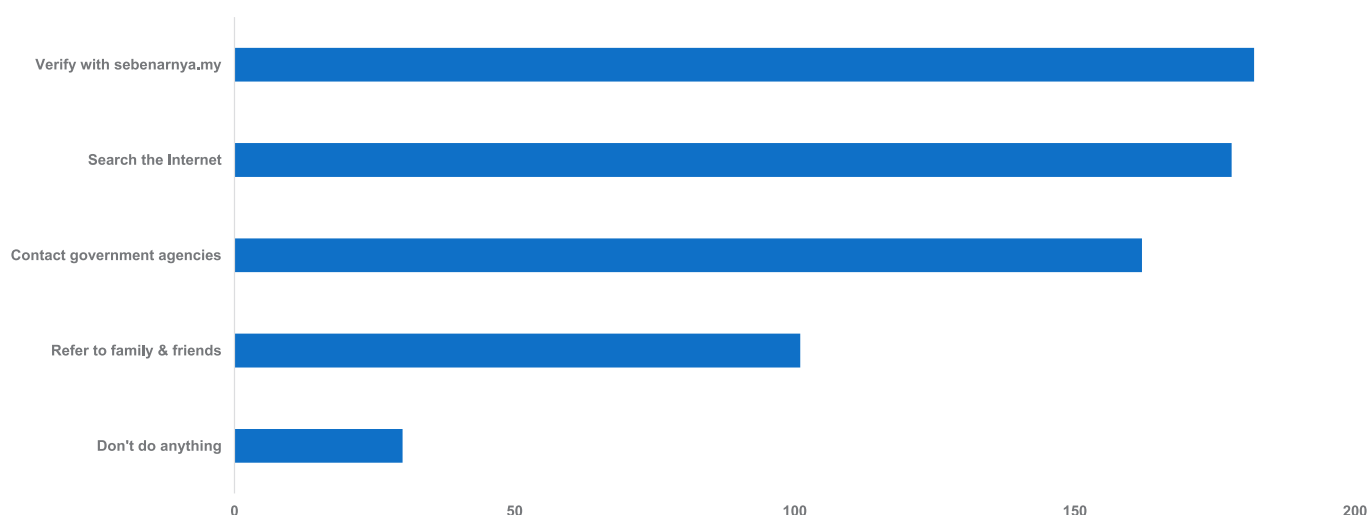
sources, learning methodologies, and developing critical thinking. MCMC launched sebenarnya.my portal in 2017 to help the public to check authenticity of information as well as to reduce proliferation of fake news. On average, this portal receives 240 public tip-offs of unverified information per month. According to the latest investigation, misinformation on Covid-19 was spread mostly by the 19 to 39 age group[50].



*Advocacy campaign by MCMC*

Forty-eight per cent of survey respondents reported that they share the information with other individuals without editing it while nine per cent share with editing. Further analysis shows that there is no gender difference in the practice of sharing information. However ethnic-based data show differences in sharing patterns. Malays and Indians are more inclined to share information while Chinese and Bumiputras of Sabah/Sarawak tend not to take any action.

**WHAT DO YOU DO WITH THE INFORMATION THAT YOU RECEIVE?**

43% Do nothing

48% Share as it is

9% Edit and share

**How do you verify information that you receive?**



| | |
|---|---|
| Verify with sebenarnya.my | |
| Search the Internet | |
| Contact government agencies | |
| Refer to family & friends | |
| Don't do anything | |

0    50    100    150    200

**The majority of respondents search or validate news using the online medium.** A hundred and eighty-two respondents verify information using the sebenarnya.my portal. In addition, a total of 178 respondents search the Internet to check the truth of the information they receive.

# C. Human and Social Insights

## Influencers

In the context of information ecosystem, influencers act more than just conveyers of news. Their words, behaviours, actions and lifestyle can persuade their followers to internalise and act upon information. In the early years of this nation, youths looked up to elected leaders of their communities. The Malaya independence movement in 1950s was fuelled by young, firebrand leaders such as Dr Burhanuddin al-Helmy and Tun VT Sambanthan who were in their early thirties. Compare that era to the 21st century, when narratives and stories about local or national heroes were shared globally in a more comprehensive manner. Distance is not an issue as youths can access information about influencers, or closely follow influencers' daily lives through digital media.

| Facebook | Twitter | Instagram | TikTok |
|----------|---------|-----------|--------|
| Tan Sri Clement Hii – businessman | Dato' Seri Najib Tun Razak – politician | Neelofa - actress | Dato' Calvin Khiu - businessman |
| 6.5 Million followers | 4.2 Million followers | 8.0 Million followers | 1.7 Million followers |

*Malaysian with the highest follower count (as of Dec 2020)*

It is challenging to pinpoint who are the most influential figures in Malaysia. Athletes, entrepreneurs, artistes, politicians, and social media influencers are vying for spheres of influence and attention. The number of social media followers doesn't actually correlate to information influence, as many 'InstaFamous' personalities use their popularity to do paid reviews or to sell their products.

**■ Who are your main influencers?**



Legend:
■ Malay
■ Chinese
■ Indian
■ Bumiputra Sabah/ Sarawak
■ Others
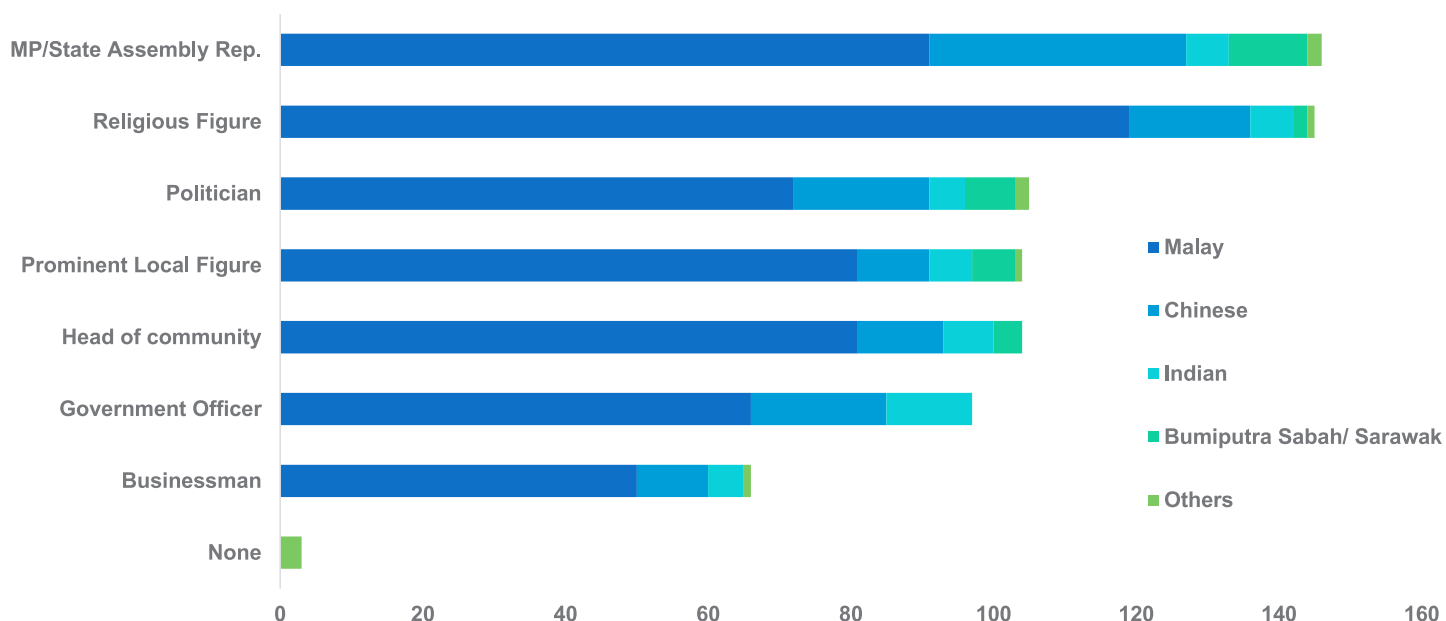
**Preferences to religious figures as influencers is very clear among Malay respondents**. One of the examples given is the famous Muslim preacher, businessman and social advocate Ebit Liew. The Chinese, Bumiputra Sabah/Sarawak and other races chose elected representatives as their main influencers. Meanwhile, Indian respondents made government officials their main influencers. A gender analysis of the survey data found that male respondents were more likely to choose religious figure as their influencer.
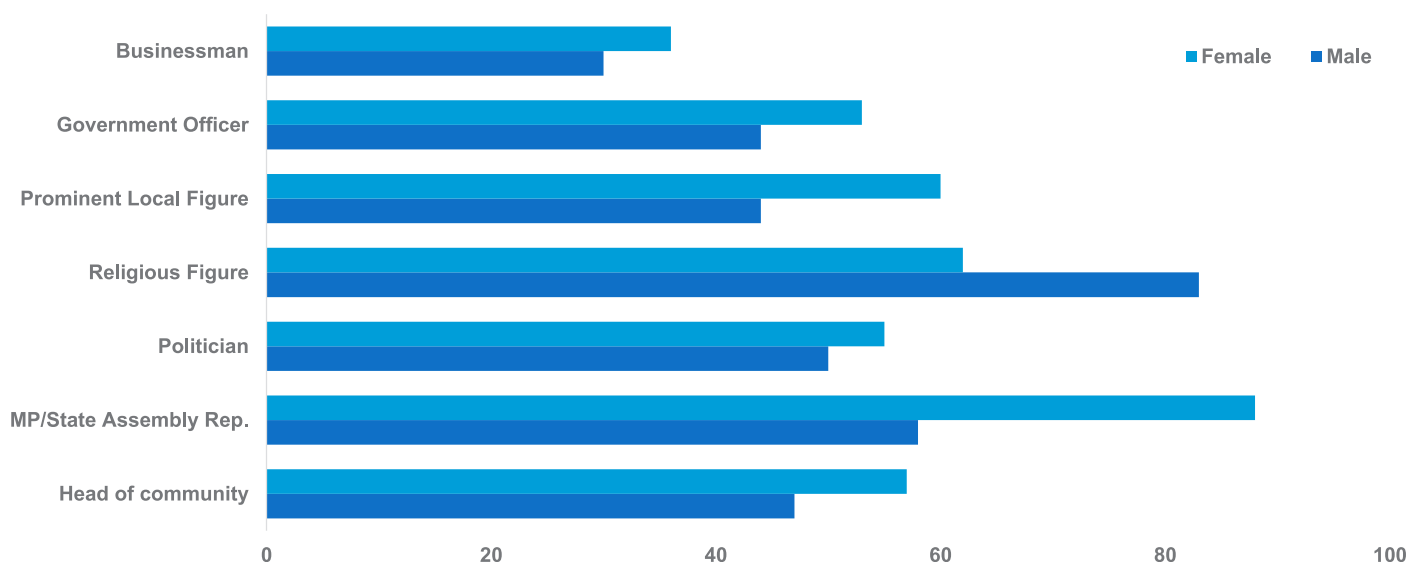


Female respondents are more likely to choose a member of parliament or state assembly man as their influencer.
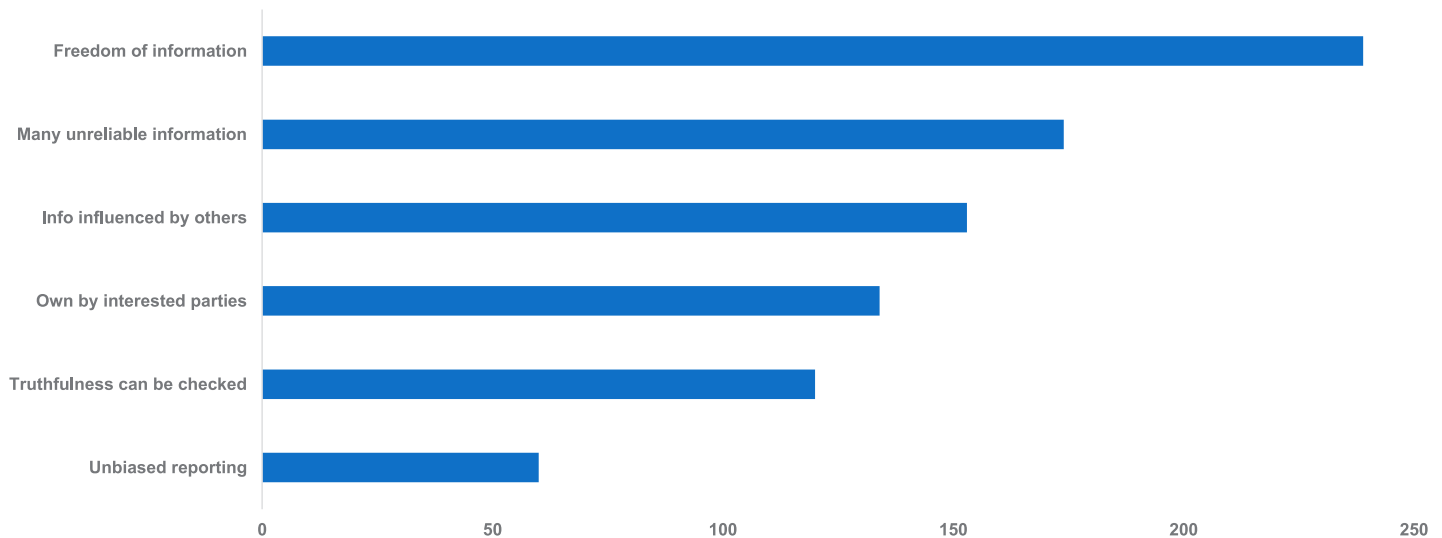
## Social Trust

In the era of information overload, credibility and trustworthiness are precarious. For newspapers, readers can distinguish the level of content reliability between mainstream newspapers such as Berita Harian and tabloid paper Harian Metro, which are known to have many sensational news. But for digital media, some may not be aware of political parties paying cybertroopers to manipulate information to suit their agenda, as well as the existence of content farm manned by Malaysians to spread disinformation51. Cult of personalities and extreme partisanships also influence efforts to find trusted information sources.

As reported by several surveys, traditional media commands more trust compared to other sources of information. Another research put forth that armed forces ranked first as the most trustworthy institutions, while politicians ranked last52.

Whether the findings of these public surveys are an accurate representation of youths' trust in information sources, that is up for debate. Therefore, the IEA youths attempted to explore youths' perception on digital media as most of them can be considered digital natives. Their views on interpersonal information exchange was also probed, as mouth-to-mouth was cited as the least trusted information source in the survey.
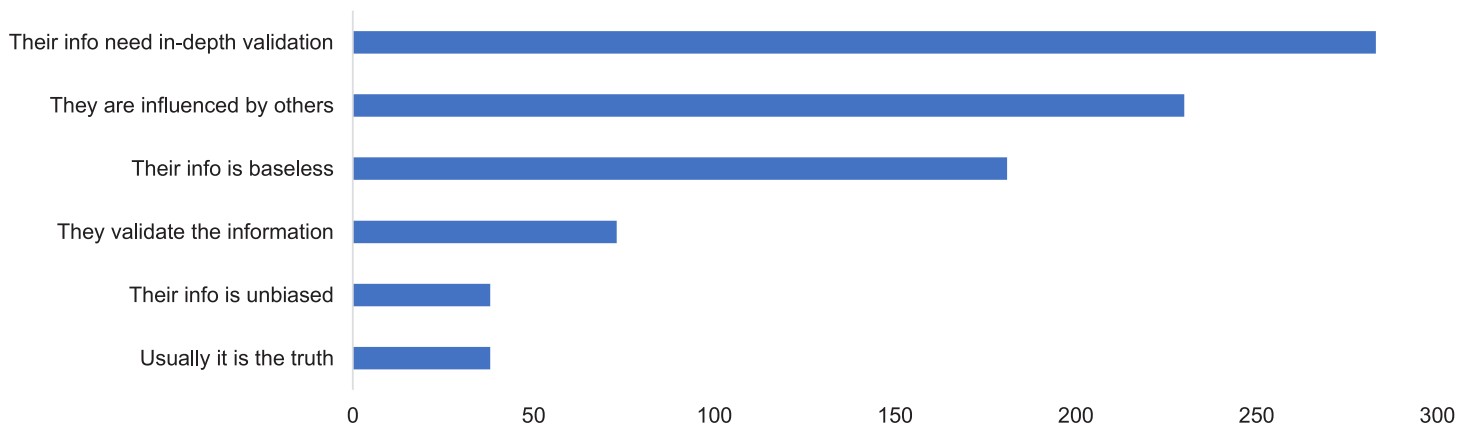
## What are your views on digital media as an information source?

| Category | Value |
|---|---|
| Freedom of information | ~240 |
| Many unreliable information | ~175 |
| Info influenced by others | ~152 |
| Own by interested parties | ~135 |
| Truthfulness can be checked | ~123 |
| Unbiased reporting | ~58 |

**Respondents noted the strongest point about digital media is the freedom of information they can enjoy. However, more than half of respondents were also concerned about the proliferation of unreliable information and how information in digital media was influenced by many stakeholders.** Nevertheless, 120 respondents indicated that the truth of the news from these media is easier to verify. Discussion within focus groups revealed that youths use the Internet to check the authenticity of information. The result of the discussion also explained the impression that there is unbiased reporting in digital media; youths consider the freedom of information as enabling the dissemination of differing views, so much so that available information is not one-sided.

## What are your views on 'word-of-mouth' as information source?

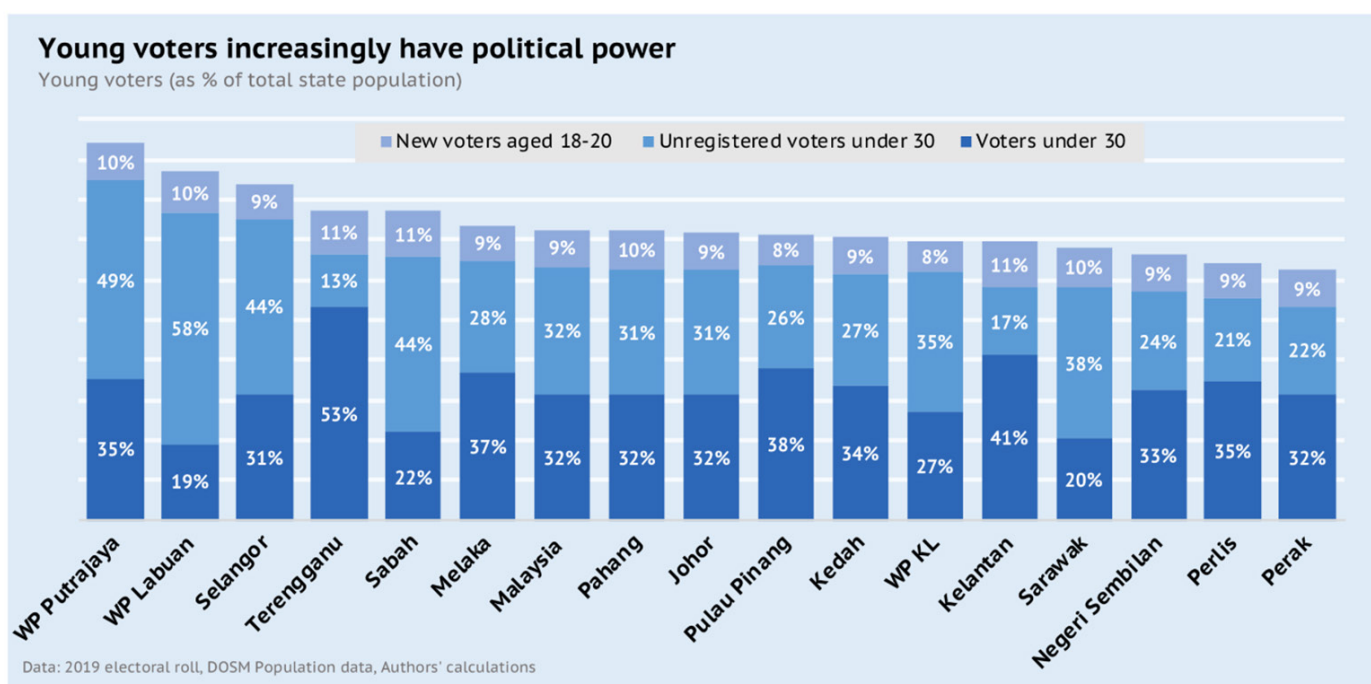| Category | Value |
|---|---|
| Their info need in-depth validation | ~283 |
| They are influenced by others | ~230 |
| Their info is baseless | ~180 |
| They validate the information | ~73 |
| Their info is unbiased | ~40 |
| Usually it is the truth | ~40 |

**Youths expressed more negative sentiments towards word-of-mouth, and it is uniformed across gender, ethnicity, and locality. In general, our findings point towards youths expressing their lack of trust on the information source.** The majority of respondents (93 per cent) stated that the information presented through face-to-face communication requires further validation. Two-third of respondents think that the information presented via face-to-face is influenced by a third party, while 59 per cent think it is unfounded.
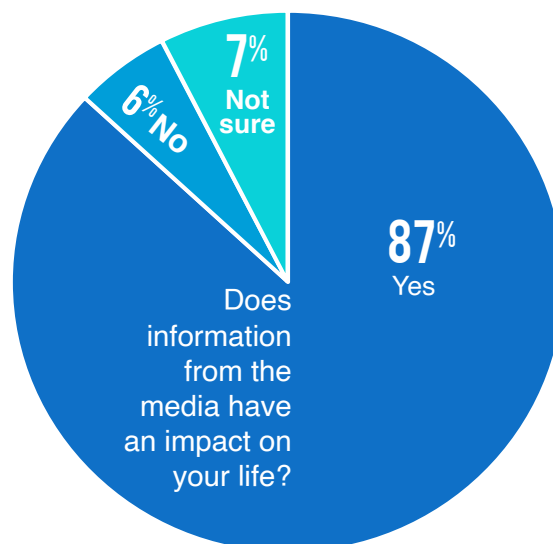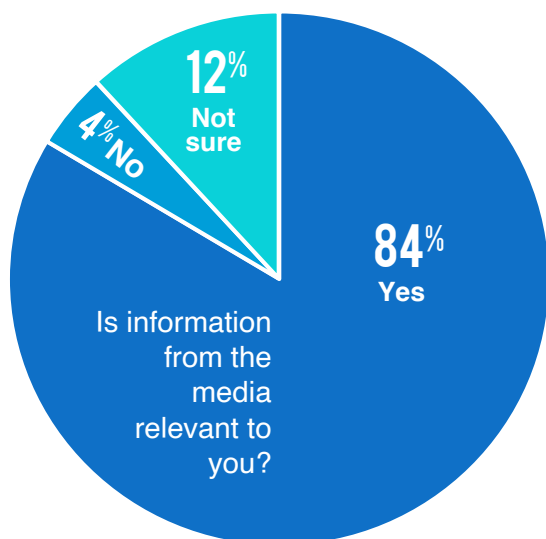
## Information Impact

Credible and evidence-based information can help the society to make better decisions. As for youths, it helps them make informed-decisions about their well-being, religion and spirituality, health, purchases and social relationships. At the community level, exposure to news of people in need of medical funds, as well as river pollution, upskilling workshops does provide opportunities for youths to be the agents of positive change. More youths-driven non-profits, social enterprises and civil societies have been formed in Malaysia in recent years to address thematic issues, particularly climate change, Internet governance, refugee rights and gender equality.
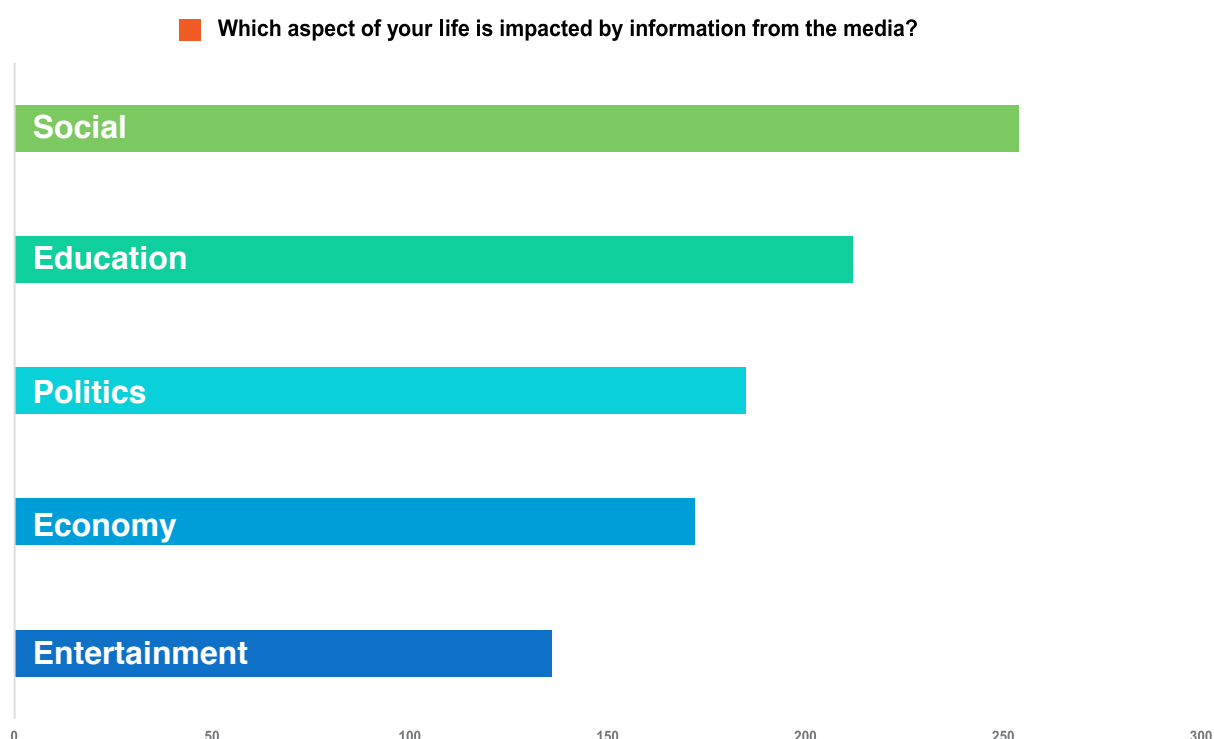
Institute of Youths Research (IYRES) through its National Youths Index[53] found that youths are increasingly addicted to screen time with six to seven hours spent per day looking at digital devices. However, the same survey indicated the socialisation of politics among youths had decreased from 2015 to 2019 from three aspects: involvement in political activities, following the local political scene and having regular discussions on politics. Reflecting on this dilemma, propelled by low trust in politicians, the impact is prevalent youths apathy[54] towards exercising their rights as voters, despite their untapped political powr.



**Young voters increasingly have political power**
Young voters (as % of total state population)

Legend: New voters aged 18-20 ■ Unregistered voters under 30 ■ Voters under 30

| State | New voters aged 18-20 | Unregistered voters under 30 | Voters under 30 |
|---|---|---|---|
| WP Putrajaya | 10% | 49% | 35% |
| WP Labuan | 10% | 58% | 19% |
| Selangor | 9% | 44% | 31% |
| Terengganu | 11% | 13% | 53% |
| Sabah | 11% | 44% | 22% |
| Melaka | 9% | 28% | 37% |
| Malaysia | 9% | 32% | 32% |
| Pahang | 10% | 31% | 32% |
| Johor | 9% | 31% | 32% |
| Pulau Pinang | 8% | 26% | 38% |
| Kedah | 9% | 27% | 34% |
| WP KL | 8% | 35% | 27% |
| Kelantan | 11% | 17% | 41% |
| Sarawak | 10% | 38% | 20% |
| Negeri Sembilan | 9% | 24% | 33% |
| Perlis | 9% | 21% | 35% |
| Perak | 9% | 22% | 32% |

Data: 2019 electoral roll, DOSM Population data, Authors' calculations

*Unregistered and new voters by state. Credit to Calvin Cheng & Bridget Welsh*

**12%** Not sure
**4% No**
**84% Yes**
Is information from the media relevant to you?

**7%** Not sure
**6% No**
**87% Yes**
Does information from the media have an impact on your life?

**IEA findings demonstrated that 84 per cent of respondents admitted that the information received is relevant to them. Meanwhile, a total of 265 respondents (87 per cent) stated that the use of the media has an impact on their lives**. Further analysis revealed there is no difference in the respondents' views across gender, ethnicity and locality.

■ **Which aspect of your life is impacted by information from the media?**



| | |
|---|---|
| Social | |
| Education | |
| Politics | |
| Economy | |
| Entertainment | |

0   50   100   150   200   250   300

To understand further the information impact on youths, respondents were asked about the effects of information on some facets of their lives. **Eighty per cent stated that their social life is affected. Aspects of social life include social relations, social problems in the society, quality of life and community development.** Focus group discussants further explained that the information received affects their perceptions and relationships with community members. The second most impacted life aspect is education with 70 per

cent respondents choosing this answer. Given they are in university or fresh graduates, they appreciate knowledge which is beneficial for their learning process also any information that are useful for planning future education.

Sixty point seven per cent of respondents acknowledged that the media offers understanding and influences their attitude towards politics. A significant number of participants in FGDs stated that through media, they know politicians and politics.
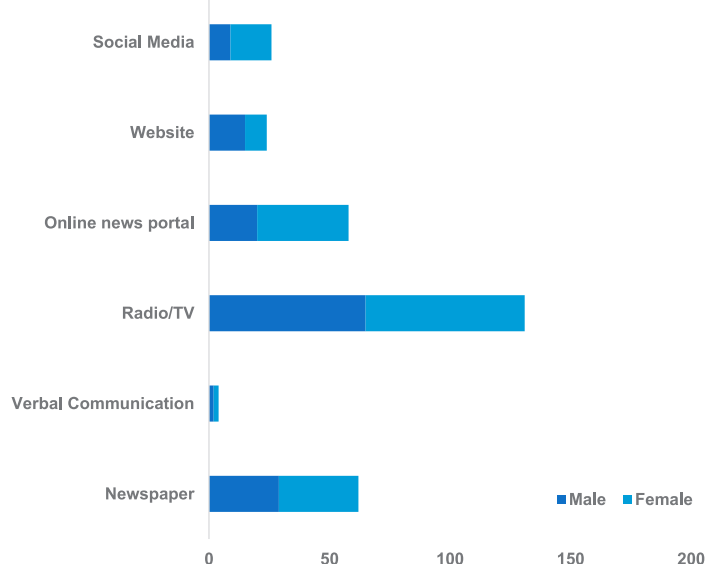
# Findings

## A. Media Consumption

### ■ What are your source(s) of information?
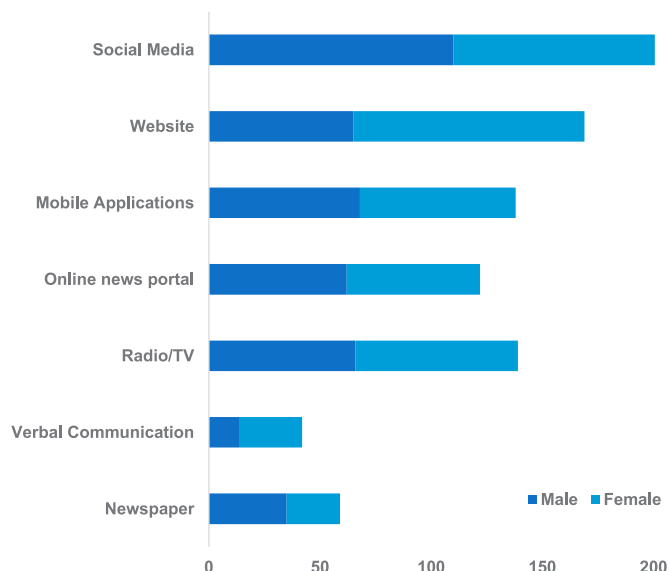


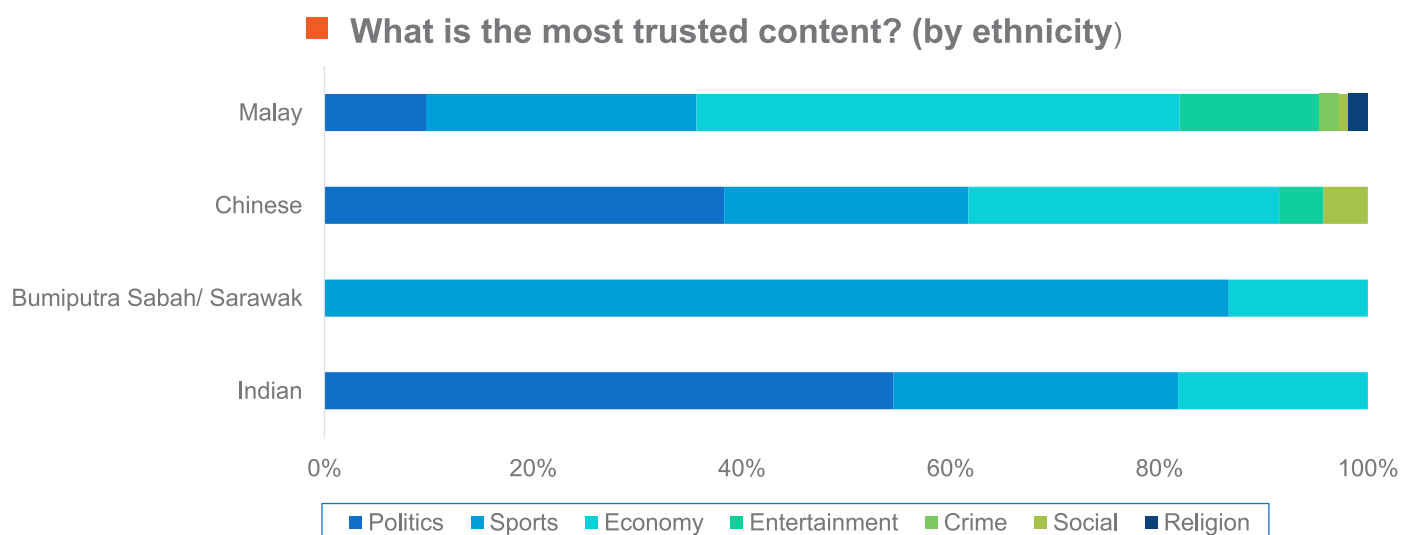### ■ What is your most trusted source of information?



**Popularity and accessibility do not translate to trust. IEA Youths found that 74 per cent identify new media as mediums to obtain information but only 35 per cent deem new media as trustworthy. Radio and TV were selected by 43 per cent of respondents as the most trusted sources of information, followed by newspapers (20 per cent).** There is no difference between genders. This aligns with conclusions of the study by Reuters Institute of Journalism that traditional media still command trust amongst general population. We observe the same pattern across all IEA locations, which shows mouth-to-mouth (verbal communication) is the least trusted information source.

### ■ Which content is the most trusted?



40% Economy
29% Sports
17% Politics
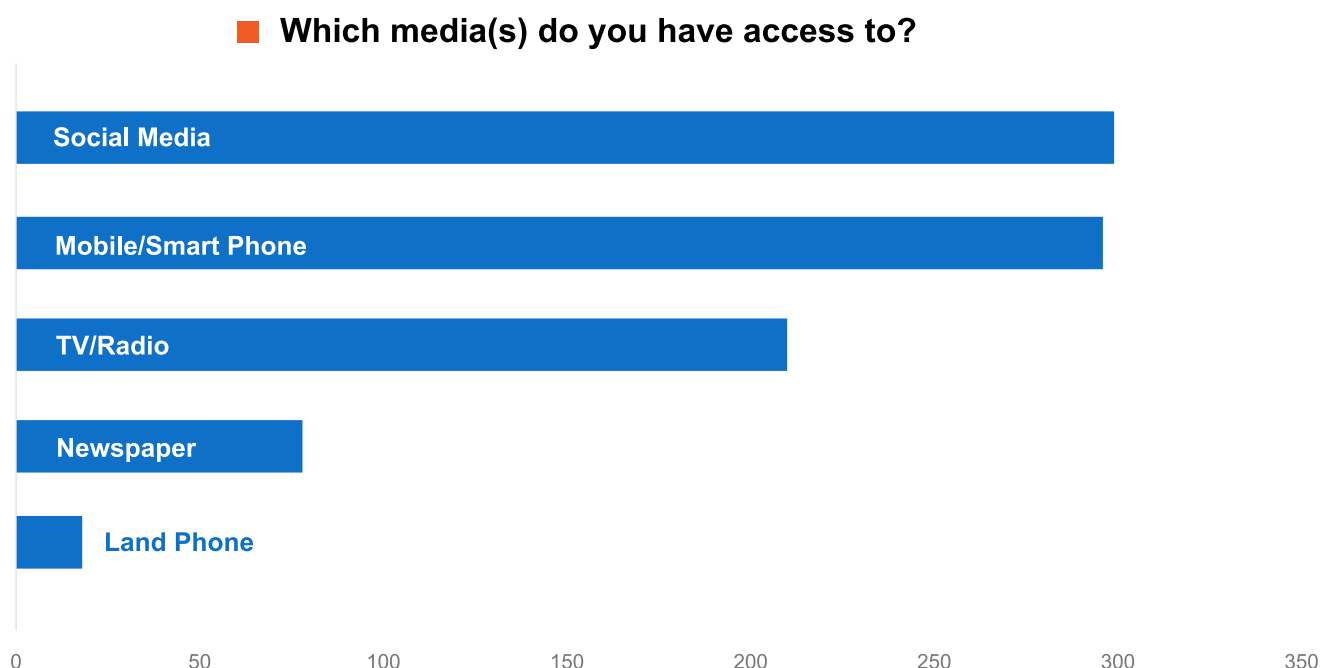10% Entertainment
2% Crime
1% Social
1% Religion
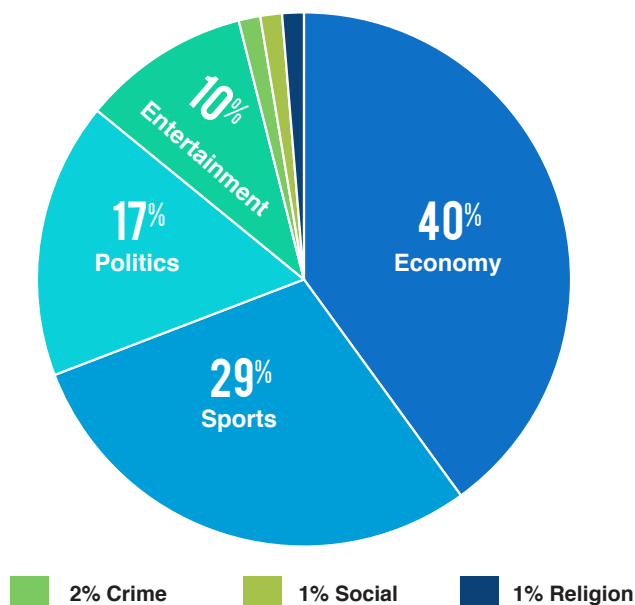
**When asked about trusted content, 40 per cent of respondents chose economy as their most trusted information. This was followed by sports-related content and then political information.** From FGDs, we learned that youths desperately need information that can improve their lives financially. Accurate information can assist them in seeking job opportunities, generating ideas for starting a business as well as getting funding.

## What is the most trusted content? (by ethnicity)



Horizontal stacked bar chart showing most trusted content by ethnicity (Malay, Chinese, Bumiputra Sabah/Sarawak, Indian) across categories: Politics, Sports, Economy, Entertainment, Crime, Social, Religion.
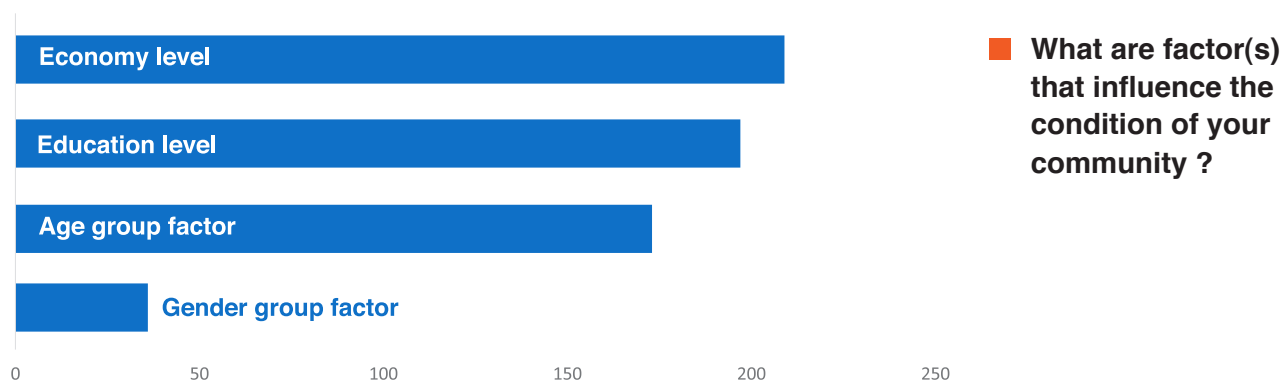
Malay respondents cited economy as the most reliable content, further analysis showed. In comparison, Chinese and Indian youths have the highest trust in political content compared to other groups. **The IEA survey also revealed that given options among economy, politics and entertainment content, 71 per cent of respondents voted that political content on media is the most distrusted.** Most considered this type of information, whether published in new or traditional media, as biased. They view the existence of cybertroopers in social media as a sign that political information is usually propaganda by political parties.

# B. Media Ownership

**Majority of IEA youths respondents have access to digital media as well as traditional media. Ninety-eight per cent own social media, while 97 per cent use mobile or smart phones.** About 69 per cent of respondents watch television or listen to the radio while 26 per cent read printed newspapers. Six per cent of respondents use landline phones as their medium of communication.

## Which media(s) do you have access to?



Horizontal bar chart showing media access: Social Media, Mobile/Smart Phone, TV/Radio, Newspaper, Land Phone.

# C. Community Access and Ownership



**What are factor(s) that influence the condition of your community ?**

IEA considers socio-political, historical, economic and cultural factors are the factors that shape the information ecosystem of a society. **The results of the survey indicated that sixty nine per cent decided that the economic factor, followed by education level as having a major effect on the condition of the information ecosystem in their respective community.** According to the youths whom we interviewed in FGDs, education level is associated with higher awareness of human rights such as freedom of information, and opportunities to improve their own socio-economic level. Age and gender factors were considered less significant.

Delving deeper, we found that Malays and Bumiputras Sabah/Sarawak respondents gave higher weightage to economic factors, while their Chinese peers on education level and Indian peers emphasised on the age factor. Majority of rural respondents regard the economic factor as being the most significant to their communities.



**What is the most effective source(s) of information?**
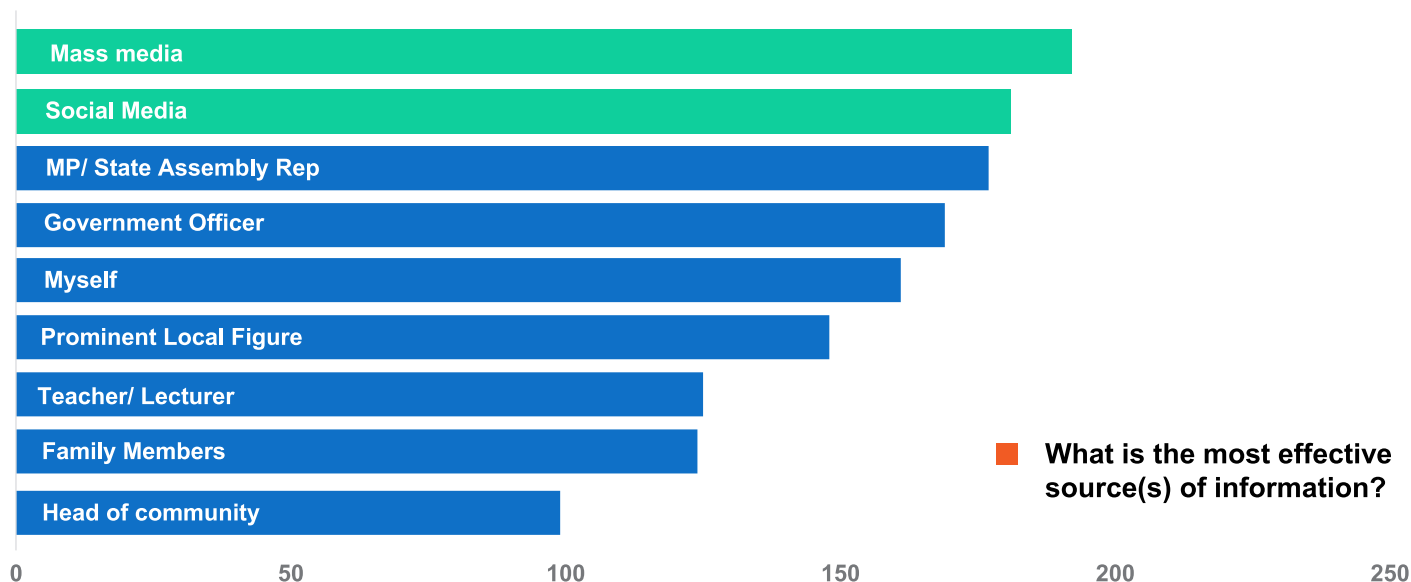
**Youths consider the most effective sources of information come from mass media and social media. Even though they are digital natives, 63 per cent of respondents stated that television, radio and newspapers are the most effective mediums in disseminating information.** This correlate with the FGD outcomes that traditional media commands higher trust compared to new media. Social media was cited by 59 per cent as the second most effective source. Community leaders rank the lowest in the list, compared to prominent local leaders, Members of Parliament, teachers and family members.

**◼ How we can ensure the information source is effective?**
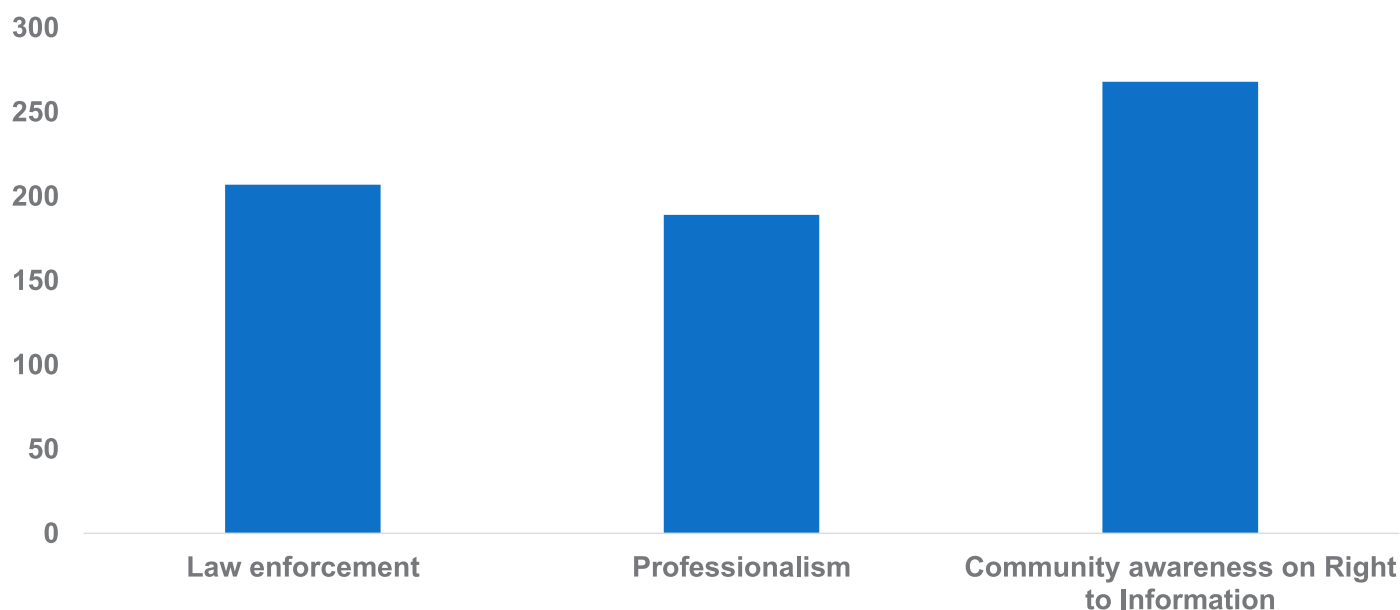


 IEA Youths took it a step further to understand how the effectiveness in information dissemination can be improved. The response showed 88 per cent of respondents believe that we need to increase awareness of the right to information. Sixty-eight per cent opined that the legal provision is one of the best approaches and 62 per cent proposed that institutions that manage information of public-interest must exercise a high level of professionalism. **Some FGD participants proposed that certain laws need to be introduced to hold accountability from institutions or those responsible for public information. Another suggestion is these institutions should have a clear policy on public information rights. Several participants want regulations that ensure any information needed by the community can be provided upon request.**
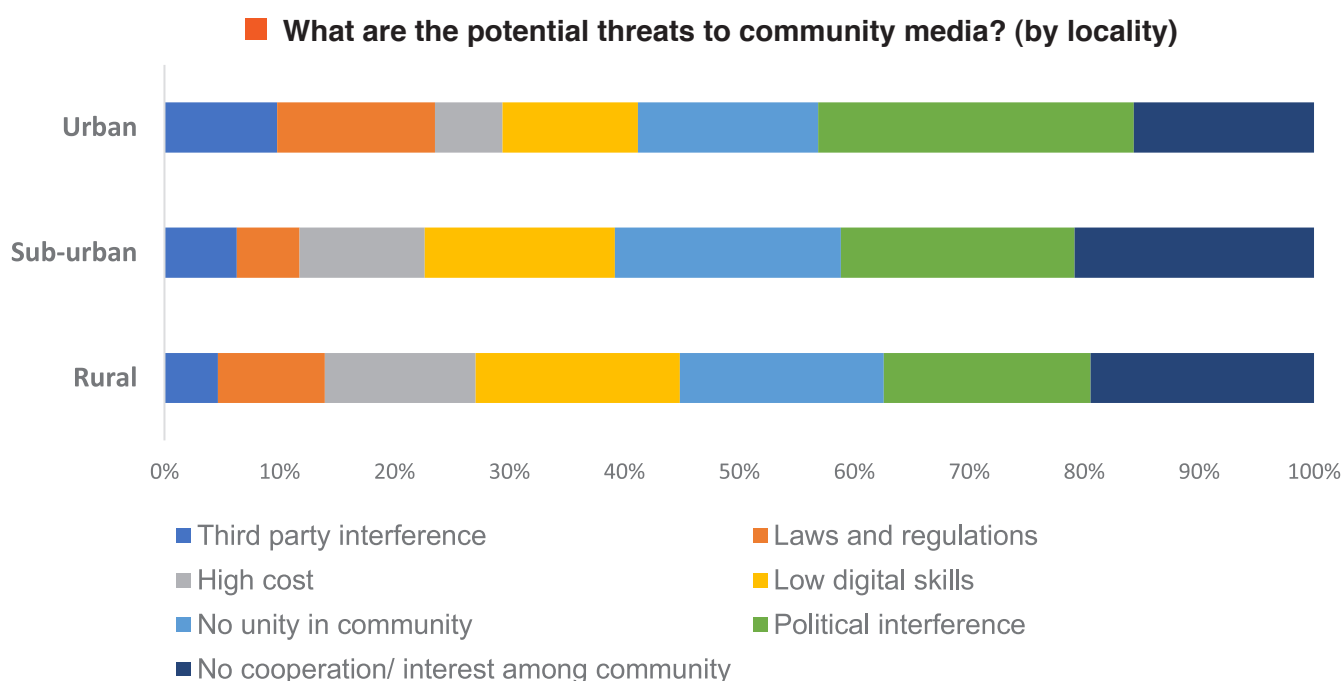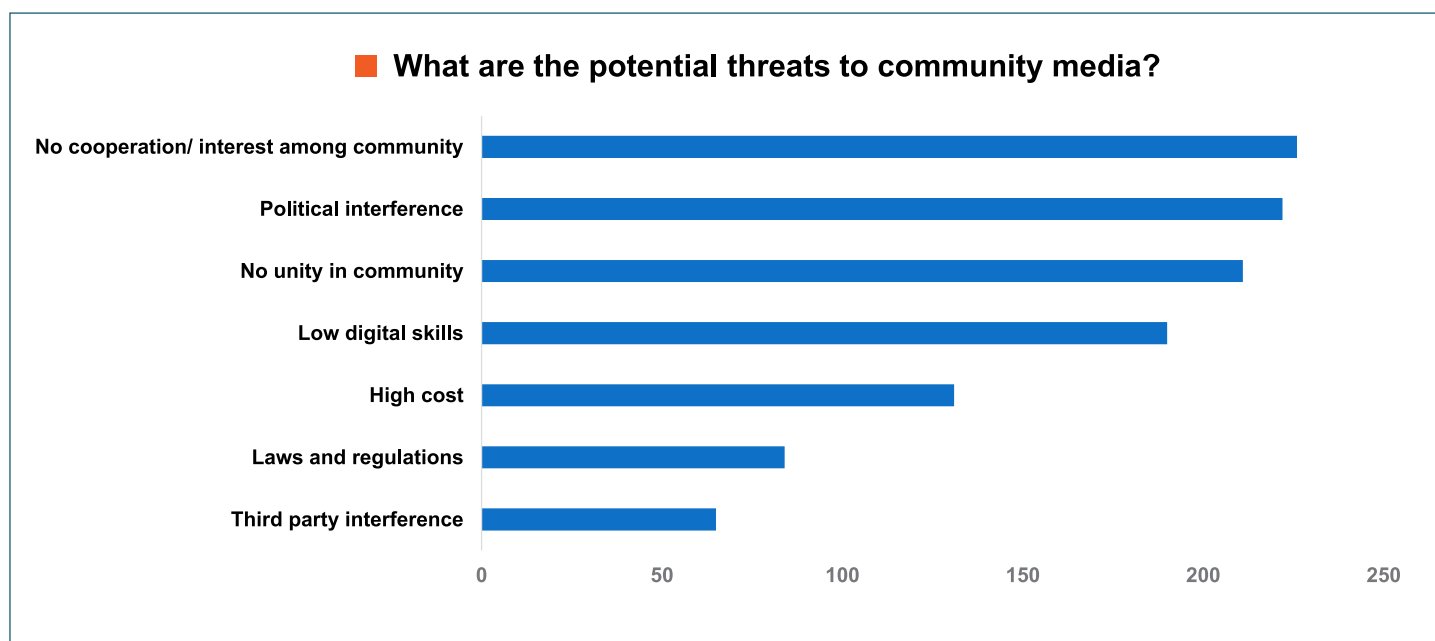
# D.   Sustainability

Internews believe that local information and the community-driven media can contribute to a healthier information ecosystem.  One of the objectives of conducting IEA in Malaysia is to understand if there is space for community media and the factors that can ensure its sustainability.
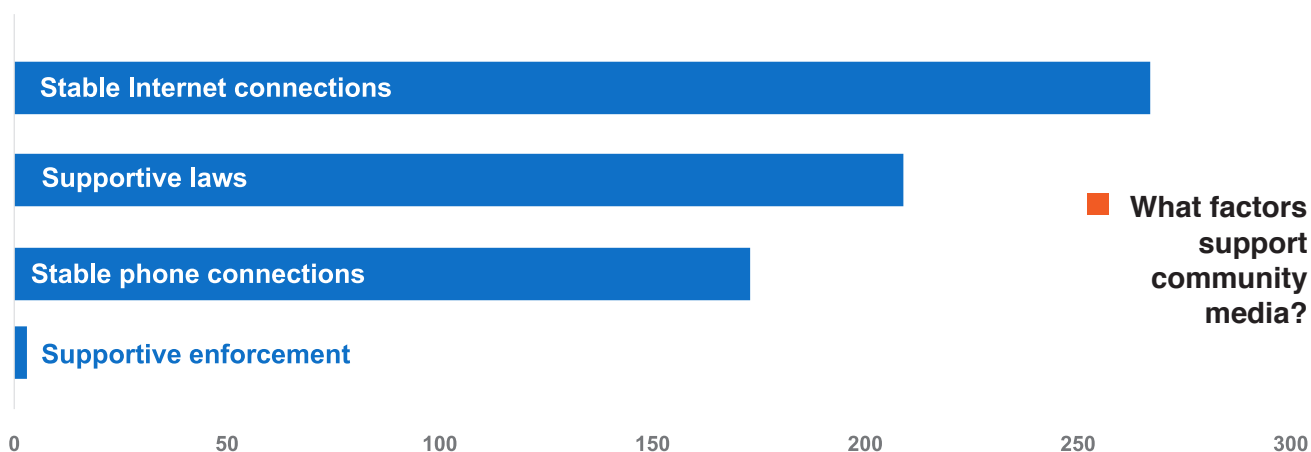


Our assessment on the potential of community media received positive response among respondents. **They view political will and commitment by the government as important factors for community media to succeed. This includes quality of Internet connection and supportive laws on the right to information**

**and freedom of information**. Currently, Selangor and Penang are the only states that have enactments related to freedom of information[55].

## What are the potential threats to community media?



## What are the potential threats to community media? (by locality)



Legend:
- Third party interference
- Laws and regulations
- High cost
- Low digital skills
- No unity in community
- Political interference
- No cooperation/ interest among community

**About 20 per cent of respondents expressed their concern on the lack of interest among community, disunity or political interference which will hinder the sustainability of community media**. Those in rural and suburban areas consider the lack of community interest as the biggest threat, whereas urban youths view political interference as the most dangerous. FGD participants stated that involvement of political parties will cause information manipulation. Ultimately, the community sees the freedom and legitimacy of information from community media to be compromised.

**Apart from low digital skills, high cost can also be a potential threat to any community media initiative. It was acknowledged that some amount of costs is required to mobilise and to disseminate information to the community.** Seven per cent of respondents think laws and regulations matter. We found out from

FGDs that to a certain extent, the trend of arresting netizens for information propagation has a negative effect on respondents. Six per cent believe that third-parties such as corporations will be potential threats as they might intervene in the management, financial as well as steering of the media to serve their own interests.

**Top three suggestions to ensure community media can be trusted and reliable are as follows:**
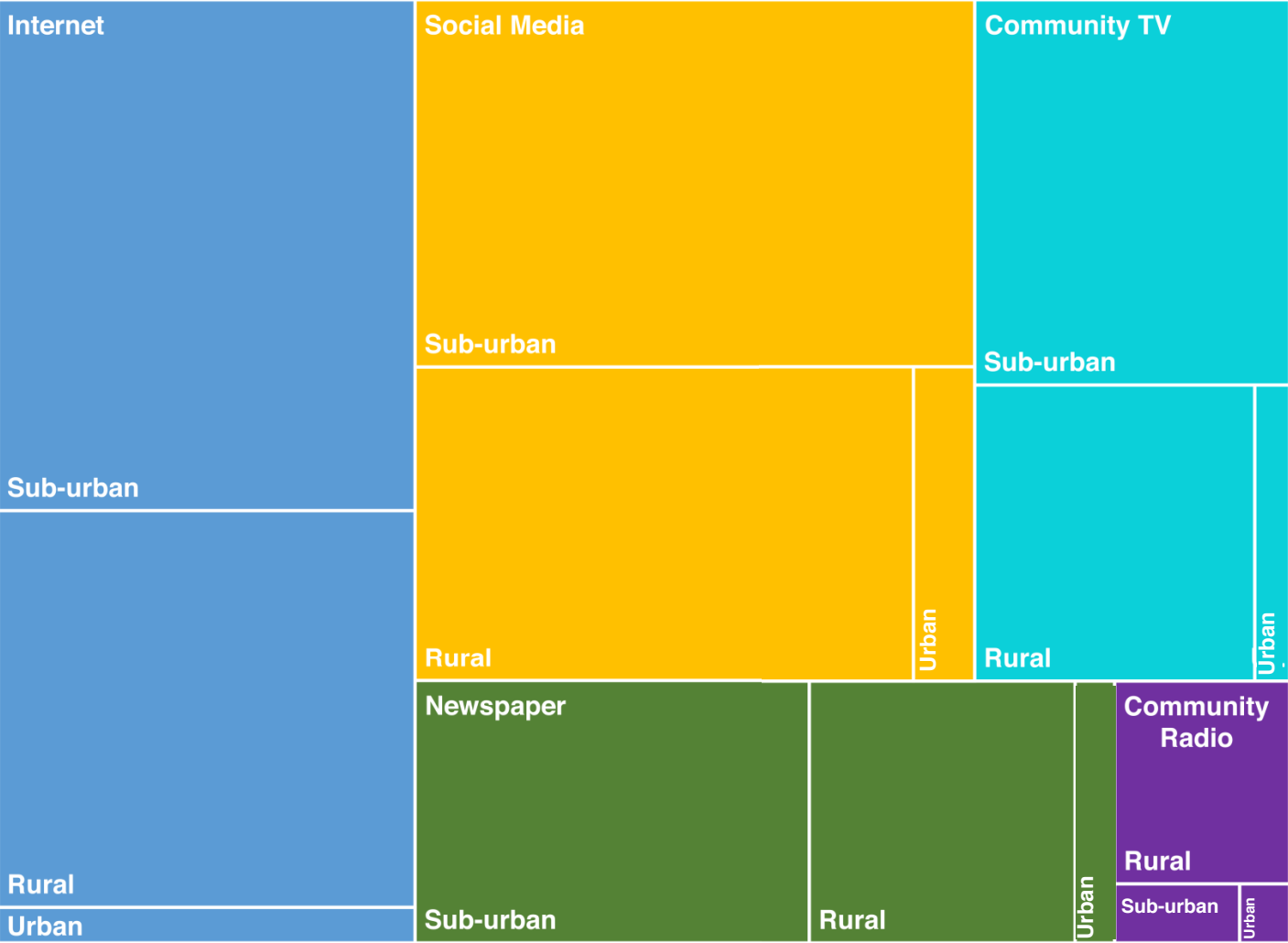
**(1) Filter information before dissemination to audience.**

**(2) Avoid political funding.**

**(3) Avoid providing political information.**

# E. Exploring Types and Opportunities

## ■ Most preferred type community media



The most preferred platform for community media is digital media, comprising Internet and social media. Although this was expected, traditional media namely newspapers and TV are still being considered due to public's confidence in their content. Only 10 per cent of respondents think community radio is a viable option, and most of them are based in rural setting.

**Content that you want to get and share through community media**
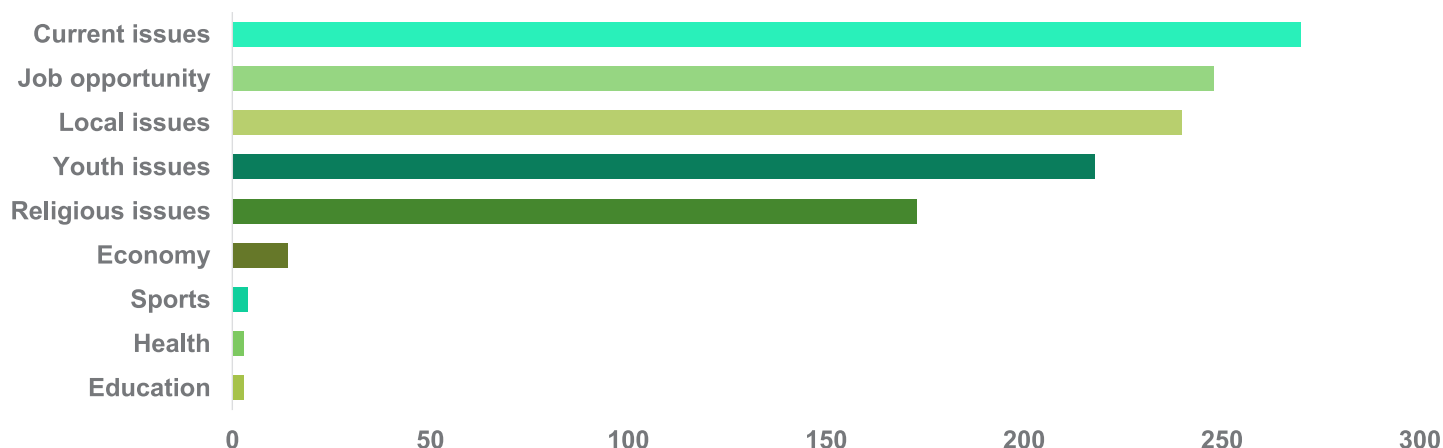


Based on the IEA Youths survey, it can be concluded that respondents tend to value current issues. A total of 270 respondents opted for this topic as the main topic of community media. Employment opportunities emerged as the second most important topic, chosen by 248 participants. As the majority of respondents are pursuing tertiary education, information such as scholarship opportunities and studying aids are important in charting their future. During FGDs, participants provide more insights on suitable content under chosen topics.

| Current & Local Issues | Job Opportunities | Youths Issues | Religious issues |
|---|---|---|---|
| <ul><li>COVID-19 pandemic</li><li>government laws or policies</li><li>cybercrime</li><li>politics</li><li>government</li></ul> | <ul><li>scholarship opportunities</li><li>studying aids starting/ developing a business</li><li>career-related skills training</li></ul> | <ul><li>youths activities</li><li>problems among youths</li><li>role in the local community</li><li>contribution from youths</li></ul> | <ul><li>religious education</li><li>the role of religion on economy, social and politics</li><li>religious activities</li></ul> |

All the issues raised by the respondents seem to be uniformed. Based on further analysis, the findings showed no significant differences when viewed in terms of gender, ethnicity or locality of respondents.

To explore how youths can contribute towards developing a better information ecosystem, respondents stated there are several key challenges faced by themselves and offered potential solutions:

**Technical**

Seventy-three per cent of respondents think technical skills need to be acquired. Through FGDs, participants stated that they need skills in terms of producing, processing, filtering and channeling information to their community effectively. They can use a variety of online applications but lack the skills to run them effectively.

## Legal

The understanding of legal aspects is the second aspect viewed to be important by 69 per cent of respondents. Some respondents expressed fear of expressing their views or sharing information. This is because they are worried about the possibility of violating existing laws. Female respondents exhibited more concern than male respondents in this regard. The feedback received from FGDs revealed that the youths need better knowledge and exposure on how they should they operate within information ecosystem from a legal point of view. Regulation that protects the right to information in the society is one of the examples cited by FGD participants.

## Community Support

Sixty-one per cent of respondents believe community support is lacking and hence, need to be addressed. They claimed low support of the local community does not only undermine their motivation, but also complicate the process of sharing and channelling information. The attitude of the community members who look down on youths, differences in political ideology, refusal to provide information or cooperation were cited to be stumbling blocks in building a good information ecosystem. There were suggestions from the participants of FGDs to institutionalise the role of youths in the information ecosystem and have policies that ensure information dissemination towards community is effective.

## Financial

Financial resources are needed for capacity-building and to implement community media. The survey found that about 46 per cent of respondents agree on the importance of financial resources required for facilities such as Internet line subscriptions and basic media equipment. If there is a Government Budget allocated for community media, it can be seen as the government making a commitment towards achieving freedom of information.

## Equipment

Another challenge in building community media in the current information ecosystem is inadequate equipment, as cited by 45 per cent of respondents of the IEA Youths. This was substantiated in FGDs, in which youths think the availability and stability Internet network are important. One of the solutions submitted was an information centre for youths. Such infrastructure has been provided in a number of places. However, poor maintenance is an issue.

From 2010 to 2014, Barisan National government provided more than 1 million[56] 1Malaysia Netbooks to the needy and selected communities. But its quality does not seem to support advanced project such as community media. Failure to provide adequate infrastructure will contribute to information and digital inequality between the have and have-nots.

*1Malaysia Netbook.*
*Credit to Berita Harian*

# Rural Communities: Youths and Women ■
## Temiar Tribe - Gua Musang, Kelantan

In August 2020, IEA was conducted in three Temiar settlements in Gua Musang, Kelantan. These settlements were selected as the Orang Asli are considered one of the most marginalised communities in the country. They are disadvantaged in terms of information network in their struggle to defend their native land rights. Temiar is one of Orang Asli tribes under Senoi that settles in Perak and Kelantan. Their livelihood heavily depends on farming, forest foraging, fishing and hunting.

Temiar's complex traditions and taboos or *pantang larang*, are pervasive in their society. These are guidelines they follow such as where they can build their settlements, or which plants they can harvest and when. Traditionally, Temiar people are animists who place utmost importance on nature for all aspects of their lives and spiritual healing. Today, some of their communities have converted into Islam and Christianity, while others still practice their animist beliefs.

" There's a missing narrative about the Orang Asli's struggles in Kelantan. People think that environmental issues like logging only affects our communities - this is not true. We want to educate the public about environmental injustice because this is a national issue with irreversible consequences to our national economy, health and survival. The 2014 floods in Kelantan made it clear that what impacts us in Kelantan has far-reaching and long-term effects to Malaysians. "

**Mustafa bin Along**

# 25%

of respondents consider their economic status constraint them from accessing media. Most of respondents live under the poverty line

# LACK OF ACCESS TO INFORMATION THEY NEED THE MOST

Economic issues and lack of information infrastructure are key reasons for these Temiar communities not having access to diverse source of information AND not receiving information that they require.

The most important types of information to these communities are community rights, customs, and land rights.

MORE THAN

# 80%

would like to have information on community rights, customs, and land rights

MORE THAN

# 65%

have distrust in political news such that most women and youths are less likely to act on political information that they receive.

## COMMUNITY MEDIA

# 2

types of preferred community media which is community radio & photography/film as the platforms to retain their cultural and intellectual assets as well as to disseminate knowledge about native and human rights. However, they acknowledge there will be challenges, notably infrastructure, high cost and external interference.

# 48%

of respondents are female. They would like to develop their pool of activists and leaders, and participate more in the decision-making process of their community
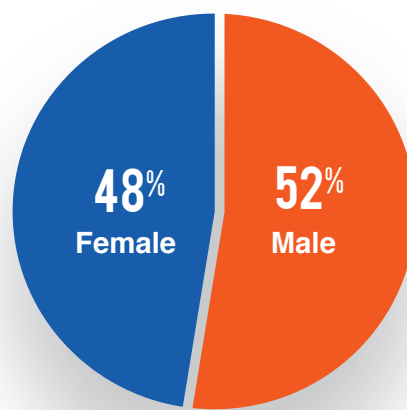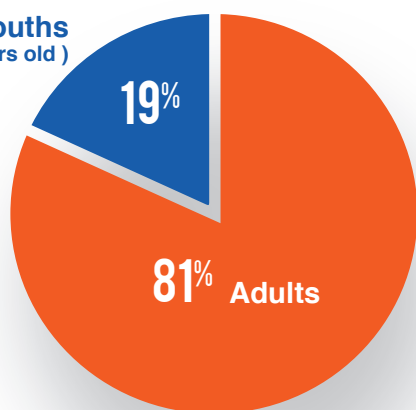
# Methodology

The design of IEA in Temiar tribes in Gua Musang emphasises on a qualitative approach. This involved ethnographic participant interaction and in-depth consultation with local resource teams about the cultural acceptance of conducting interviews and surveys amongst their tribal members, as Internews aimed to provide a safe environment in which respondents can yield rich narratives about their experience. A need assessment was carried out prior to the actual fieldwork to understand the logistics and feasibility of conducting the IEA in these communities. FGDs, survey discussions, information mapping were combined with key informant interviews, validation exercises and desktop research in an iterative process of data analysis and synthesis.
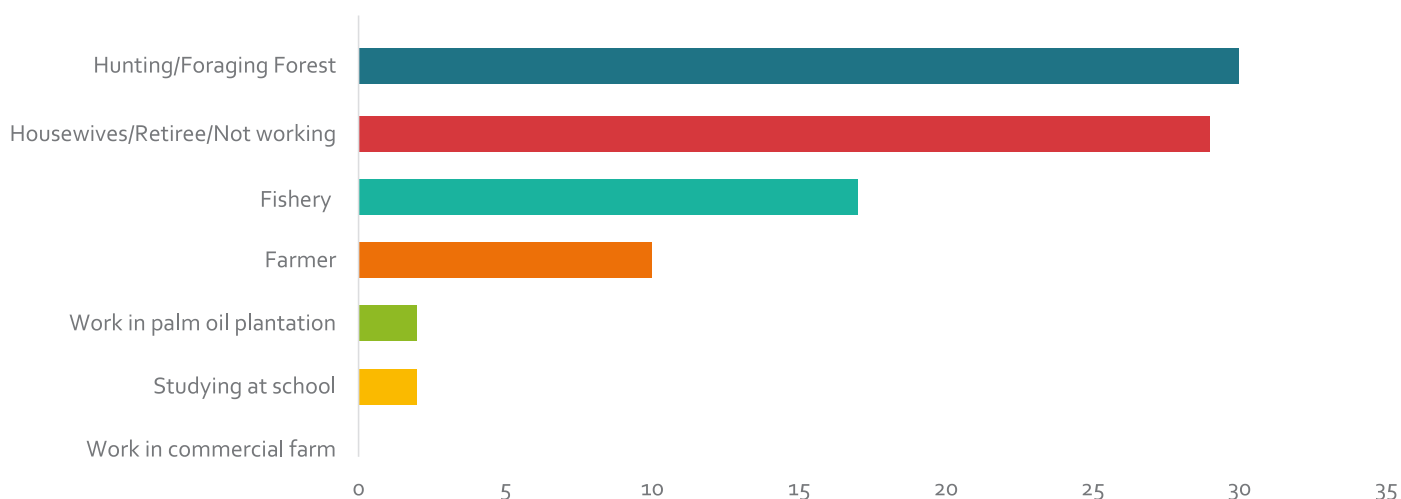
This process took six weeks to complete in August to September 2020. Internews also requested for women to be part of the resource team to promote inclusion and higher level of assertiveness amongst women respondents. The IEA in Gua Musang was also the first assessment carried out with the Temiar community which involved 100 per cent planning, participation and input from community members.

A total of 90 respondents gathered from three communities. All respondents fall under the B40 economic group (earning less than RM1,000 monthly on average).

**Youths**
**( 15 - 25 years old )**

19% 81% Adults

48% Female 52% Male

**Primary source of livelihood**

| | |
| --- | --- |
| Hunting/Foraging Forest | 30 |
| Housewives/Retiree/Not working | 29 |
| Fishery | 17 |
| Farmer | 10 |
| Work in palm oil plantation | 2 |
| Studying at school | 2 |
| Work in commercial farm | 0 |

# Information Ecosystem

## A. Macro Environment

### Information Landscape

Physical infrastructure started with building paved roads and electricity grid to connect major towns. These facilities make it easier for the information to be passed on from the source to rural communities, through travelling individuals, postal services or hardcopy newspapers. The Gua Musang population, especially those in town, do have access to national or state-level newspapers. Sinar Harian, at one point, attempted to deliver state and regional-focused newspapers including for Kelantan. They used to employ a journalist (Skuad Cakna) in each district to cover local news and equip them with a car and recording equipment. Broadcast televisions and radios such as TV1, Tv3, Kelantan FM and Asyik FM are available in the area, but a report[13] stated that they need stronger reception of AsyikFM in Orang Asli settlements.
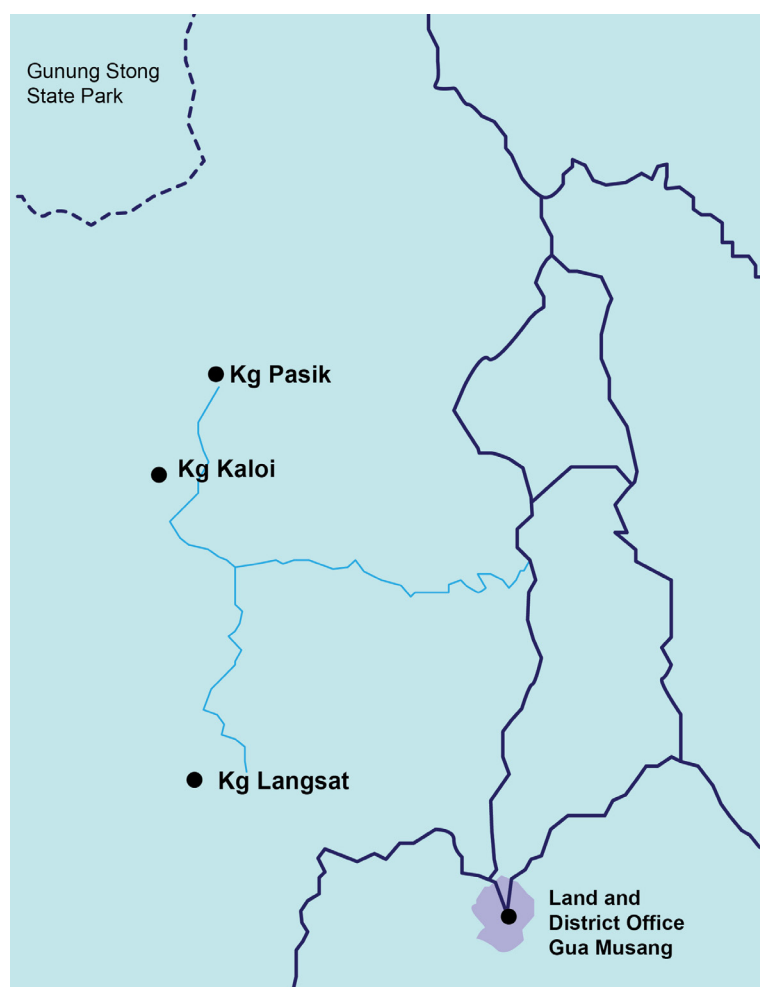


*Location of Kg Langsat, Kg Pasik and Kg Kaloi*

### Kampung Langsat, RPS Betis

One of villages situated in *Rancangan Penempatan Semula* (RPS) Betis. Basic necessities such as electricity and mobile coverage exist, and it takes about 40 minutes to travel from the village to Gua Musang town.

### POS Kampung Pasik

Accessible about three hours by an off-road route from Gua Musang town, electricity is supplied through grids. There is spotty 3G coverage in this village of 500 people. Most of them rely on prepaid services, with prices marked up by local sellers. A RM10 pre-paid top-up costs RM12 here.

### Kampung Kaloi

This is the least developed village compared to the other two communities as residents here moved from Kampung Kuala Wok about two years ago. There is no electricity nor mobile coverage. Most of the 22 families here rely on battery-powered radio or have to travel about 4km to a spot where they can get a mobile signal. Most of them come from a three-generation extended family.

|  | Kg Langsat | Kg Pasik | Kg Kaloi |
|---|---|---|---|
| Community/ritual hall– built by the community made of bamboo and wood | Dewan Adat | Kg Bejer 500 m | Under construction |
| Centralized Community hall – built by government | 1 at Kuala Betis |  |  |
| Market/Farmers' Market | Every Monday |  |  |
| Sundry Shop | 4 | 5 | 1 |
| Kindergarten/Pra-Sekolah | Kg Jias, 500m | Yes |  |
| Primary School | Kuala Betis, 5km | 1.1km |  |
| Secondary School | Gua Musang, 35km |  |  |
| Post Office | Gua Musang, 35km | Village leader will get the letters from post office in town |  |
| Government Clinic | Kuala Betis, 5km | Doctors come once a month |  |

The information infrastructure of these communities depends on the availability of school, telecommunication tower as well as basic necessities, namely electricity and mobile signal.

## What are the basic necessities that you have at home?
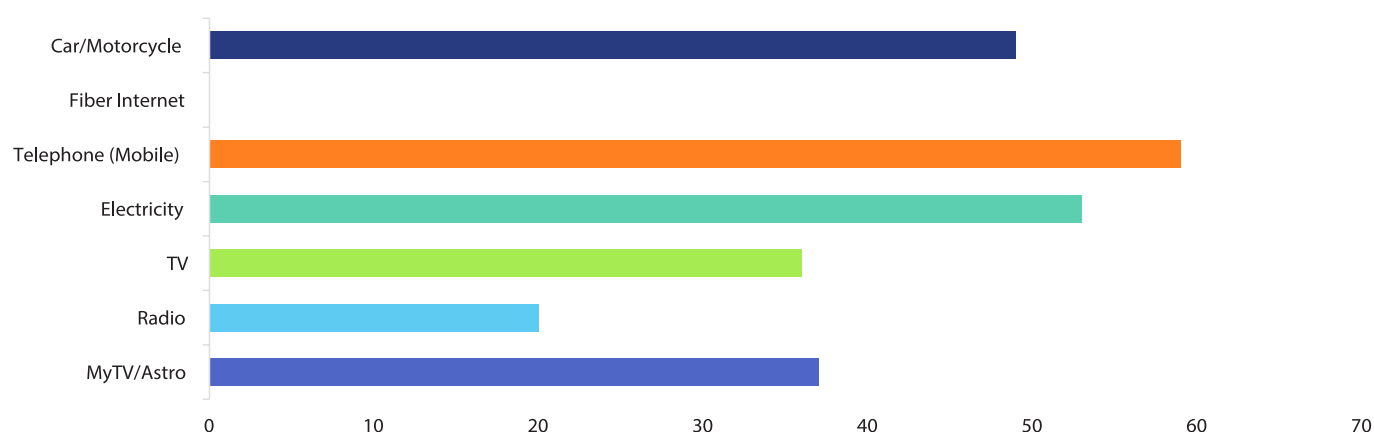


**Fifty-nine of the total respondents who live in Kg Langsat and Kg Pasik cited that they are supplied by grid electricity. With electricity, they can watch TV through free-to-air MyTV or Astro NJOY.** Radio channels such as Nasional FM, Sinar and AsyikFM are also available on either platform, thus fewer households have stand-alone radios. But they still need a portable radio when they are out working at farms, fishing or searching for food in the jungle.

Sixty-five per cent of total respondents own either a smartphone or a 2G phone, which is currently considered a necessity to connect to the outside world. Mothers cited that phones are the most important communication medium with teachers at school, who will notify them about the well-being and academic performance of their children. Due to the long distance to school, a number of primary & secondary school students from the Orang Asli settlements need to stay at dormitories, only to return to their villages on weekends or during school holidays.

## Dynamic of Access

Access to information, particularly in the impoverished communities are shaped by economic and social hierarchies. Those who live under the poverty line and in areas with no Internet access rely on information communicated by community leaders, middlemen who come to their villages or even teachers from schools. Having a TV or radio is a privilege, and it is a common practice for villagers to convene at neighbours' houses, communal areas or shops to listen to the radio or watch TV together. They bond over this shared experience of watching news, sports matches, dramas or entertainment events.

Even if they receive 3G coverage, they need to spend their hard-earned income for pre-paid top-ups and battery for communication devices. As their income varies from month to month, sometimes they are not able to pay for top-ups, hence losing their data subscription. Some travel to the nearest town or other settlements which have electricity to charge their phones. It is common to see 9V-battery or generator-powered TV or radio in the households at remote areas around the country.

With access to the Internet, Orang Asli are turning to online sources for information. However, their access can also be cut off when floods or landslides occur. Telecommunication towers might be shut down and roads unusable due to the rising water level. Whenever the Internet access is lost, the education of their children is also affected, more so during the Covid-19 pandemic when most learnings need to be held online. Parents who have lost their income cannot afford to buy additional devices for their children to participate in online learning[57]. It is apparent that this pandemic has shown the hidden cost of the digital divide, as it comes with the expense of widening the disparity in educational outcomes between the haves and have-nots.



*An Orang Asli Man showing his portable battery that charges his cellphone. Credit: Global Peace Foundation Malaysia*
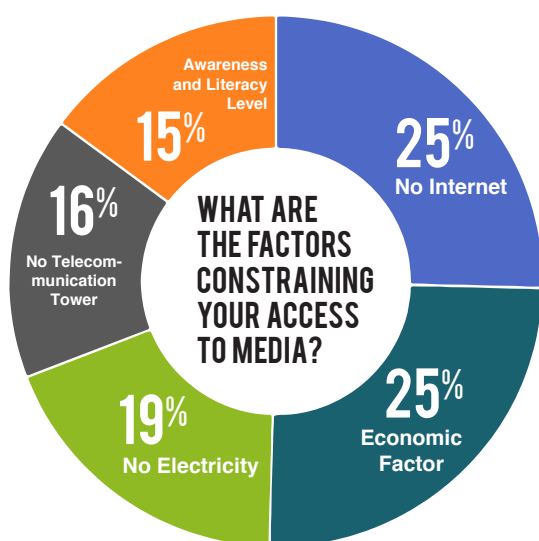


This is manifested in our findings in all three communities that we assessed**. Respondents acknowledged the importance of Internet access and electricity as the prerequisite to access the media. However, the cost of access (prepaid fee and electricity bill) are their main worries**. Since most of the respondents live below the poverty line and do not have stable income, prepaid telephone fees (ranging from RM40 to RM80 per month) can take up a considerable portion of their income. Prepaid cards are sold in sundry shops but it is RM2 more than its value (RM10 prepaid card is sold for RM12). One elderly man in Kg Kaloi is concerned that his loss of eyesight has hindered him from getting important information through traditional or online platforms.

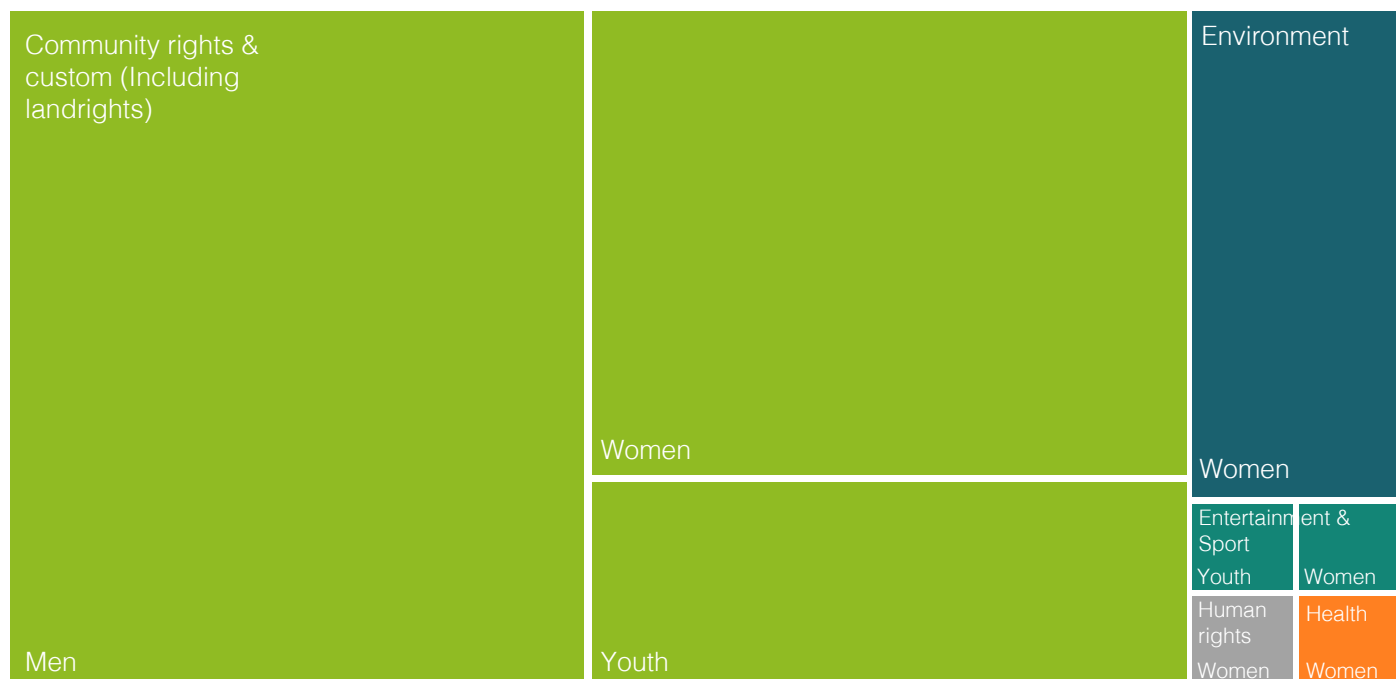# B. Content Distribution and Environment

## Information Needs

Asymmetrical developments between regions, states and rural-urban areas still remain wide in Malaysia and hence, affects the distribution of information resources. The failure to understand the information that socio-economically disadvantaged communities want to receive, leads to the gaps which would deter meaningful socio-economic development. In the case of the Orang Asli, a substantial number of them live in poverty, experience high rates of school-dropouts and malnutrition as well as lack of basic amenities such as potable water.

The demand for accurate and timely information is also exacerbated in the events of natural and humanitarian disasters such as floods and pandemics, which will disproportionately impact the most vulnerable communities. Thus, it is imperative that these communities are empowered to critically assess information and can safely access information.

**As for our Temiar respondents in Gua Musang, the most salient and important types of information for them are community rights, customs, and land rights. These have been persisting issues that undermine their survivability and self-determination as the natives of Malaysia.**

**A number of women think that local ecological knowledge, not just about the environment but signs from the nature itself, is central to their life.** Nature gives them clues on when and where to fish, predict seasonal changes and track for wildlife. As a community that is intimately connected to the Earth, unsustainable development and rampant deforestation have truly disrupted their lives. Entertainment and sports news were also expressed as something needed by youths and women.

## What is the most important information that you need?



Community rights & custom (Including landrights) — Men

Women / Youth

Environment — Women

Entertainment & Sport — Youth / Women

Human rights — Women

Health — Women

## Production and Movement

In rural communities, the types of information supplied by media and non-media actors include current affairs, government welfare programs, religious information, education-related matters such as the opening and closing date of schools and sporting events. These types of information come through broadcast TVs or radios, talks by government officials, sermons by religious heads in *surau* and community churches and notifications by head of villagers (Tok Empat, Ketua Kampung, JKKK). At the physical or ground level, information exchange and discussion usually take place in *warung kopi* (coffee shops), hangout sessions after recreational activities, community meetings, at home and in places of worship. Those with functional mobile line should receive short messaging system (SMS) text messages sent by the government to the public that provide vital information about public health and address misinformation concerning COVID-19.
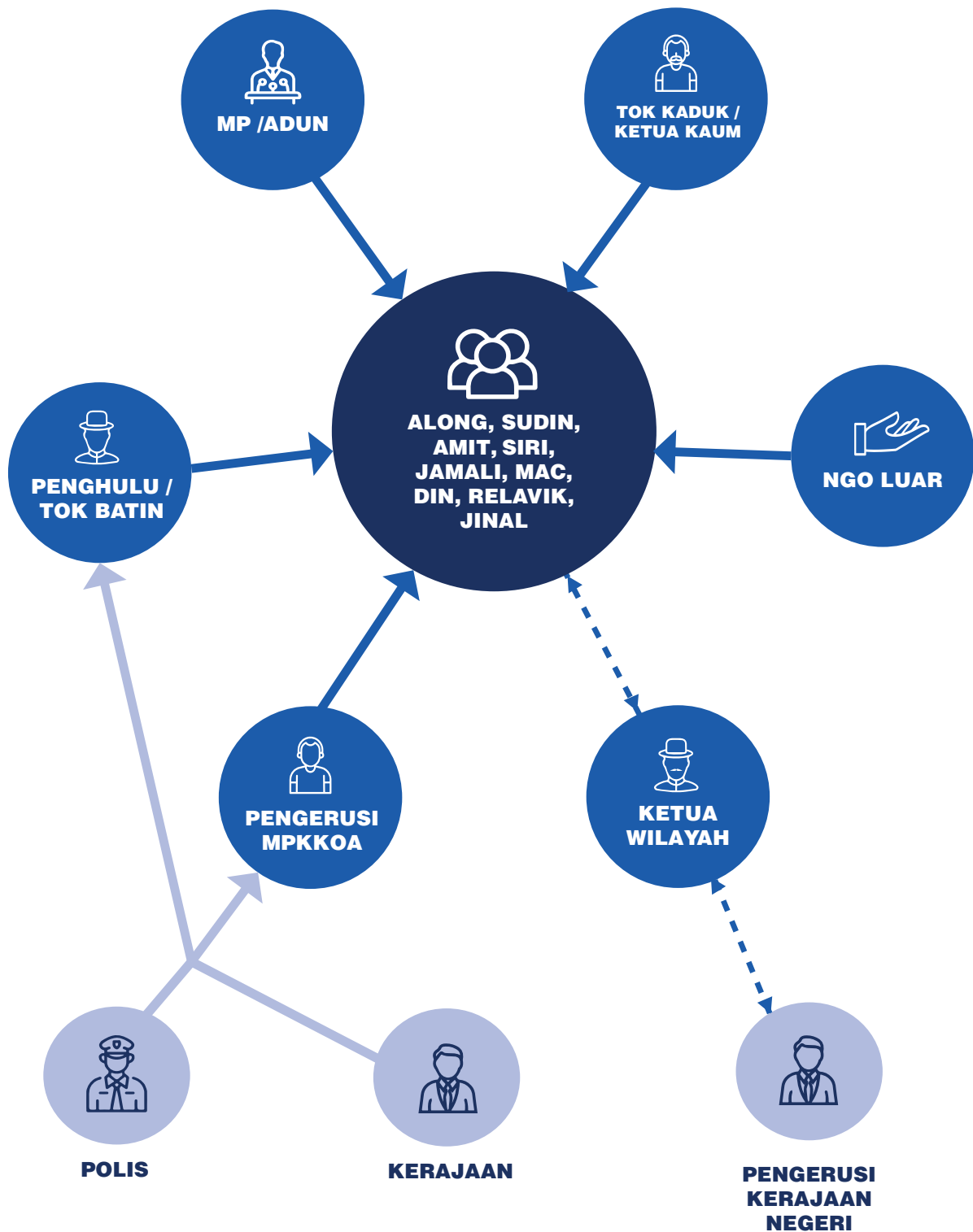
Gua Musang's government-run Information Department has a mobile unit which drives through townships and neighborhoods to broadcast information to the masses. These include information on Covid-19, Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) of the new normal and, promoting awareness on government campaigns such as Independence Day. The initiative, branded as "Info-on-Wheels" also deliver printed materials such as Covid-19 awareness posters to the public.

As for the Temiar tribes, we observed that traditional structures of communication are converging with social media and technologies. **WhatsApp is the primary source of information especially among youths. Men receive news primarily from television and radio. There are also men from the communities who rely on social media and face-to-face village meetings**.



**What is your primary source of information?**
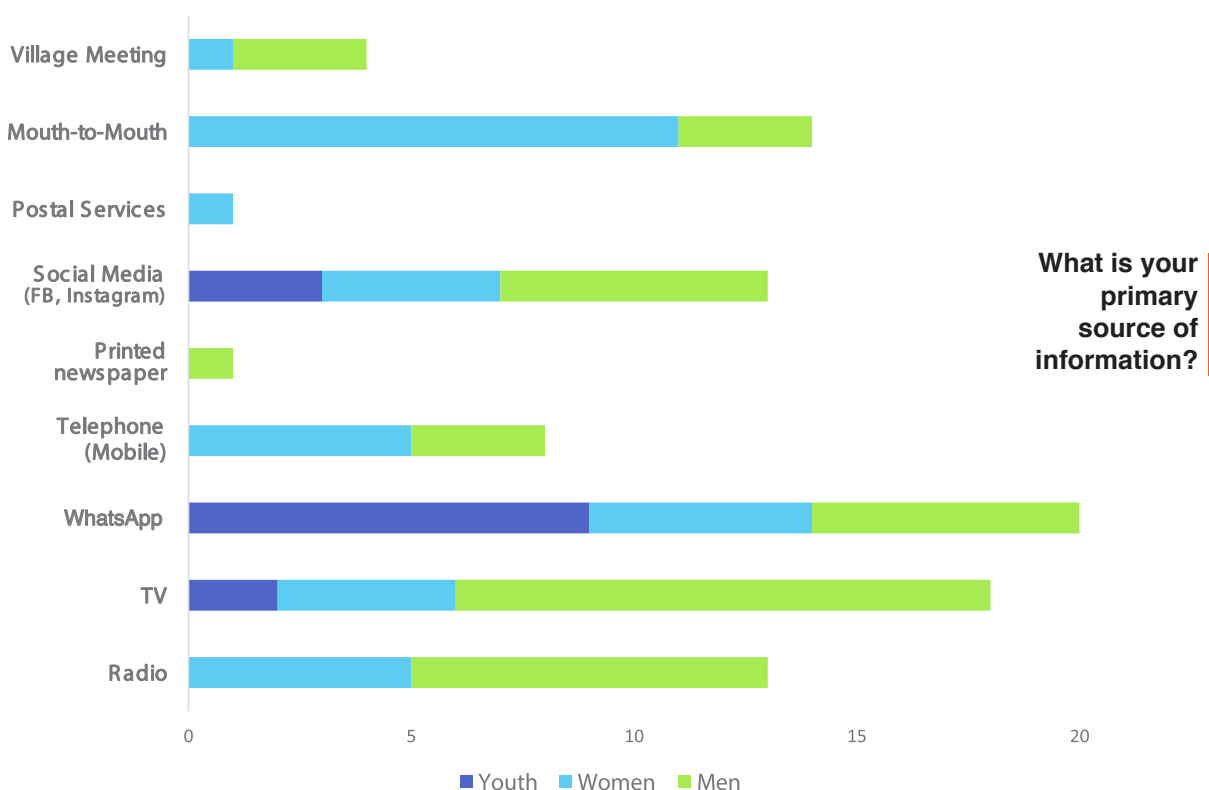
**Mouth-to-mouth communication, and the use of radio and telephone are popular among women.** They prefer to exchange information during social gatherings which would take place when they are together down by the river or making preparations for *Sewang (*community feast). Sometimes, women attend community meetings, but they often prioritise managing the house and taking care of their children instead. As such, women usually get community updates from their husbands or fathers.

Printed newspapers do not reach the communities because of the geographical challenge. They are also not preferred by the villagers, as many of them are illiterate. It is interesting to note that one man from Kg Langsat travels to Gua Musang periodically to buy newspapers.

MP /ADUN

TOK KADUK / KETUA KAUM

PENGHULU / TOK BATIN

ALONG, SUDIN, AMIT, SIRI, JAMALI, MAC, DIN, RELAVIK, JINAL

NGO LUAR

PENGERUSI MPKKOA

KETUA WILAYAH

POLIS

KERAJAAN

PENGERUSI KERAJAAN NEGERI

*For men, the information flow reflects their fight of land rights and self-determination of their community. The network for sharing information is structured and quite sophisticated, with access to media and NGO. The question is whether responsible actors namely government will act upon these communities' concern.*
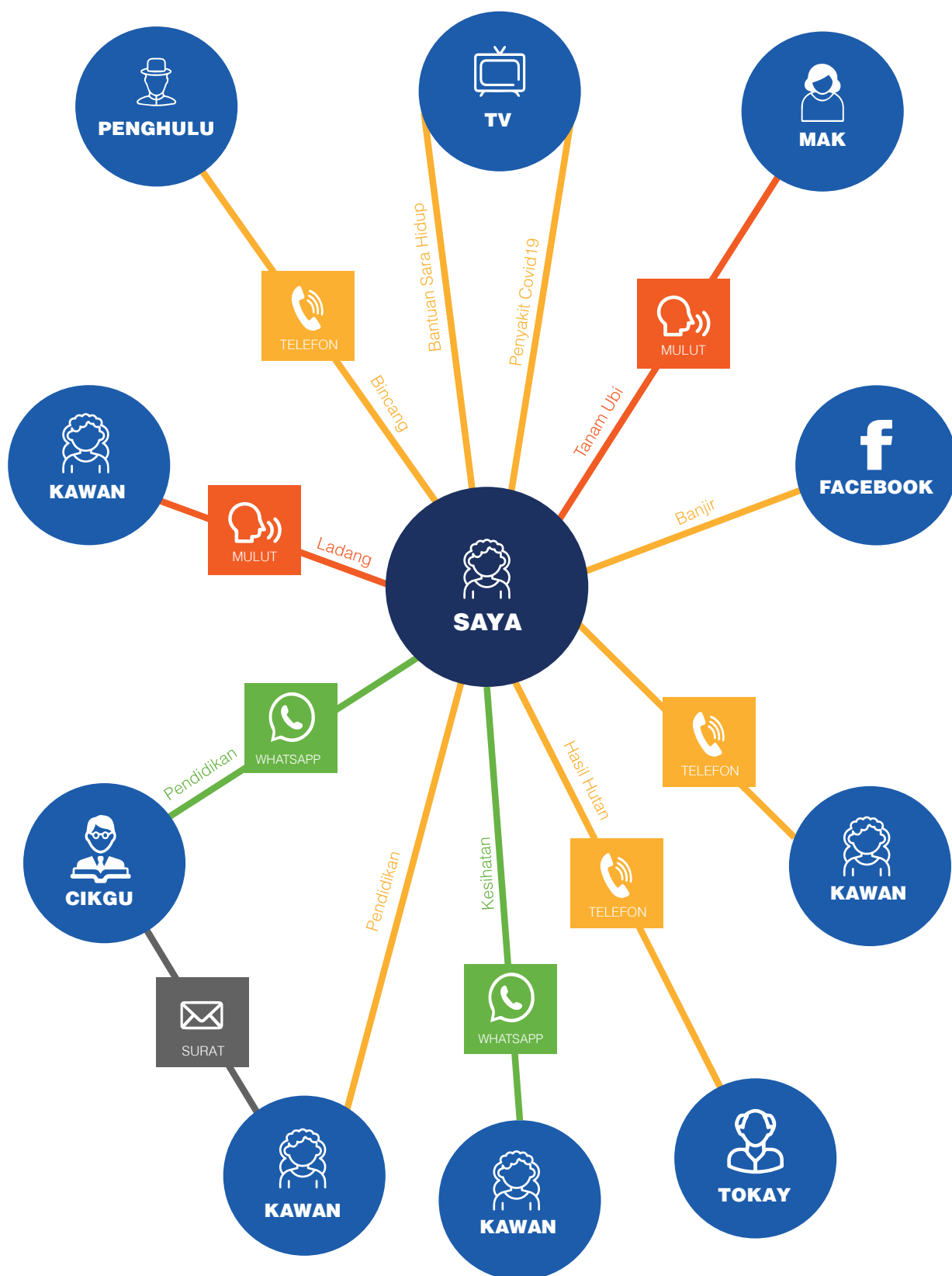
*Younger women visualize their own information network which comprises education matters from teachers, communication with friends and families on farming and health, as well as news of government aid and Covid-19 from television.*

Another group of women realize how important signs from the nature is to their livelihoods. They are able to channel their concerns through their husband or father to be forwarded to head of communities. Local news, sharing cooking and beauty tips, and entertainment are much appreciated. Recently they started to do online shopping (they or their friends will pick up parcels in Gua Musang town)

# Information Use

The factors influencing the usefulness of information depends on the receiver's preference, socio-economic status and current situation. The timeliness of the information is also important. In particular, news about job opportunities, the weather condition, government directives and market prices of commodities are a lifeline for marginalised communities such as the Orang Asli. As WhatsApp and social media platforms become the primary means of communication, so has the 'forwarding' culture which now takes precedence in the society - fake news, misinformation and disinformation continue to proliferate the information ecosystem in Malaysia. According to an MCMC Study, 61.8 per cent Malaysians share content online.

Another common way of transmitting information in rural communities is through face-to-face interaction or collective sharing. As with many geographically-specific and localised communities, stories or messages (e.g. folktales, ecological, chants, songs and etc.) are often preserved as oral tradition. There are efforts to bring these stories back to the Malaysian public through books written in English and Bahasa Malaysia, yet cohesive attempts to codify them within the Orang Asli communities are few and far between.
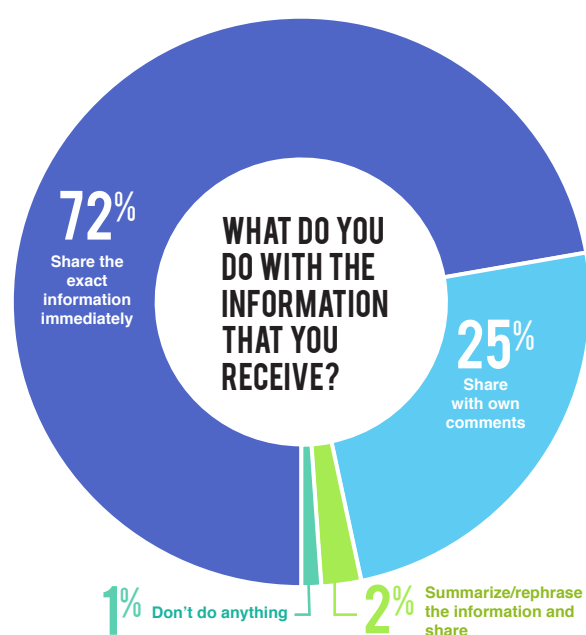


**Ninety-nine per cent of IEA respondents share the information they receive. However, this practice also depends on what type of information it is and the gravity of the situation they are in.** They will share trusted information pertaining to security, adverse weather forecasts or health-related concerns. For WhatsApp communication, they have the tendency to share to their contacts all forms of information ranging from entertainment clips, jokes and sound-bytes of relevant and pertinent news. A few of the respondents stated that they forward and share news on WhatsApp to triangulate the information.
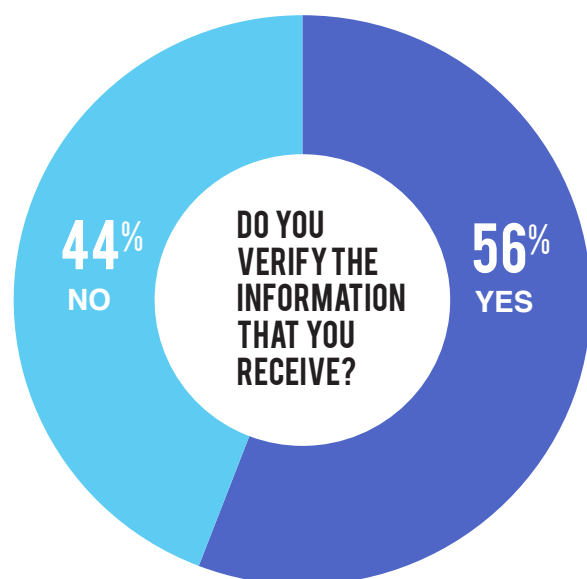


**The communities are aware of fake news and the implications of sharing unverified content.** Some of them have advised their family members and friends to stop sending information that are questionable. One man from Kg Kaloi mentioned that he will verify by checking with other sources; he will tune in to his radio for news to authenticate stories that he receives from others.

# C. Human and Social Insights

## Influencers

In rural communities, where cultural norms, faith, myths, perceptions and moral values exert influence on social dynamics of people, influencers typically have positions of power such as community and spiritual leaders of whom are predominantly male. Orang Asli communities are still deeply spiritual, attempting to preserve their old ways but also adopting modern administrative structures with appointed representatives. Whether they are government-appointed *Ketua Kampung/Tok Batin/Tuai Rumah*, grassroot leaders or youths leaders, all of them carve their own spheres of influence. Influencers also assume the role of a village representative for engagements with outsiders. Other highly respected individuals in the community such as religious elders (*Tok Halak, Imam,* Priest) also have considerable influence in imparting wisdom and spiritual guidance.

### The most influential people in your community
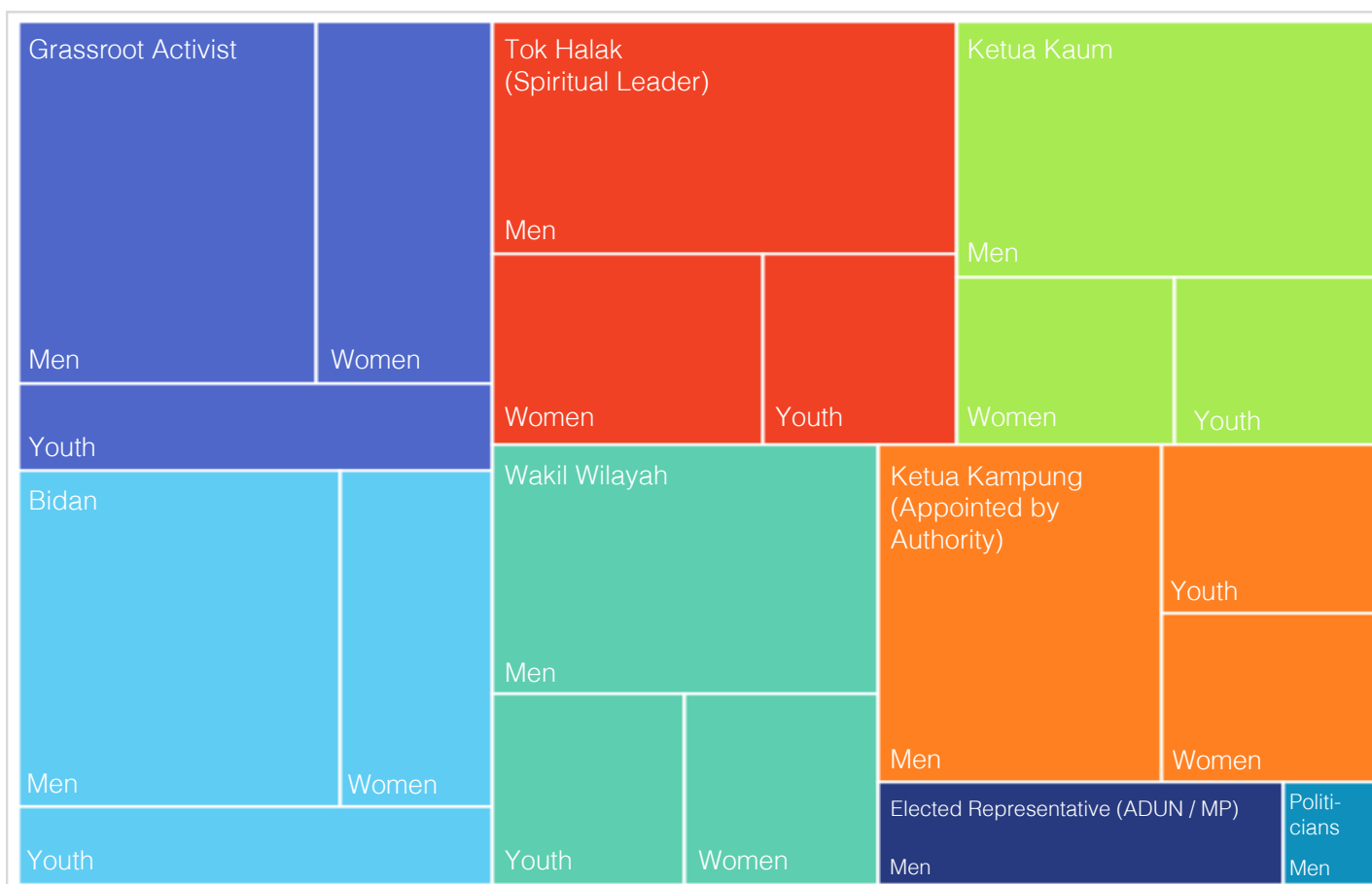


**The most influential figures in these Temiar communities are grassroots activists, Tok Halak (spiritual leaders and healers) Ketua Kaum, Wakil Wilayah and Bidan (head of midwives).  As such, information moves hierarchically in the society, especially important updates on land issues, threats, court cases and humanitarian assistance.** The youths too acknowledge these influencers who act as experienced interlocutor and information broker with external stakeholders. There are overlapping spheres of power between government-appointed leaders and their own elected Ketua Kaum.
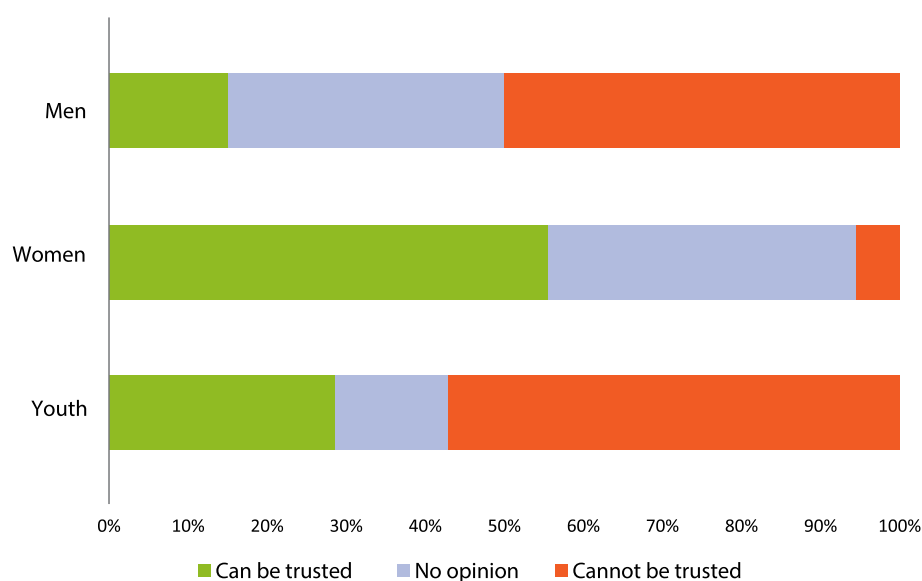
# Social Trust

Several factors contribute to the landscape of trust in a dynamic information ecosystem such as that of Malaysia, with race, culture, religion, education, political affiliation, credibility and socio-economic status present as variables. The primary factors are the link between influence and trust[58] , and whether the source of information is determined to be trustworthy or not. People are more likely to trust information coming from religious leaders and tribal leaders who have high ethical behaviours[59].

Even with the advent of Internet and technology, information-poor communities like those in rural Gua Musang are also at risk of entering echo chambers propagated by friends, family members, politicians, community leaders and activists. Promises and pledges to protect their rights, including customary land, are taken very seriously by this segment of population, and they are not hesitant to 'punish' the elected government by voting for another coalition if the elected government fails to deliver their promise[60].
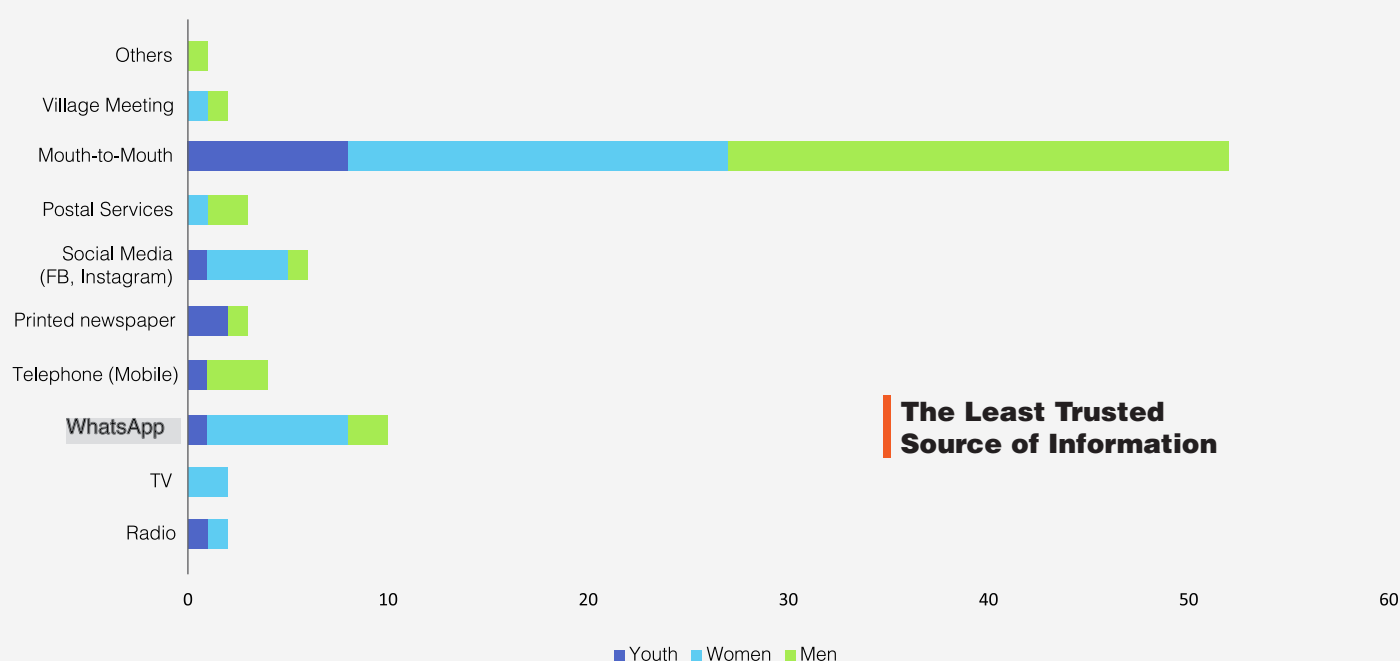


**An overwhelming number of respondents agreed that information from interpersonal sources cannot be trusted. They practice the philosophy of '*dengar boleh, percaya belum tentu*' (listen, but don't trust).** Women are more wary about the information they receive from WhatsApp, especially if it comes from someone whom they don't trust in real life.

## What is your perception of social media (eg:Facebook, Instagram)?



Legend: Can be trusted (green) · No opinion (light purple) · Cannot be trusted (orange)

**When they were asked about social media, the perception is mixed across men, women and youths. Women are more trusting of this platform, as they use social media to connect with friends and families. However, more than half of the youths respondents opine that the information from social media is not reliable.** Despite being more digital-savvy than other members of their community and spending more hours on social media, the youths defer to more authoritative sources such as television and the elders for important information. This finding depicts highly localized social dynamics that are different to urban communities, even though social media use is increasingly prevalent in both populations.
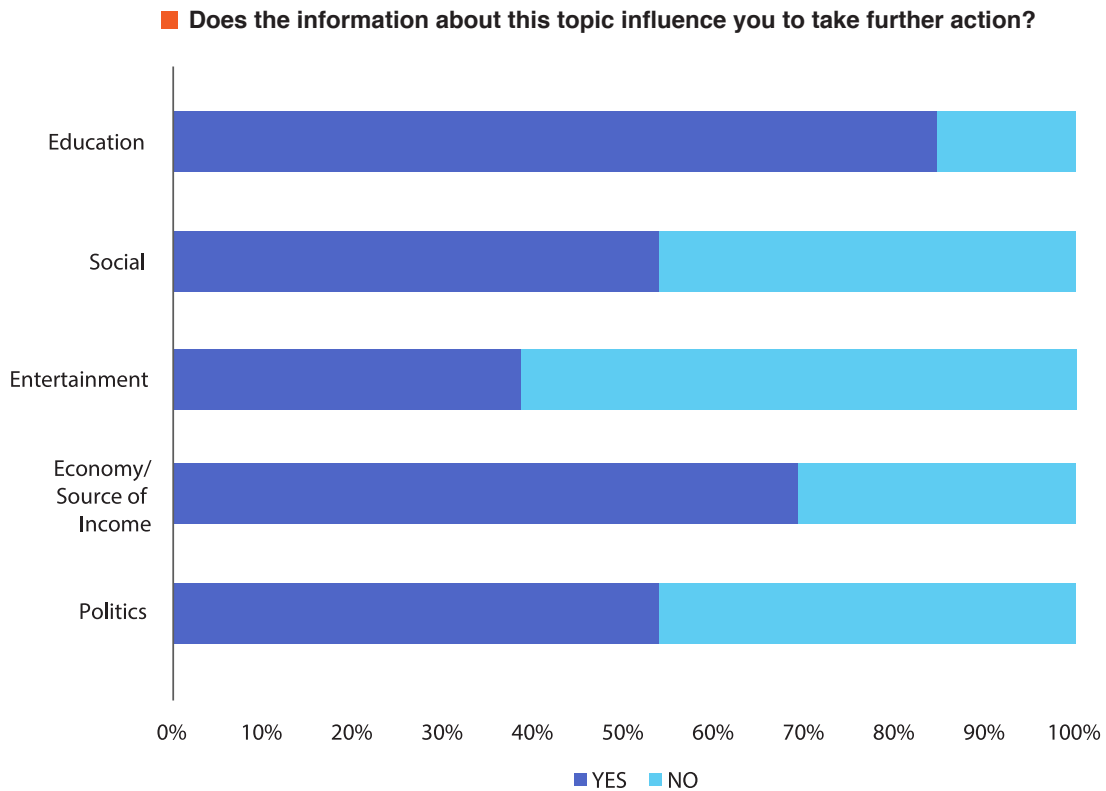
## Information Impact

In the context of rural Malaysia, the information landscape can empower or limit an individual's and community's socio-economic opportunities, health, resilience, self-determination and rights. The asymmetrical development between urban and rural areas will be widened when critical information fails to reach its intended audience. In the case of delivering government monetary assistance during the peak of COVID-19, there was widespread confusion about the application criteria, procedure, and system. Those who are illiterate or have no access to the Internet had great difficulty in applying as the form was hosted on the Inland Revenue Board's website.

Preservation of tangible and intangible heritage also relies on effective production and sharing of information. Indigenous knowledge, traditions

and *adat* (customs) concerning the environment, geographically and culturally-specific sites, artforms and oral stories are the keys to the identity of the Orang Asli. By tapping on media diversification, particularly in the forms of community-owned and operated media, these rich traditions can be revitalised and documented.

Temiar communities acknowledge that the information they get affects their day-to-day life, but only selected type of information warrant follow-up actions.

**■ Does the information about this topic influence you to take further action?**



Legend: ■ YES ■ NO

**Youths and women are less likely to act on information about politics compared to men. They are more motivated by social news like gatherings, charity or the well-being of the community.** Overall, news on education scored the highest to spur action amongst the community members

Older men and women are also influenced by economic, trading and job opportunities. For example: they need information about the current price of commodities (rubber or palm oil) in order to sell to traders. One man stated that he always seeks information about daily jobs offered in plantation or shops and that he would not hesitate to go for an interview once he has verified there is a vacancy. available.
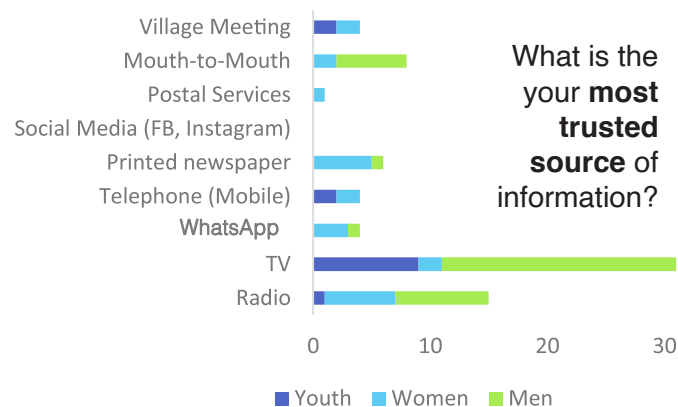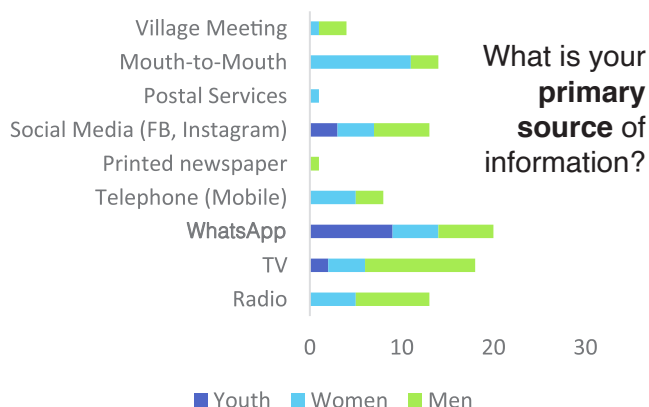
"There is an urgent necessity to build the pipeline of women activists in this area. I am very fortunate that my husband and family are supportive about my passion, but I do feel given encouragement, skills and community support, we can have more young women stepping up and championing the cause of our community"
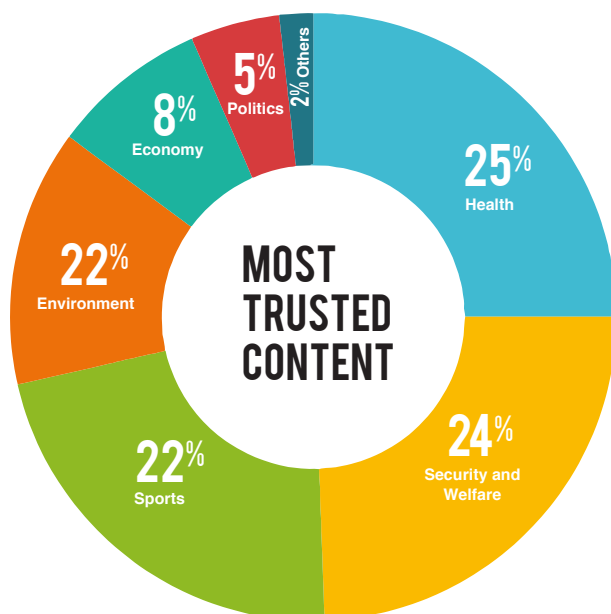
**Nora, Woman Activist of JAKOASM**

# Findings

## A. Media Consumption



What is your **primary source** of information?

Village Meeting
Mouth-to-Mouth
Postal Services
Social Media (FB, Instagram)
Printed newspaper
Telephone (Mobile)
WhatsApp
TV
Radio

■ Youth ■ Women ■ Men



What is the your **most trusted source** of information?

Village Meeting
Mouth-to-Mouth
Postal Services
Social Media (FB, Instagram)
Printed newspaper
Telephone (Mobile)
WhatsApp
TV
Radio

■ Youth ■ Women ■ Men

**Although WhatsApp is the most popular among the respondents, it is not the most trusted media across all segments. Many still rely on television for reliable and accurate information, more so from official government channels.** For respondents who do not own television, they trust radio channels to provide them with the same current affair updates, especially about the status of COVID-19 and MCO. Respondents have a high degree of trust in familiar sources, especially if these are the community elders and Ketua Wilayah.



**MOST TRUSTED CONTENT**

25% Health
24% Security and Welfare
22% Sports
22% Environment
8% Economy
5% Politics
2% Others

The Temiar communities in Gua Musang are constantly on alert for security breaches such as encroachment of their land by plantation companies and loggers as well as potential kidnapping of their loved ones. Following the 2015 tragedy of the seven Orang Asli children who disappeared from their boarding school in POS Tohoi, Gua Musang, (five of whom died), Temiar parents always connect with teachers through their phone to check on their children. Any information on potential risks will be taken seriously by each member of the community. The respondents also believe in health information especially from the official sources namely the Ministry of Health.

## Most trusted content (by segment)



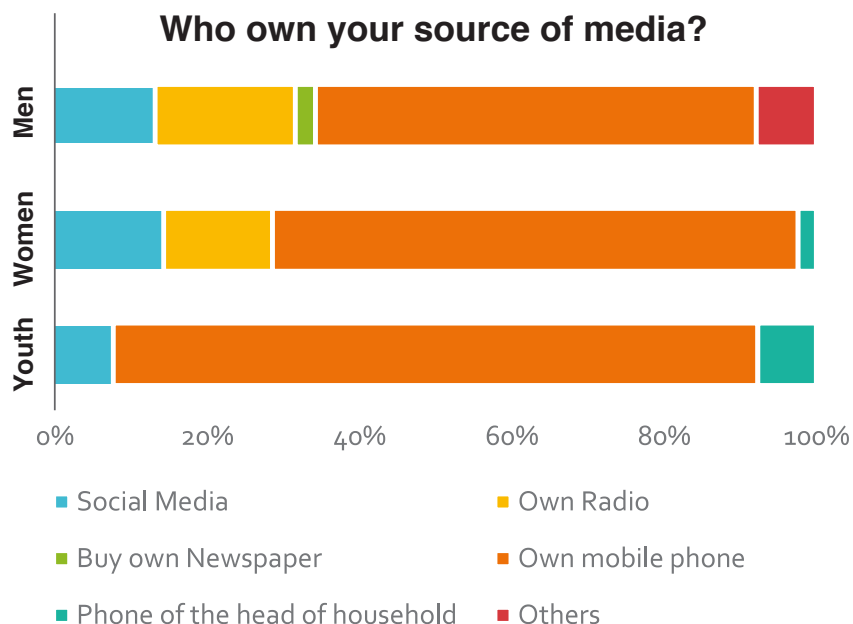Legend: Others | Politics | Sports | Economy | Health | Security & Welfare | Environment
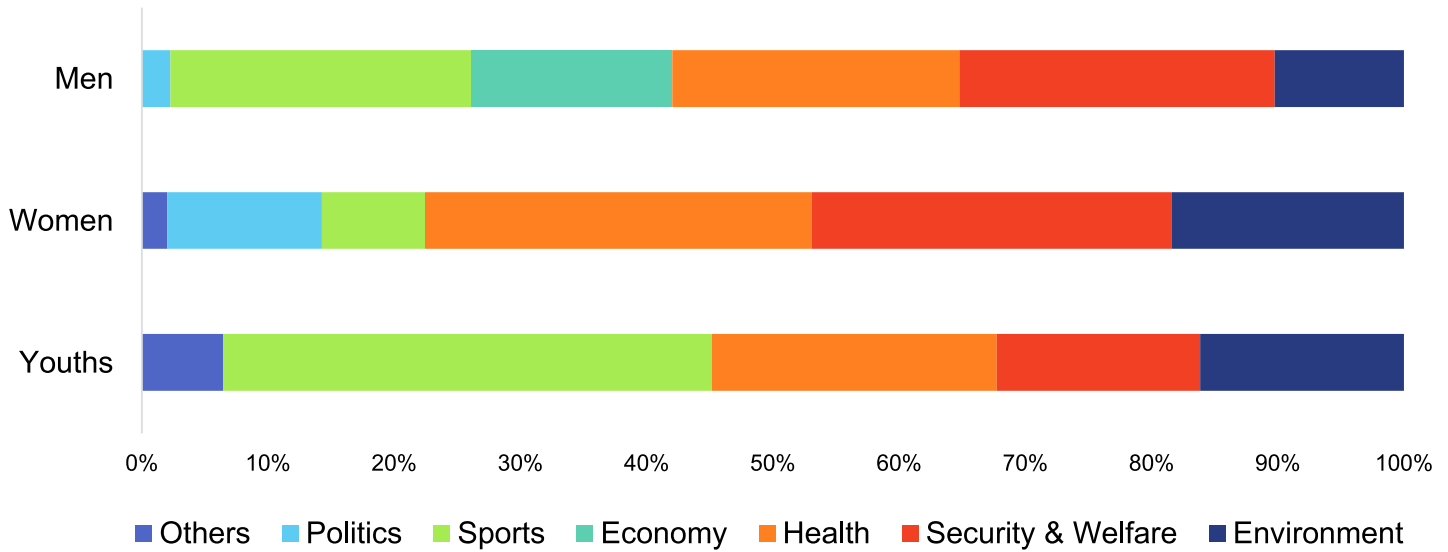
**Through a gender lens, a thorough analysis was done to understand data that corresponds with the difference of trust between men and women. Several male respondents depend on trustworthy information about economic opportunities and trading, as most of them are the breadwinners of their family.** Information on sports are appreciated by men and youths as it is straight-forward and allows them to bond over a mutual interest. One youths mentioned that entertainment news can always be trusted. Older women in these communities have cultivated trust in health-related news from both *Bidan* (midwives) and public service providers in community clinics.
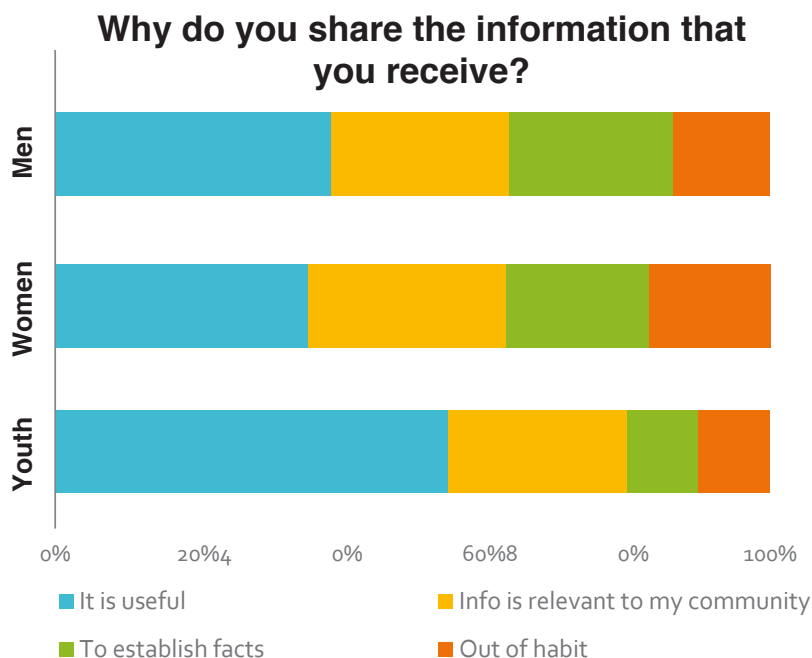
**Two thirds of the respondents in these three communities believe that political news is the least trusted content, given the high degree of personal bias and propaganda that they have observed. Eighty per cent of youths surveyed stated that they distrust any information about politics.** One female respondent cited that all politicians are the same; their words mean nothing if not followed by action. Interestingly, only men in Kg Pasik find information regarding environment as questionable. They think that the media is only speaking for the side who will gain from exploiting natural resources and do not feel that their opinion on this issue is represented accurately.
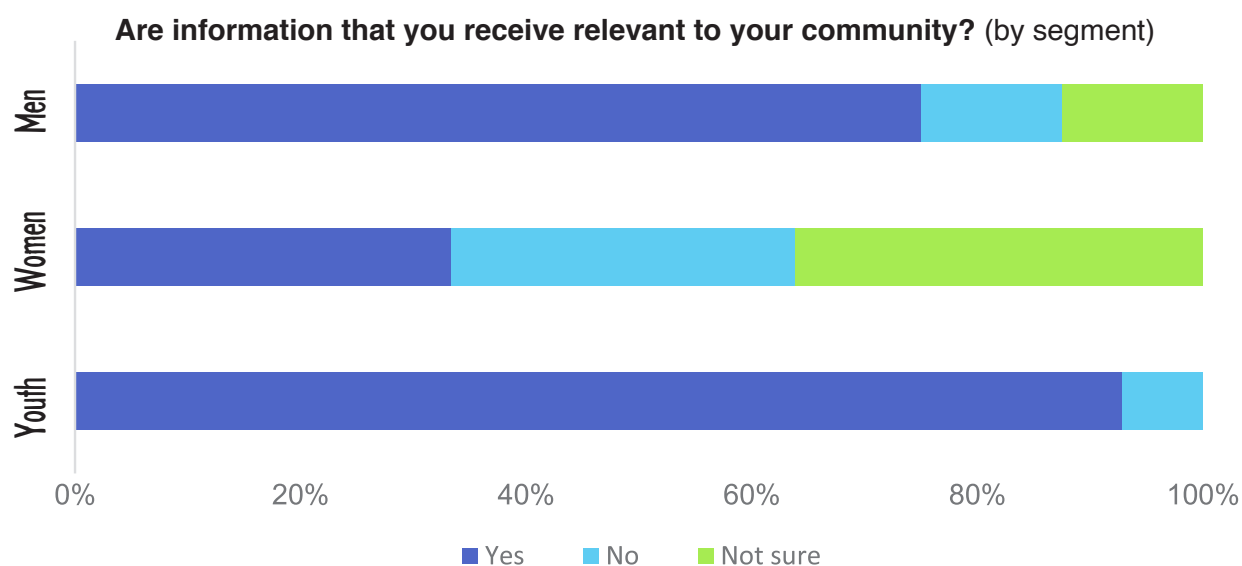
# B. Media Ownership

**More than half (65 per cent) have their own mobile phones, with a few youthsand women who are secondary users of their father's, husband's or children's phone.** Men and women who have set up their own social media accounts tend to come from the younger age bracket. Men also tend to seek information in the media more frequent compared to women and youthss. Eighty per cent of men reported that they seek information every day, as they are more likely to have their own devices.

### Who own your source of media?



Legend:
- Social Media
- Own Radio
- Buy own Newspaper
- Own mobile phone
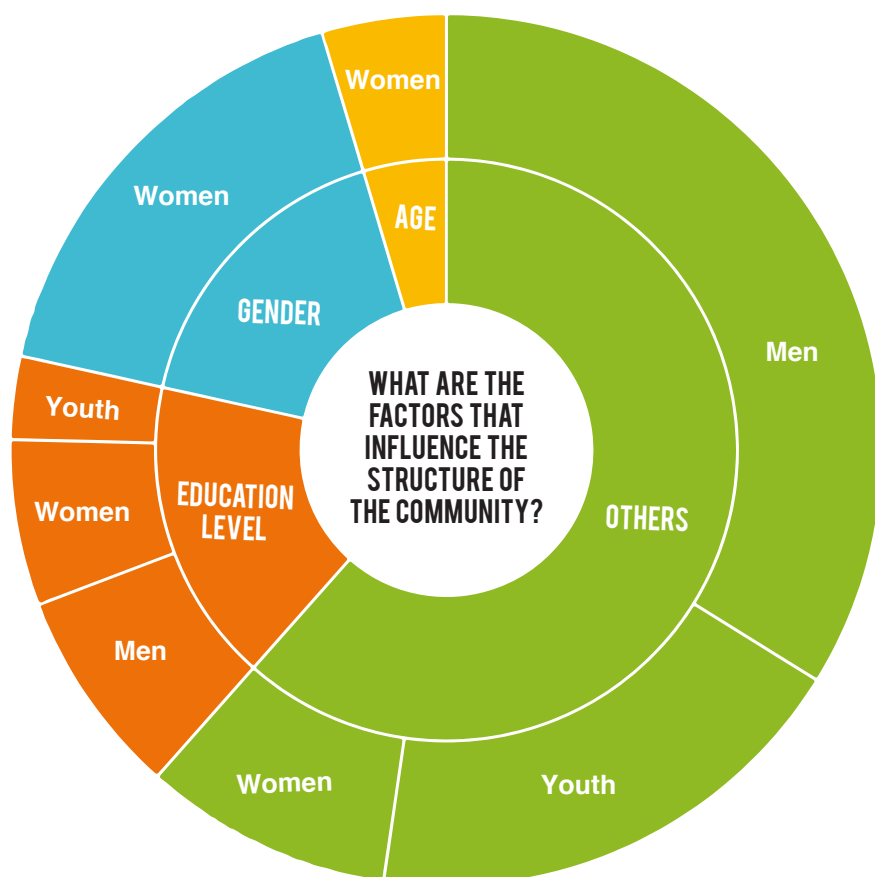- Phone of the head of household
- Others

Generally, respondents in Kg. Langsat, Kg. Pasik and Kg. Kaloi share information through face-to-face interactions, community meetings and through WhatsApp. Information shared also include security concerns, planning for picnics and festivals as well as latest updates of their land rights.

### Why do you share the information that you receive?



Legend:
- It is useful
- Info is relevant to my community
- To establish facts
- Out of habit

# C. Community Access and Ownership

**Are information that you receive relevant to your community?** (by segment)


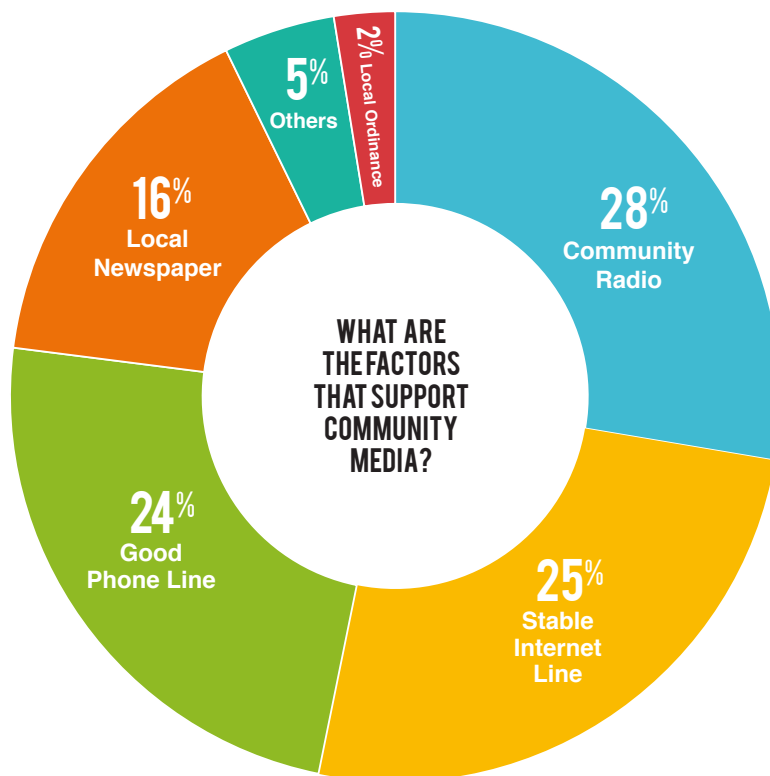
Legend: ■ Yes ■ No ■ Not sure

**61 per cent of total respondents stated that they receive information that is relevant to and timely for their community. Further examination reveals that women are less satisfied with the relevance of the information that they receive compared to men and youths.**



Sunburst chart: WHAT ARE THE FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THE STRUCTURE OF THE COMMUNITY? — OTHERS (Men, Youth, Women); EDUCATION LEVEL (Youth, Women, Men); GENDER (Women); AGE (Women)

**The communities demand stronger leadership qualities; a leader who can unite the people and bring disputing parties together**. They also believe that regardless of age and education level, a great leader will stand up to the external actors and defend their native rights. On the inclusivity aspect of the communities, women think that there should be more space provided for them in the decision-making process, as some of them feel that the patriarchal structure limits them to be more participative in shaping the progress of their community. According to women in Kg Pasik, their female leader will assume the leadership role during preparations of a festival whereby she delegates tasks to the women and makes sure that this communal event run smoothly.

# D. Sustainability



**WHAT ARE THE FACTORS THAT SUPPORT COMMUNITY MEDIA?**

- 28% Community Radio
- 25% Stable Internet Line
- 24% Good Phone Line
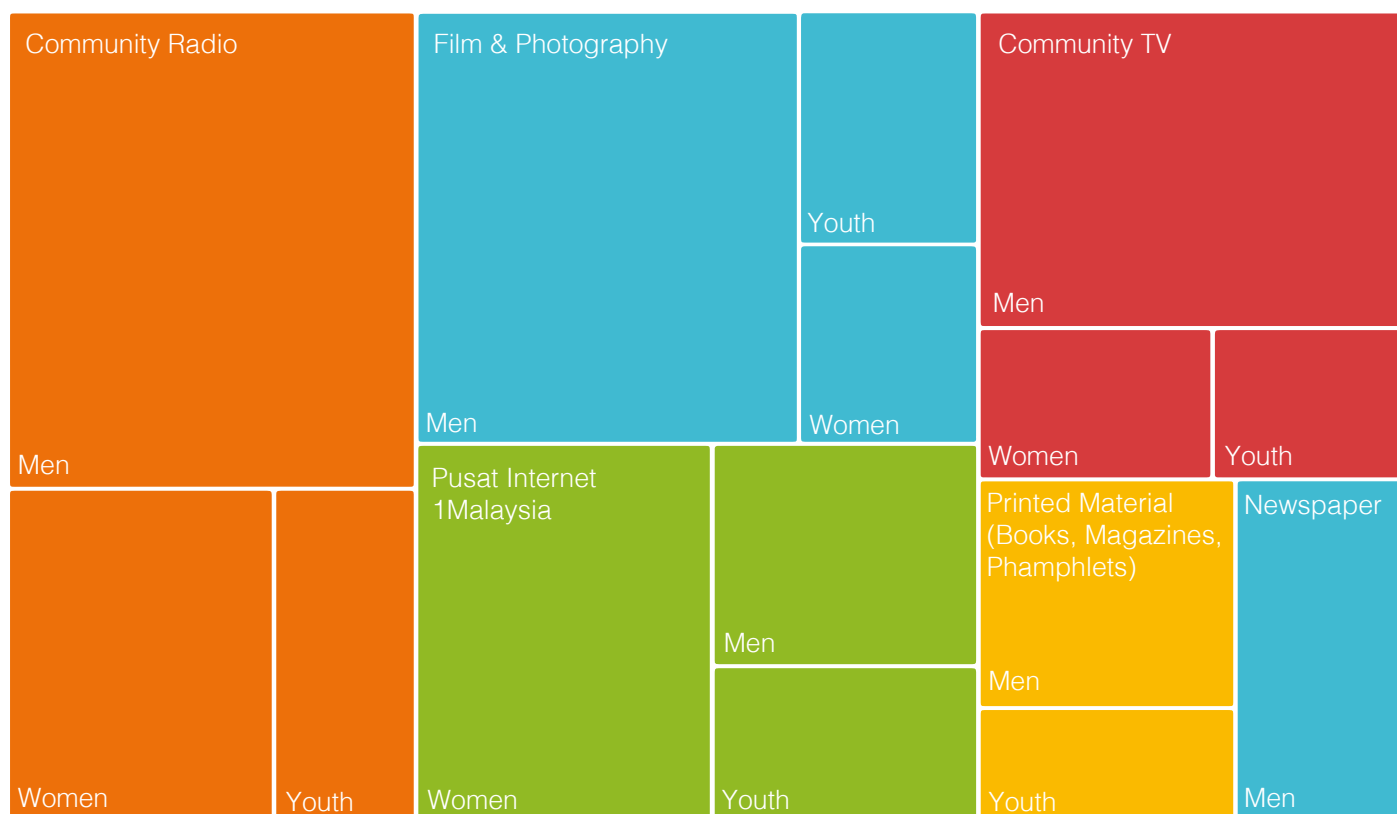- 16% Local Newspaper
- 5% Others
- 2% Local Ordinance

**To begin addressing gaps in the information access and needs of Kg Pasik, Kg Kaloi and Kg Langsat, infrastructure in these villages must be improved.** Kg. Kaloi requires a 3G signal that will help the residents to stay connected with other communities and the world, especially in times of natural and humanitarian disasters such as flash floods, health and environmental crisis and pandemics. Moreover, they have to travel by motorcycle for about 4km in often dangerous off-road conditions in order to get 3G signals to retrieve their backlog of WhatsApp conversations.

**It is understandable that due to the Temiar group's experience in fighting for their land and customary rights, they highly distrust politicians and companies. The concern about interference from these two parties were translated in their consideration to establish community media as well as the financial resources needed to set up and maintain their project.** Since all respondents live below the poverty line, and struggle to make ends meet especially with uncertainties posed by COVID-19 and unsustainable development happening on their lands, the sources of funding will need to be explored further.

# F. Exploring Types and Opportunities

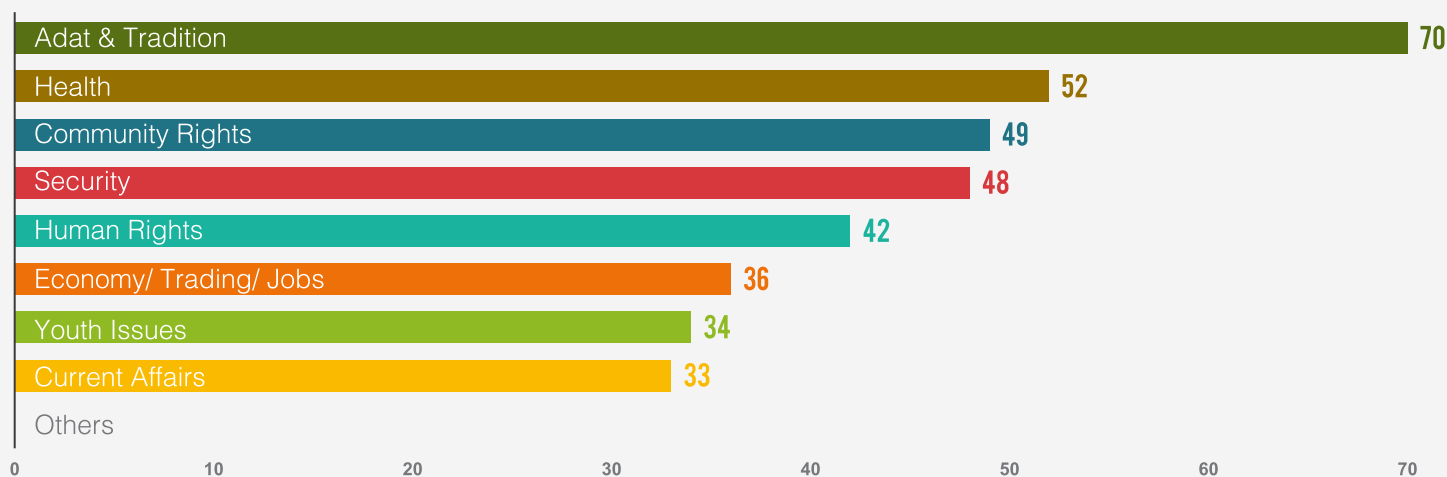## ■ Most preferred type of community media

| Community Radio | Film & Photography | | Community TV |
|---|---|---|---|
| Men | | Youth | Men |
| | Men | Women | |
| Women | Pusat Internet 1Malaysia | | Women / Youth |
| Youth | Women | Men / Youth | Printed Material (Books, Magazines, Phamphlets) / Newspaper |
| | | | Men / Youth / Men |

**Community radio is the media most preferred by respondents as it can be hyper-localised, interactive and engaging. Moreover, the setup cost for each household is not high.** These communities would also like to explore telling their stories and issues in visual forms – either through films or photography, as these mediums will benefit the large number of villagers who are illiterate. In fact, some elders in Kg Pasik who prefer this medium reported that they were hired as extras in a film back in 1970s and really cherish the experience.

**Women, especially those in Kg Kaloi, are very keen to have Pusat Internet 1Malaysia in their village.** Pusat Internet 1Malaysia is an initiative under the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission that provides underserved communities in rural areas with access to broadband services. Hence, building the 1 centre in their village will speed up infrastructure and internet access setup. The centre can also serve as the venue for upskilling the residents with digital skills.

*Pusat Internet 1 Malaysia. Courtesy of MCMC*

| Category | Value |
|---|---|
| Adat & Tradition | 70 |
| Health | 52 |
| Community Rights | 49 |
| Security | 48 |
| Human Rights | 42 |
| Economy/ Trading/ Jobs | 36 |
| Youth Issues | 34 |
| Current Affairs | 33 |
| Others | |

■ **Content that you want to get and share through community media**

Some respondents think that all types of content can be included in community media. However, the most pressing information that they need to share and receive are: information on their customs and traditions, followed by community rights and health topics. Health is an even more pressing topic now, as they learnt from the COVID-19 crisis: the lack of information or fake news on this can be a matter of life or death.  youths and several men want youths issues such as education, unemployment rates and job opportunities to be featured in the media.

## Melangkap & Pitas, Sabah

Another IEA was conducted in the month of August 2020 in Melangkap, Kota Belud and Bongkol in the district of Pitas. Melangkap is the home to an estimated 3,000 native Dusun in five villages. These villages are situated near Mount Kinabalu, blessed with fertile land and panoramic views that attract thousands of visitors each month. In Pitas, respondents are from 20 small settlements and villages or hamlets found along the Bongkol Road. Population of Pitas is estimated around 3,500 people from various ethnic groups who have been experiencing water supply issue and unstable electricity for decades.

# 78%

of respondents need information on current issues. Almost half of them want more religious issues to be discussed through media. Youths want information on jobs while women are interested in reproductive health

## POOR INFORMATION INFRASTRUCTURE

Bad road condition, frequent power outages, unreliable phone connection contribute to reduced community access to information whenever they need it the most.

Village and church bulletin serve as sources of information, but main infrastructure must be improved, repaired and built to withstand adverse effects of natural disasters

ONLY

# 20%

claimed news reach them quickly all the time

## MORE THAN

# 60%

trust news related to security or crimes

## AND

# 4 OUT OF 5

tend to dismiss any news related to politics, as it is hard to differentiate between facts and fake-news

## COMMUNITY MEDIA

# 75%

prefer Pusat Internet 1Malaysia as community media. Community media priority topics are current issues and job opportunities

## INFLUENCERS ARE FROM COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

Although youths and women felt left out of the decision-making, and denied opportunity to elect their own leaders. Thus both groups want to have stronger voices in the community meetings

# Methodology

Resource Person carried out surveys, interviews as well as focus group discussions (FGDs) on a total of 185 respondents. Prior to actual fieldwork, local community researchers from Melangkap and Pitas attended a one-day training session for the purpose of IEA, survey and interview methodologies. All community researchers are fluent in local languages since not all respondents can understand the Malay language. Resource Person and her team also obtained consent from the communities prior to entering the villages.
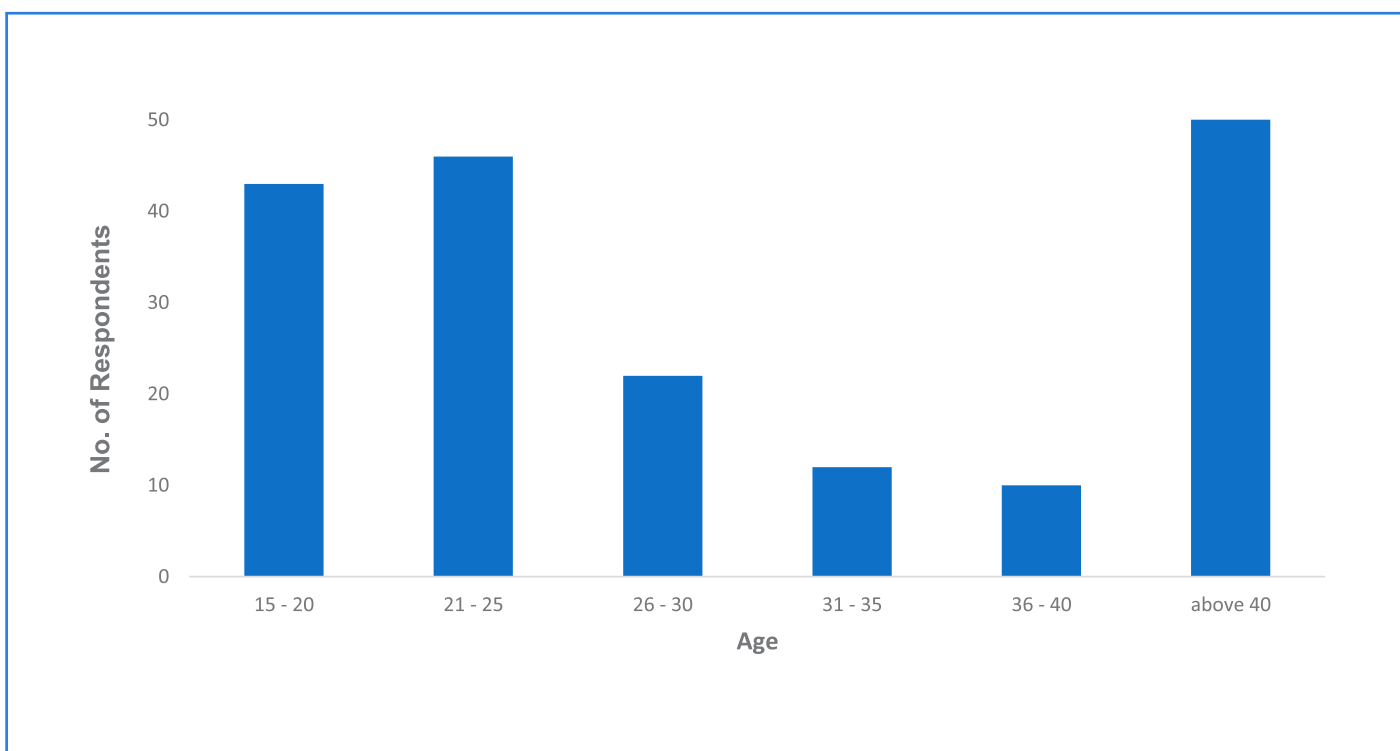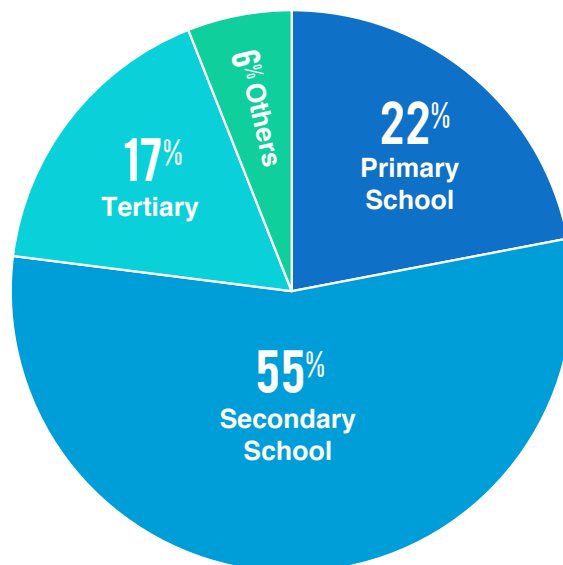
Data collection was done through face-to-face interviews including house-to-house visits. The survey form,

consists of eight sections, was filled up by community researchers or interviewers during the process. Community researchers also hosted FGDs: five in Melangkap and one in Pitas. These FGDs were held in small groups with a maximum of five people as precautionary measures due to Covid-19.

**Gender**



16% Male

84% Female

**Education Level**



6% Others

17% Tertiary

22% Primary School

55% Secondary School



No. of Respondents

Age: 15 - 20, 21 - 25, 26 - 30, 31 - 35, 36 - 40, above 40
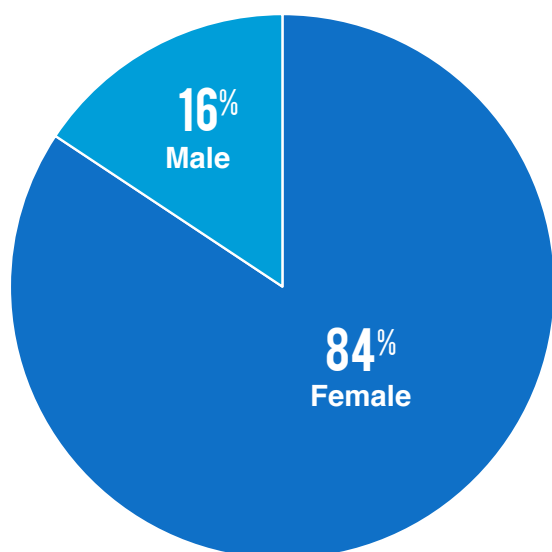
# Information Ecosystem

## A. Macro Environment

### Information Landscape

Sabah is the second largest state in Malaysia with about 32 ethnic groups. The media landscape in Sabah is as varied as that of Peninsular Malaysia. Besides enjoying coverage of national mass media, Sabah has multiple regional radio stations, for example Sabah FM, Sandakan FM and Kupi Kupi FM. At one time, there were 19 newspapers operating in this state[61]. Currently, popular printed newspapers serving 3.9 million Sabahans are New Sabah Times, Utusan Borneo, Daily Express, The Borneo Post and Merdeka Daily News: a Chinese daily based in Sandakan. A few of these publications have columns or sections in Kadazandusun language which helps youths to learn the culture, language and issues of Kadazan-Dusun, the largest indigenous group in Sabah.



To some extent, Melangkap and Pitas are both covered by the same range of media. Most residents own television sets but not all have the necessary decoders to access TV programmes since after the nationwide transition to digital TV. In Pitas, a household claimed they do not have the decoder and the Ultra High Frequency (UHT) aerial required for digital TV. Adding to that, there are only three telecommunication towers serving the 140 km$^2$ district. Consequently, many areas in Pitas are without mobile services. This situation frustrates youths in Pitas. Unlike their peers in Melangkap, they generally stay in their villages and do not leave to find employment outside their district.

Melangkap is comprised of five villages namely Melangkap Tiong, Melangkap Tomis, Melangkap Nariou, Melangkap Kapa and Melangkap Baru. Each have their own village bulletins or public announcement boards set up at their *balairaya* (community hall). Equally important for these communities is their church's bulletin, which many of them found more trustworthy than any other news sources. In comparison, Pitas communities do not have the same information infrastructure. The villagers live far from each other. Some stay in the

interior of palm oil plantations along the Bongkol Road. Most part of this 35km road are not tarred and in bad condition.

| Village names | Community Hall | Balai raya | Market/Tamu | Sundry shop | Preschool | Primary school | Secondary school | Health clinic |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Melangkap Kapa | X | X | | X | X | | | |
| Melangkap Nariou | | X | | X | | | | |
| Melangkap Tomis | X | | | X | | | | |
| Melangkap Tiong | X | | | X | X | X | | |
| Melangkap Baru | X | | | X | X | X | | |
| Datong | | X | | X | X | X | | |
| Manggis | | X | | X | | | | |
| Sungai Eloi | X | X | | X | X | | | |
| Boluuh | X | | | X | | | | |
| Kalumpang | | X | | X | X | X | | |
| Malubang | | X | X | | | | | |
| Sinasak | | X | | X | | | | |
| Kalipuon | X | X | | X | X | | | |
| Bawang | | X | | X | X | | | |
| Fery | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| Ranggu | | X | | X | | | | |
| Sinsilog | | X | | X | X | | | |
| Gusung | | X | | X | X | | | |
| Rukom | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| Tampakahu | | X | | | | | | |
| Kerasik | | X | | X | X | X | | |
| Pantai Kanibongan | | | | | | X | | |
| Taka | | X | | | | | | |

*Infrastructure in the 24 villages surveyed for IEA Sabah*

# Dynamic of Access

Access to information in these areas depends heavily on economic factors, availability of infrastructures and social interaction. Natural disasters can also cut off the mobile network availability, or even worse, roads leading to clinics, schools and workplace. One of the main grievances of the people, not only those in Melangkap and Pitas, but in most districts in Sabah, suffer unstable power supply[62]. Sabah fares worst in terms of electricity supply interruptions compared to Sarawak and Peninsular Malaysia[63.]

**No of Electricity Supply Interruption per 1,000 Consumers
(Unscheduled Interruption)**
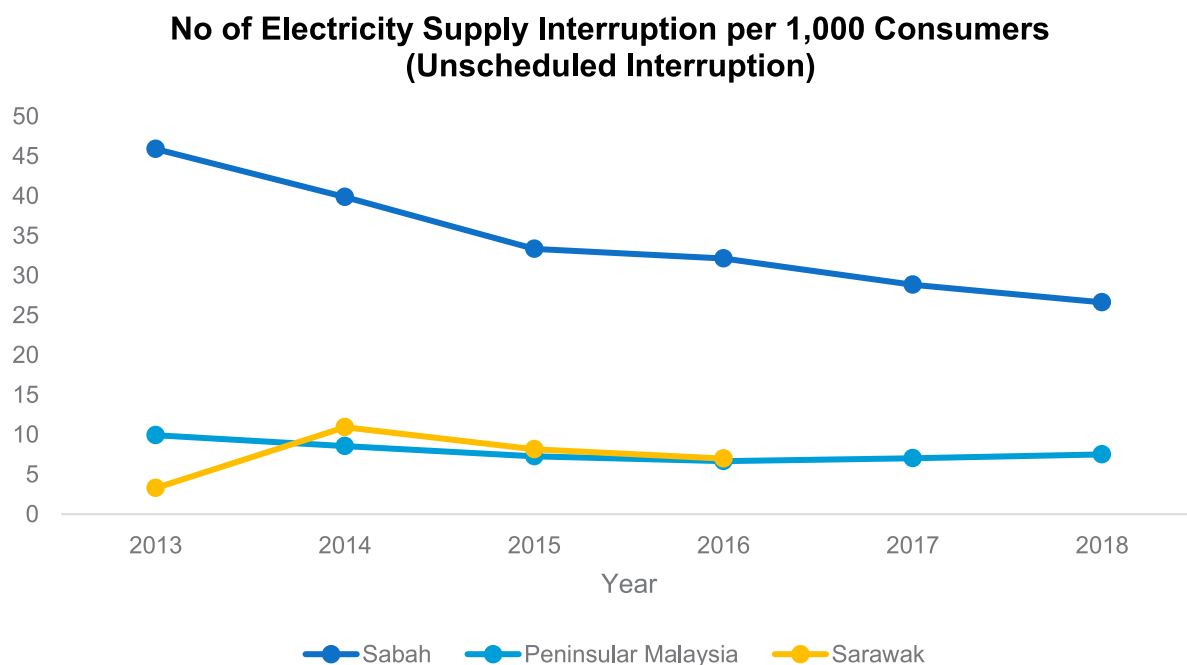


**This truly affect the access to information of respondents in Melangkap and Pitas, who prefer to watch segments on television as they find these can be more trusted and the visual-audio delivery are stimulating**. However, due to continued interruptions in power supply, many respondents complained that their electrical appliances are damaged beyond repair due to recurrent power surges.

**What are the factors constraining your access to media?**
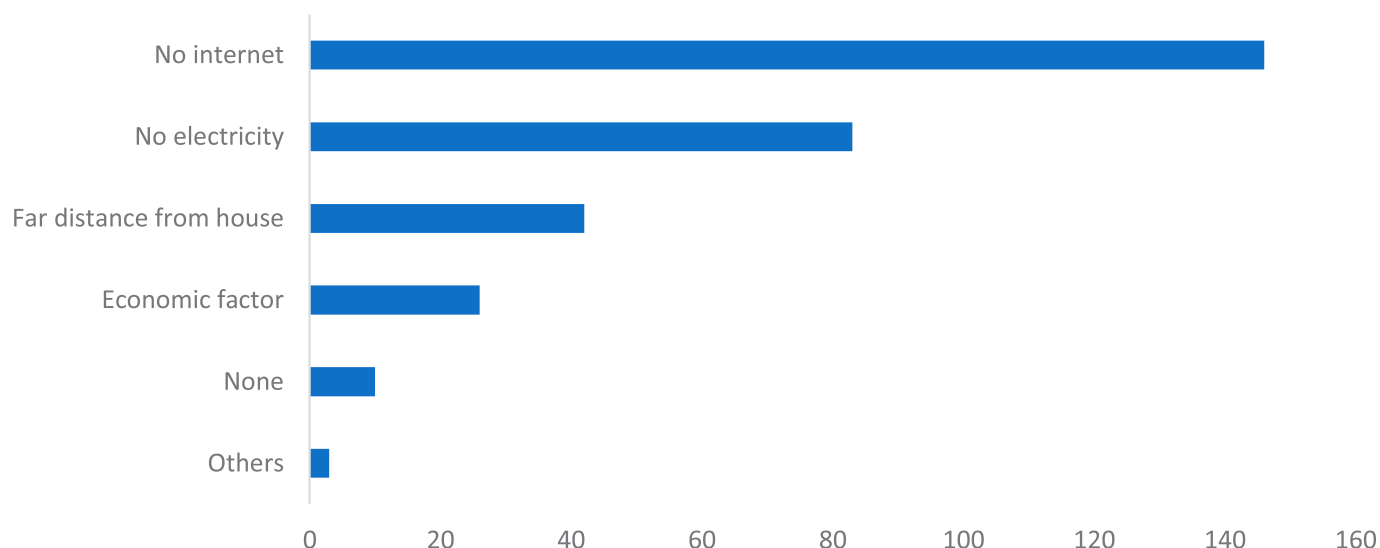
Both communities rely heavily on smartphones for their information. However **mobile services are deemed to be below expectations**. In Melangkap's case, their services would be unavailable whenever natural disasters such as flood or earthquakes happen. Similar to Temiar tribe in Gua Musang, Kelantan, those who do not have mobile signal or suffer from unstable connection need to travel outside of their villages to download information onto their phones for reading later.

Due to the lack of reliable communication channels, the communities have no choice but to depend on word-of-mouth for their information. However, they still believe this type of communication can be the main source of fake news, mainly because the stories may have been distorted or misrepresented along the information chain.

# B. Content Distribution and Environment

## Information Needs

Sabah's main economic activities are tourism, export of oil and gas, timber and palm oil. Despite the abundance of natural resources and mega biodiversity, it consistently fares as the poorest state in Malaysia. Nineteen point five per cent of Sabah households fall under the poverty line. Covid-19 reinforces the economic precarity as tourism industry suffers from travel restrictions, and jobs become scarce. It is imperative for those in power to understand what information those in socio-economically disadvantaged communities want to receive without imposing political interventions. Addressing bread-and-butter and self-determination issues of indigenous Sabah, especially those living in the interior will make a difference.

## Information Need
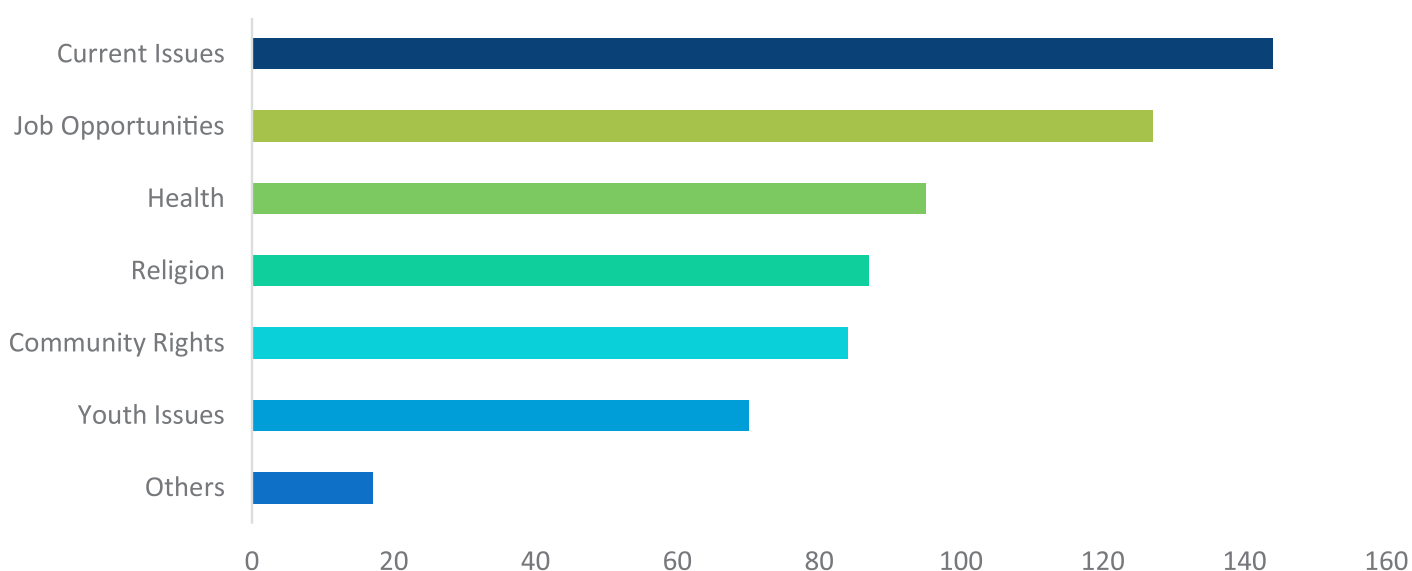


**The finding from IEA revealed that 78 per cent of respondents prioritise current issues and 69 per cent prioritise job opportunities. Since the Covid-19 pandemic still persists, health is also one of the top concerns. Almost half of respondents (47 per cent) want more religious issues to be discussed and disseminated through the media, 45 per cent require more information on community rights. The communities in Melangkap and Pitas are aware of their rights and privileges as natives of the land.**

Respondents cited that they want more information on this matter and how they can fight the violations towards their rights.

In interviews and FGDs, the youths expressed their wish to get information that is affecting them especially one that leads to job and business opportunities. Women particularly were interested to know more about reproductive health as they believe the subject had never been discussed openly before. They also care about issues affecting women and families. Whenever they talked about job opportunities, they meant prospects for their children.

## Production and Movement

For rural communities, information moves either one-way from TV, radio, religious sermons or exchanges during phone calls or social interactions on the ground. As digital media becomes more integral in their lives, information is also relayed in WhatsApp and Facebook communication. The speed of news entirely depends on transportation mode and the availability of mobile signal. Satellite phone usage is rare, due to its exorbitant cost. News also come from outsiders who are granted permission to enter these communities, who can be either non-profit workers or health professionals.

### What are your sources of information?
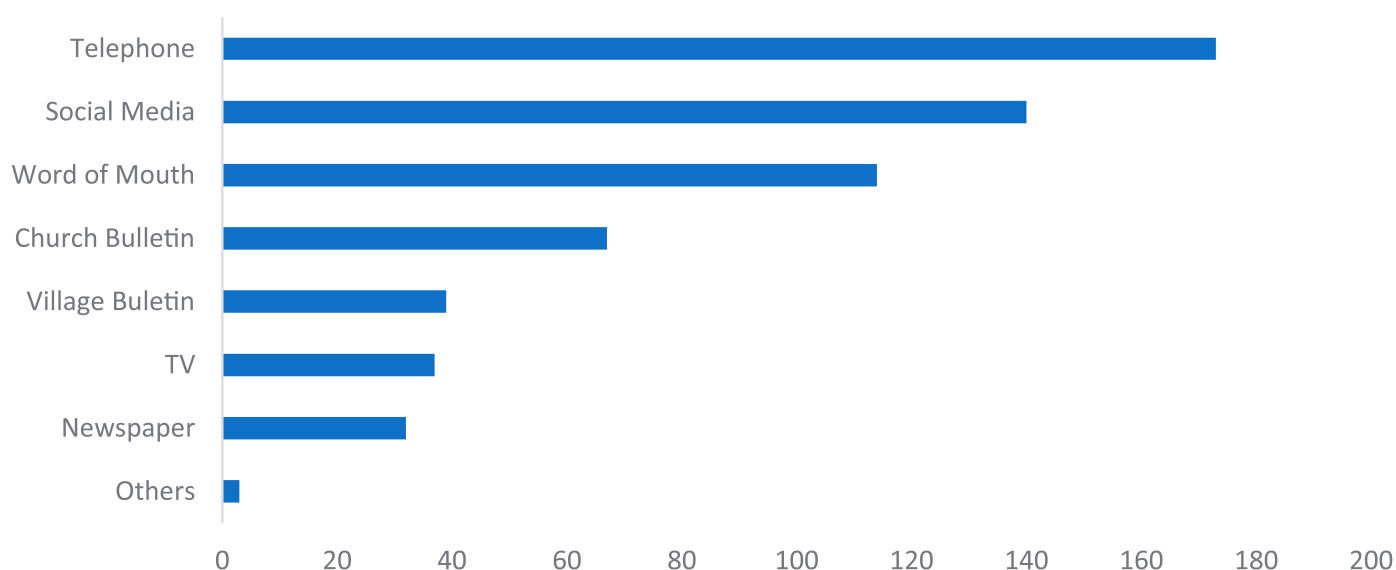


**Ninety-four per cent of respondents cited telephone as their main source of information. Further insights revealed that most of the time, news is received second-hand in Pitas and Melangkap**. Local news and information are shared through WhatsApp groups in Melangkap but there is no evidence of the existence of such groups in Pitas. Hence, latest information is slower in reaching Pitas communities. In comparison, Melangkap have better top-down and bottom-up communication channels. They established a committee thanks to their community protocol which they worked on since 2012. The protocol indirectly helped the communities to organise themselves better and therefore affected the way information sharing from one household to another. Almost all of respondents have access to Facebook and some disclosed that the accounts actually belong to their children or husbands.

Respondents acknowledged that it is situational when it comes to the speed of information. The lack of power supply and phone signals make news reach the community members at slower pace. Only 20% of respondents said news reach them quickly all the time.



**24%** Yes
**25%** No
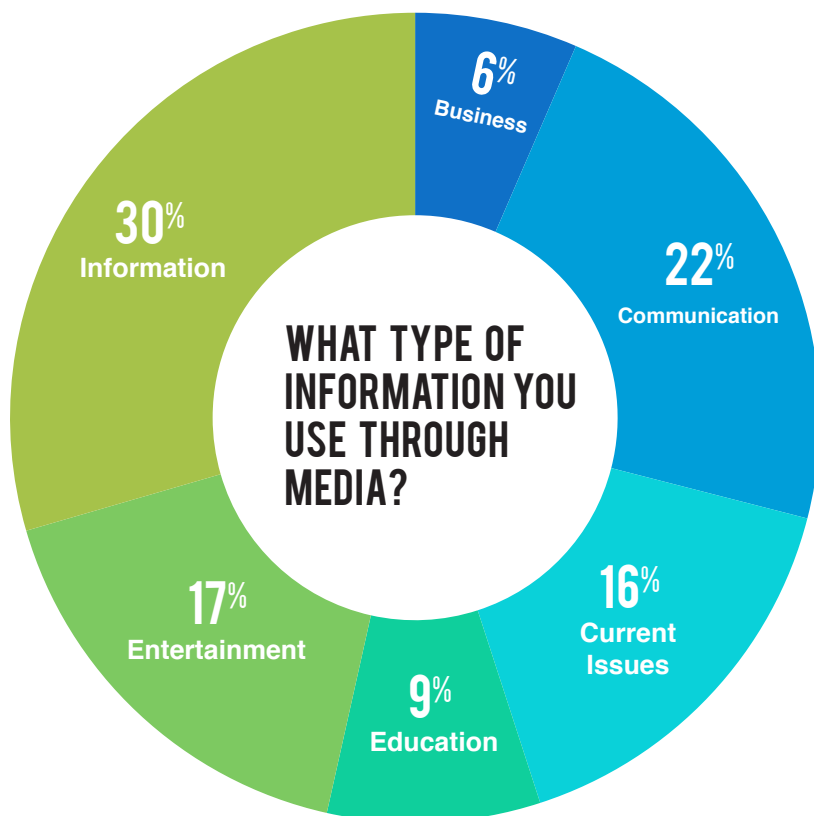**16%** Sometimes
**35%** Unsure
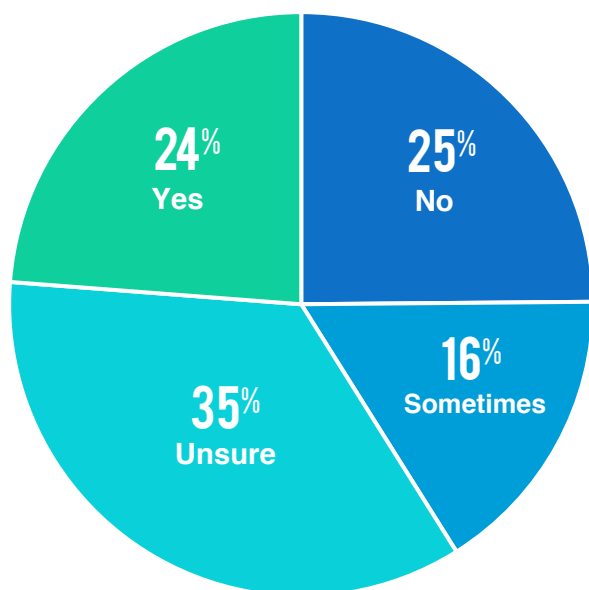
**Do you think your media content is censored?**

**In terms of content censorship or filtering, 35 per cent of respondents said they are not sure since they are not very familiar with the owner or the sources of information. However, they would do self-censorship to ensure they do not contribute to the spread of fake news or the content they share does not offend others or to avoid sharing anything considered vulgar or violent.** One respondent in Melangkap Tiong said her contents are filtered by her children as they do not want her to view the content they would consider 'negative'.

"Many things can be viewed on WhatsApp and YouTube. My children put restrictions on what I should see because they do not want me to view the bad stuff on the Internet."

**A respondent from Melangkap Tiong**

# Information Use



**WHAT TYPE OF INFORMATION YOU USE THROUGH MEDIA?**

- 6% Business
- 22% Communication
- 16% Current Issues
- 9% Education
- 17% Entertainment
- 30% Information

The factors influencing the usefulness of information depends on the receiver's preference, socio-economic status and current situation. Media is used for communication, relaying information, entertainment and doing financial transaction, although mobile banking penetration in Malaysia is 57.5 **per cent**. MCMC 2018 study[64] revealed that 96.5 **per cent** of Malaysia's population use Internet for texting by using Over-The-Top (OTT) messaging platforms and 85.5 **per cent** search information with Internet. The 'Forward Culture' is common in the country, with the most shared information being educational, entertainment & humorous content, news and public service announcement.

**Thirty per cent of IEA Sabah respondents revealed that they use media they trust primarily for relaying and receiving information, and 22 per cent to communicate with each other.** Youths generally use their media for entertainment and education.



**WHAT DO YOU DO WITH THE INFORMATION THAT YOU RECEIVE?**

- 9% Don't do anything
- 22% Share with own comments
- 18% Summarise / rephrase & Share
- 51% Share the exact information immediately

**Only nine per cent of respondents stated that they do not forward information they receive.** Those who choose to summarise messages or share their own comments, stated their reason as wanting to determine the truth of the information.

# C. Human and Social Insights

## Influencers

In rural communities, including indigenous communities in Sabah, influencers typically have positions of power such as community and spiritual leaders who are predominantly male. Sabah Native Courts that serve as judiciary mechanism to address breach of native laws (*hukum adat*) and customs, are usually headed by a male Judge and Native Chiefs. Cultural influence is at play, with traditional leadership, *adat* or customs, consultations with community members are deeply ingrained in indigenous societies such as Kadazan, Dusun and Murut.

## Who is the influencer in your community?
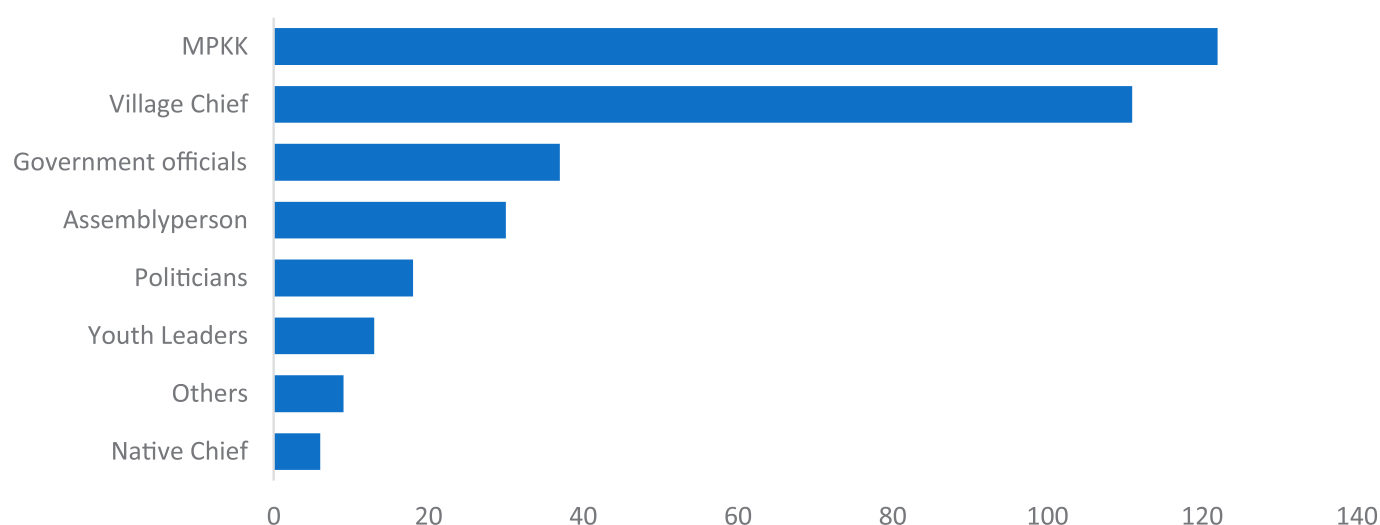


**As expected, the influencers come from traditional leadership of the communities. More than 60 per cent of respondents consider village chiefs and members of Village Community Management Council (MPKK) as main influencers in their communities.** In the highly religious Melangkap communities, church leaders are well-respected. The youths tend to look up to their own leaders, as many preferred to ignore the hierarchical social structure. They have distrust in the system hence, some of youths in Pitas believe the political interference by the state government had denied them the opportunity to select their own leaders.
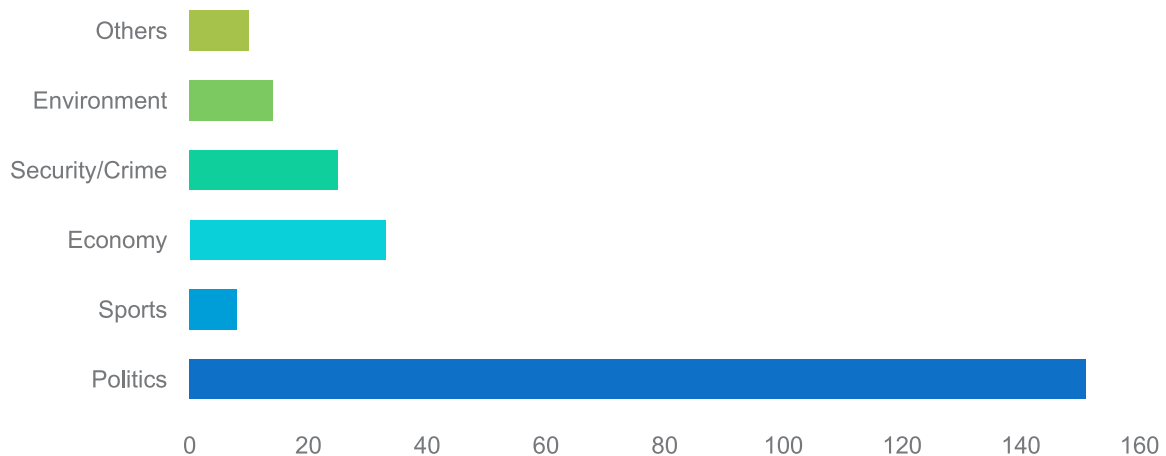
Government officers and assemblymen also act as information gatekeepers. According to respondents, journalists who want to access information about the communities and surrounding areas need to rely on official statements from the District Office or the elected assemblymen.

## Social Trust

The primary factors are the link between influence and trust[65], and whether the source of information is determined to be trustworthy or not. People are more likely to trust information coming from religious leaders and tribal leaders who have high ethical behaviours[66]. The practice of frog-politics (politicians jumping-ship from one party to another) which is not legally wrong, but morally not right, eroded people's trust in politicians, so much so one analyst believed it has stalled the socio-economic progress of Sabah[67].

It is worth pointing out that there are many on-going battles to defend ancestral lands from development projects. The Sabah Land Ordinance 1930 provides for the protection of land rights of the natives of Sabah, referred to as Native Customary Rights (NCR). However, activists from local communities have been facing threats, legal obstacles and abuse of power[68]. Sometimes communities grow divided over land-right issues, and resort to various means of intimidations.

## The least trusted type of information



Horizontal bar chart showing values for:
- Others: ~10
- Environment: ~14
- Security/Crime: ~25
- Economy: ~33
- Sports: ~8
- Politics: ~150

(x-axis: 0, 20, 40, 60, 80, 100, 120, 140, 160)

**Generally, the communities trust their leaders especially in Melangkap. Nevertheless, when it comes to the least trusted information content, respondents tend to dismiss any news related to politics.** When probed further, they view most of the words coming from politicians are lies that are used to fish for votes and to garner sympathy. They also think that there is too many political news until they cannot differentiate between facts and fake news. Therefore, respondents who are majority females are more likely to brush aside political news and want nothing to do with anything political, preferring to leave the issue to men.

Some of the Pitas communities are united by disputes relating to a huge shrimp farm project that they claim continuously threatens their livelihood and destroys their precious mangroves. Unfortunately, not all are on the same page on this matter which makes unity even more difficult. Different households will only accept information from those they trust to be on their side. Land issue is also a major concern. Kg Boluuh in Pitas, for instance, has clashed with a state-owned paper and mill company over the rightful ownership of the lands they are living on.



Pie chart:
- 27% Can be trusted
- 19% Cannot be trusted
- 54% Depends on the situation
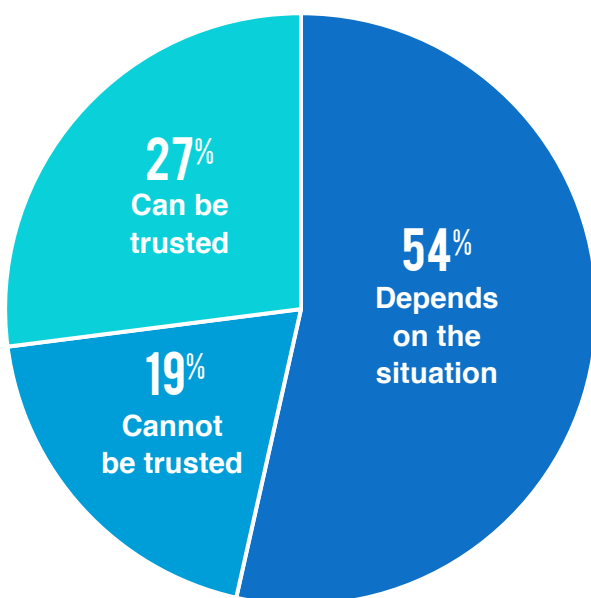
When they were asked about digital (new) media, most respondents refer to it as smartphones and the apps such as messaging apps (WhatsApp and Telegram), weather, online shopping, social media (Facebook) and mobile games. **Fifty-four per cent said that trust in digital media depends on the situation as some information from WhatsApp or Facebook are considered authentic while others too absurd.** If the news is shared by someone they trust, they would consider it to be true and will not hesitate to share the news with others. They also trust the emergency-related content such as natural disasters, road hazards and death of community members.
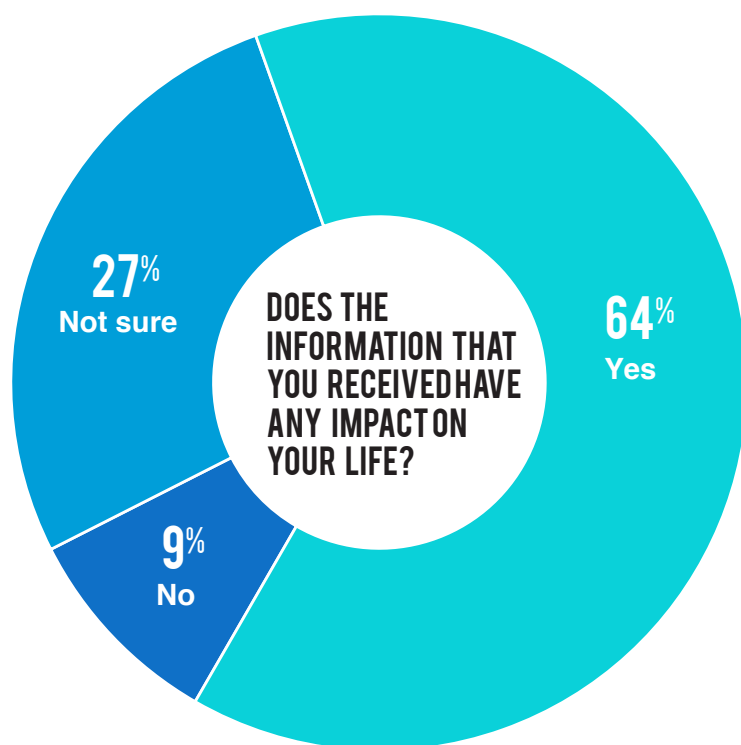
**What is your perception of digital media?**

# Information Impact



*Community researchers conducting interviews with women respondents*

**Since the survey was carried out against the backdrop of COVID-19, most respondents based their responses on the impacts of the pandemic and the efficiency of government communication channels.** Most participants in Melangkap referred to the pandemic when discussing current issues.

**DOES THE INFORMATION THAT YOU RECEIVED HAVE ANY IMPACT ON YOUR LIFE?**

**27%** Not sure

**9%** No

**64%** Yes

They acknowledged that the information received does affect their lives, in both positive and negative ways. On the other hand, communities in Pitas did not put much emphasis on COVID-19. Pitas communities are already burdened with poverty and youth unemployment that COVID-19 seemed to be less of a problem.

# Findings

## A. Media Consumption

### What are your primary sources of information?
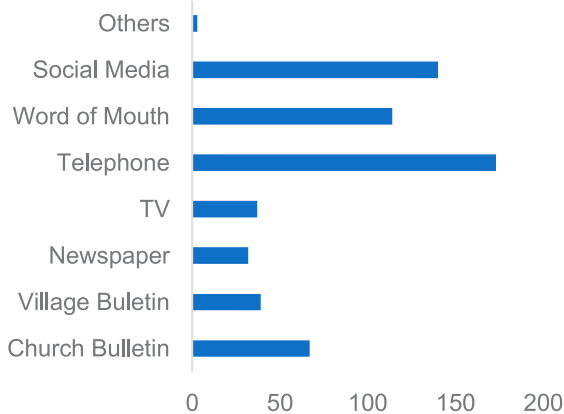


### What is your most trusted source of information?
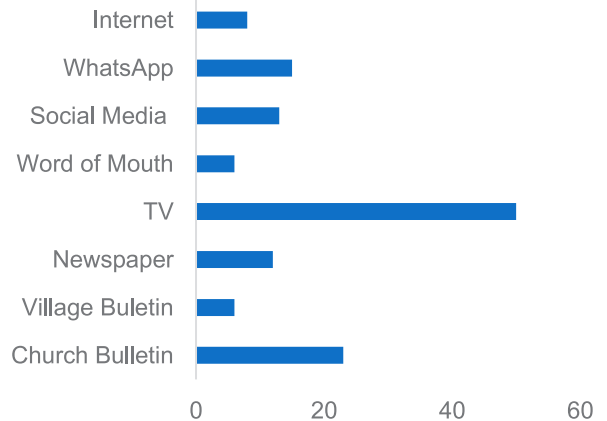


**Telephones including house phones are the main source of information for respondents. This is followed by social media,** especially WhatsApp since it is easy to create groups in which people can talk about mutual issues. In Melangkap, each village has its own WhatsApp group. Communities still rely on word-of-mouth either through their leaders or their family members and neighbours.

Physical and communal medium such as shared bulletin is also common, particularly in Melangkap. Church bulletin is important for communities in this area. Respondents in this area cited they are more likely to trust information they read from their church bulletins than in any other sources. Lesser used

medium is the village bulletin, which comes in the form of flyers or notes put up on the announcement boards at the *balairaya* (community hall).

**Similar to what we found in other communities engaged for the IEA, television commands higher trust amongst respondents in Melangkap and Pitas.** Only 10 per cent claimed that social media can be trusted, as some of them reported as having bad experiences. One respondent claimed she was a victim of fraud when trying to purchase items via Facebook. However, despite the bad contents on social media, some of the news can be trusted, especially when they are accompanied by videos.

### Most trusted content
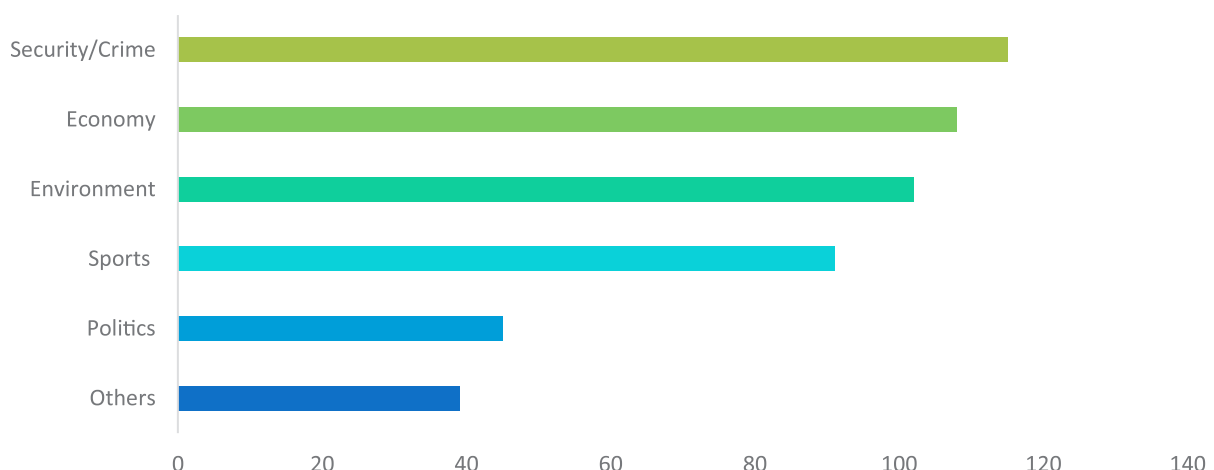
**Sixty-two per cent of IEA Sabah respondents said they trust issues related to security or crime such as accidents, court stories and police statements more than anything else.** They also trust any government announcement about the ongoing battle against COVID-19 and would take the necessary steps to adhere to the required SOPs. One respondent cited that she will only believe a matter is true or not if the Prime Minister mentions it on TV.

Since rural communities must rely on themselves for sustenance, information about the state of economy, opportunities and advices are also trusted. One respondent in Pitas said she would listen to the news on her radio about prices of rubber before deciding to sell her rubber sheets. News on environment issues are very much of interest because of their ongoing land issues.

# B. Media Ownership

**Which media do you own?**
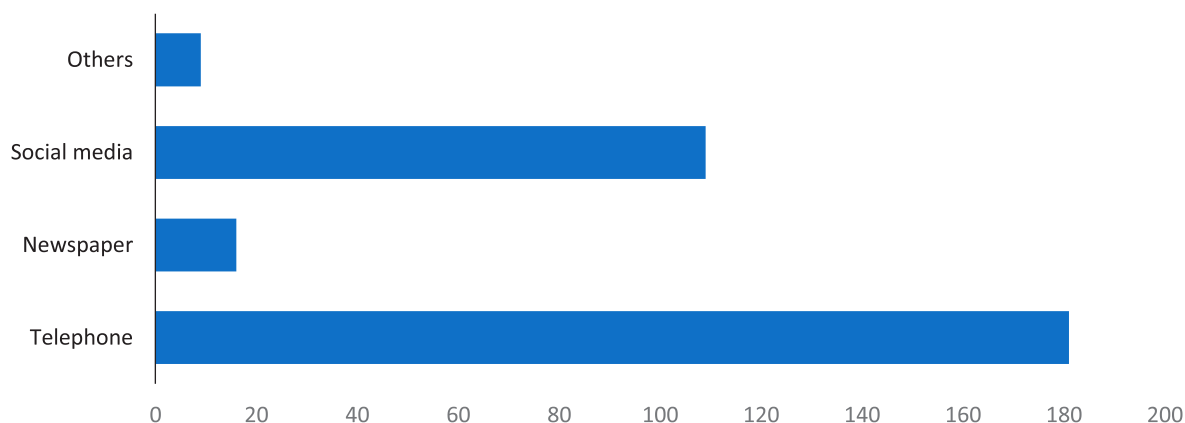


Almost all respondents in Melangkap and Pitas have telephones including fixed lines. They also say they have social media accounts. One respondent who does not own a phone cited she uses her children's phone or her aunt's while another woman said she shares her husband's Facebook account.

**What type of information you have received?**
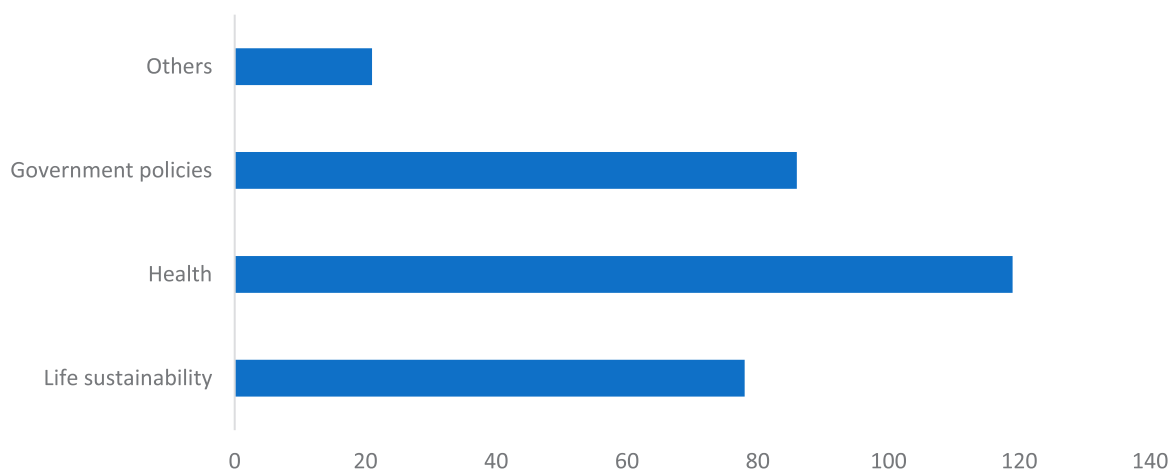


**Through the media that they own, they have received health-related information, government policies and news pertaining to their sustainability. More than half of the respondents said the information they receive are relevant to their communities and would readily share the contents.** Fifty-eight per cent admitted they share content that is deemed useful and 38 per cent does it to establish its truth.

# C. Community Access and Ownership

## What influences the structure of the community?
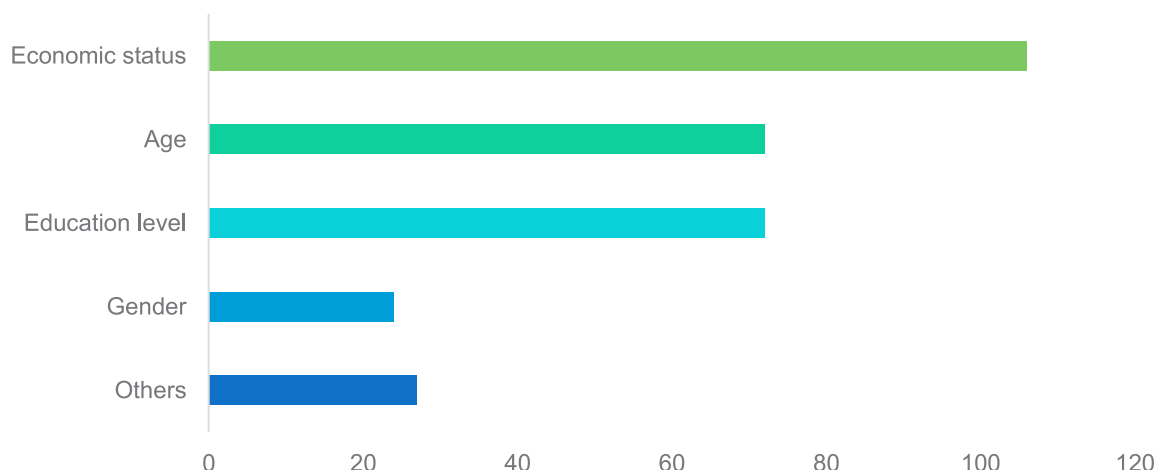


The most significant factor in information flow of these communities is the community leadership. **However, there are a number of respondents especially the younger ones, who do not trust any of the community leaders, namely village chiefs and MPKK committees because they feel they are left out of any decision-making process due to their young age.** To illustrate further, respondents stated that village meetings are always dominated by the older men who voice out their views. Often, these office bearers are appointed not because of their level of education but due to their close connection to the politicians.

Based on FGDs in Pitas, respondents proposed for a complaint mechanism to be created together with a tracking system to measure the performance of the office bearers in the community. They also sought higher participation from the youths and the voice of women, to be represented at the village level. In Melangkap, respondents want their office bearers to kickstart community-based business. Both communities would like to have more frequent meetings with their leaders, community activities and more inclusive WhatsApp groups.

# D. Sustainability

## What factors will threaten the sustainability of community media?
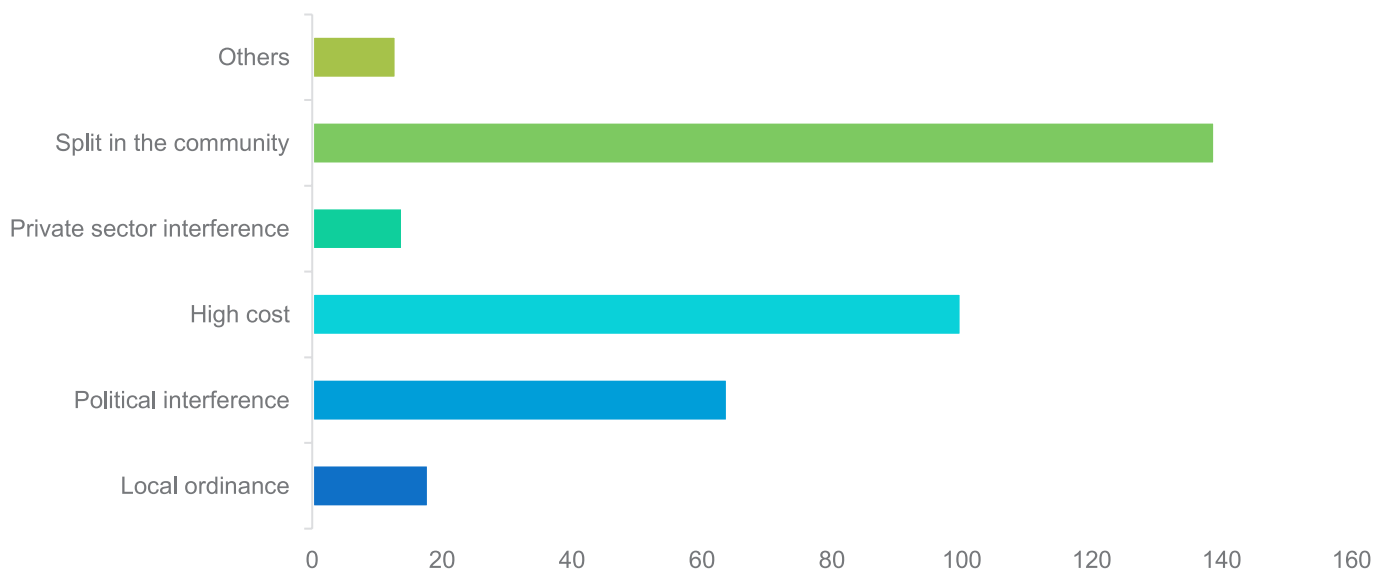
One of the objectives of IEA is to understand aspects that can improve local information ecosystem. **Our findings point to the fact that communities in Melangkap and Pitas are in dire need of a stable phone signal as well as Internet connection. Infrastructure must be improved, repaired and built to withstand adverse effects of natural disasters.**

## What factors will threaten sustainability of community media?
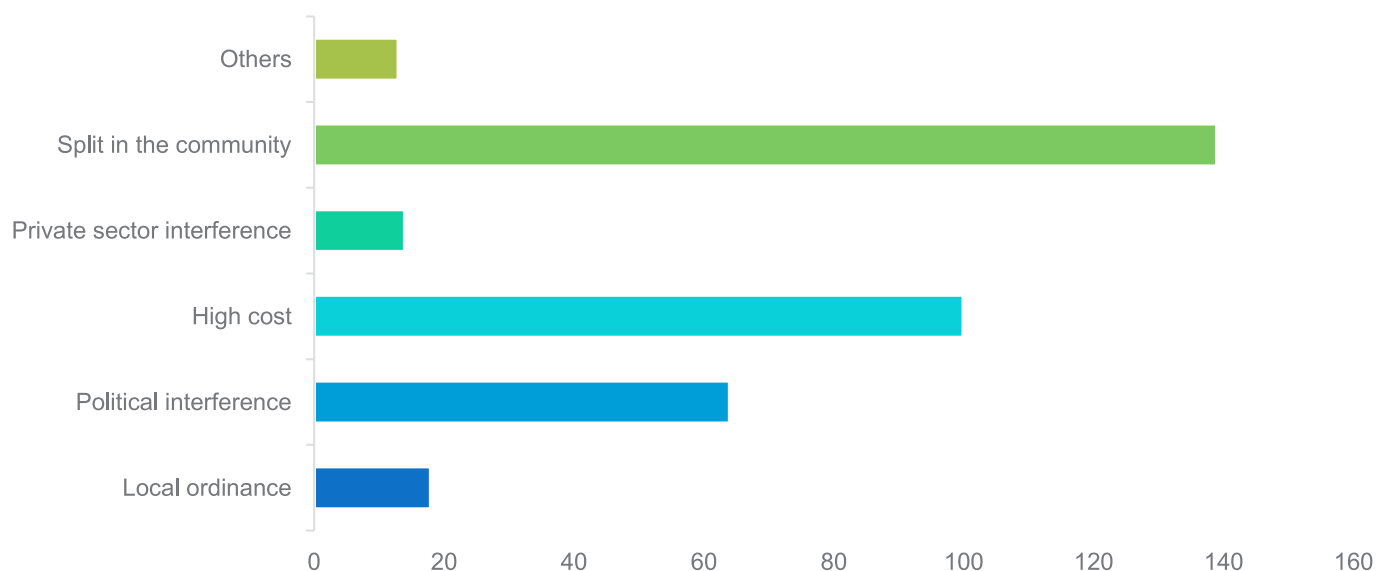


**Respondents are excited about the prospect of having their own community media but most of them are worried that any split in the community will threaten its establishment.** They are also worried about the cost. It might be prohibitive sincethey cannot contribute their meagre income to support community media. From interviews and FGDs, IEA participants are aware that there is always opportunity for abuse or misuse of this type of facility for political purposes. However, they would not tolerate excessive political information or campaign.

**Suggestions by participants to maintain sustainability of community media include setting up a special committee to manage its operations, ensure no fake news will be disseminated through the community media and feature more local issues.**

# E. Exploring Types and Opportunities

## Most preferred type of community media
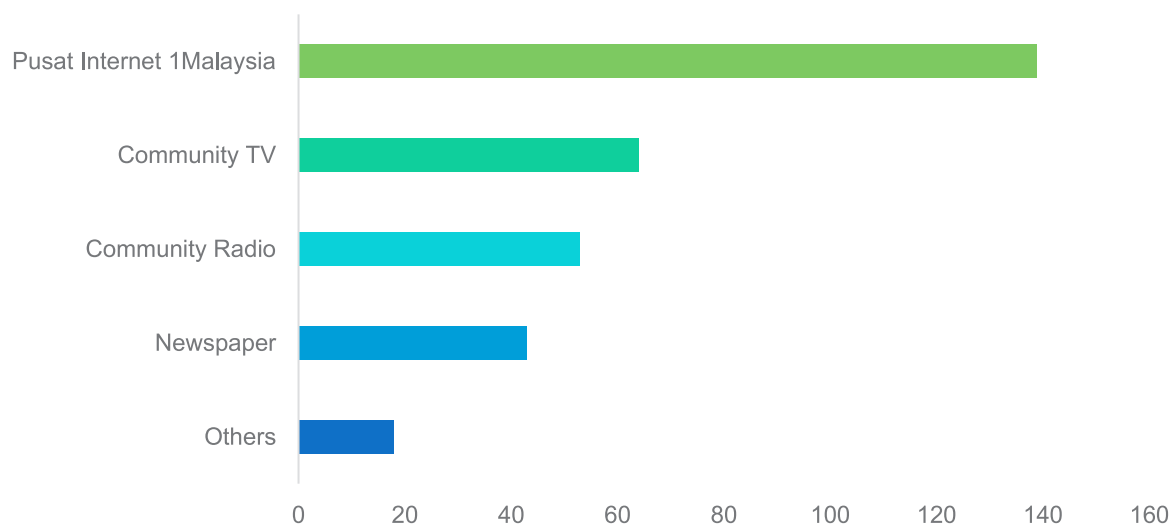


**Majority of the respondents need the 1Malaysia Internet Centre (PP1M) in their areas because they believe it could open doors to many opportunities.** Not only will this infrastructure lead to significantly improved telephone signal and Internet connection but also opportunities in education and efforts to combat misinformation. Community TV is also preferred since many women have limited reading ability and it is easier for them to understand information presented in visuals. Those without grid electricity said they would be happy to have a community radio service.  A shortwave radio could help connect isolated households with others around them, thus speeding up the rate of information.

## Content that you want to get and share through community media
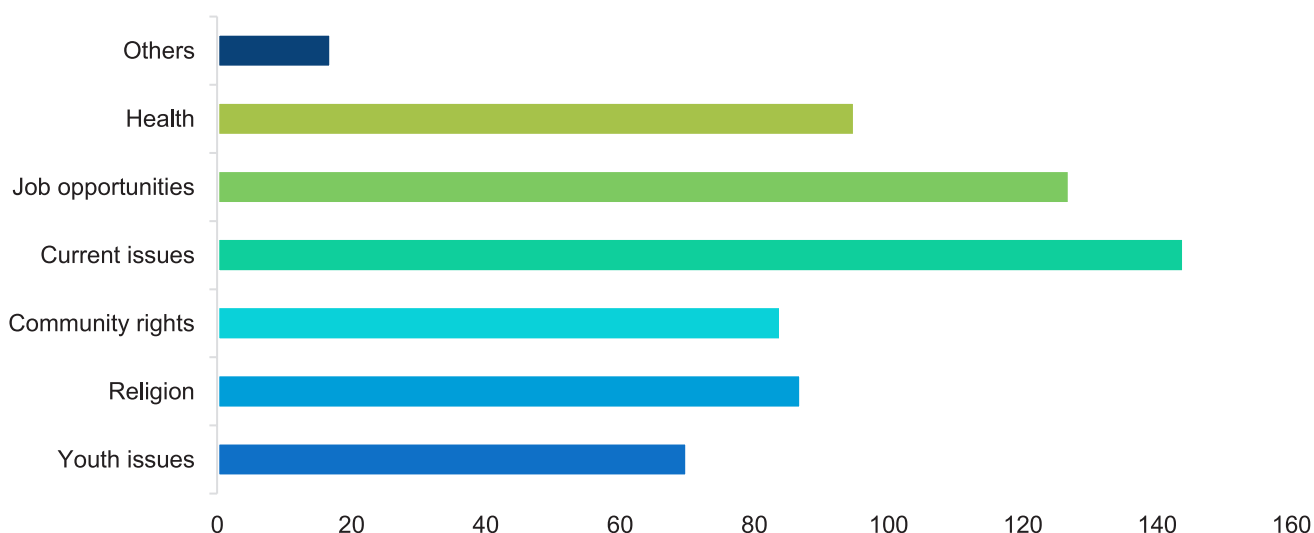


**In terms of the type of content on community media, a total of 78 per cent of respondents in Melangkap and Pitas focus on current issues since it is difficult to differentiate between truth and false.** They were hoping for a community media that can filter out fake news thus helping to resolve this problem. In addition, the youths want to have subjects on business tips and motivational speeches on community media. In Pitas, they want to get out of their villages in search of better livelihoods thus appreciate any information on opportunities to further their studies or to secure a job.

Photo credit: Albert Bansa

## Kg Lebor & Nanga Bekatan, Sarawak

Information Ecosystem Assessment (IEA) in Sarawak was carried out at Kampung Lebor in Serian district and Nanga Bekatan in Julau district. Kg Lebor is a village of 250 households of the native Dayak who work in various sectors including agriculture. About 150km northeast of Kg Lebor is Nanga Bekatan, where IEA respondents reside in 34-door longhouse in Rumah Michael, accessible only by boats. Primarily, it is an agricultural community. Planting black pepper, hunting, pig-rearing and fishing are main activities. The villagers here have been facing issues with their native customary lands due to encroachment by private companies.

# 65%

listed village chief as the main influencer. Inclusivity in decision-making is one of key factors of great leadership in their communities

# 76%

of respondents forward info or messages they receive, either summarised, with or without personal comment.

## DISTANCE AND SERVICE RELIABILITY MATTER

The closer to town, the better access to information. With more content disseminated exclusively on digital platforms, remote areas are missing important information if they do not have mobile phone connection.

Telephones including house phones are the main source of information while social media is getting more popular as the medium of communication

## MORE THAN

# 50%

dismiss any news
related to politics.

## AND

# 59%

trust security-related
news such as court

## COMMUNITY MEDIA

# 70%

prefer Pusat Internet
1Malaysia as community
media. Community
media priority topics are
current issues and job
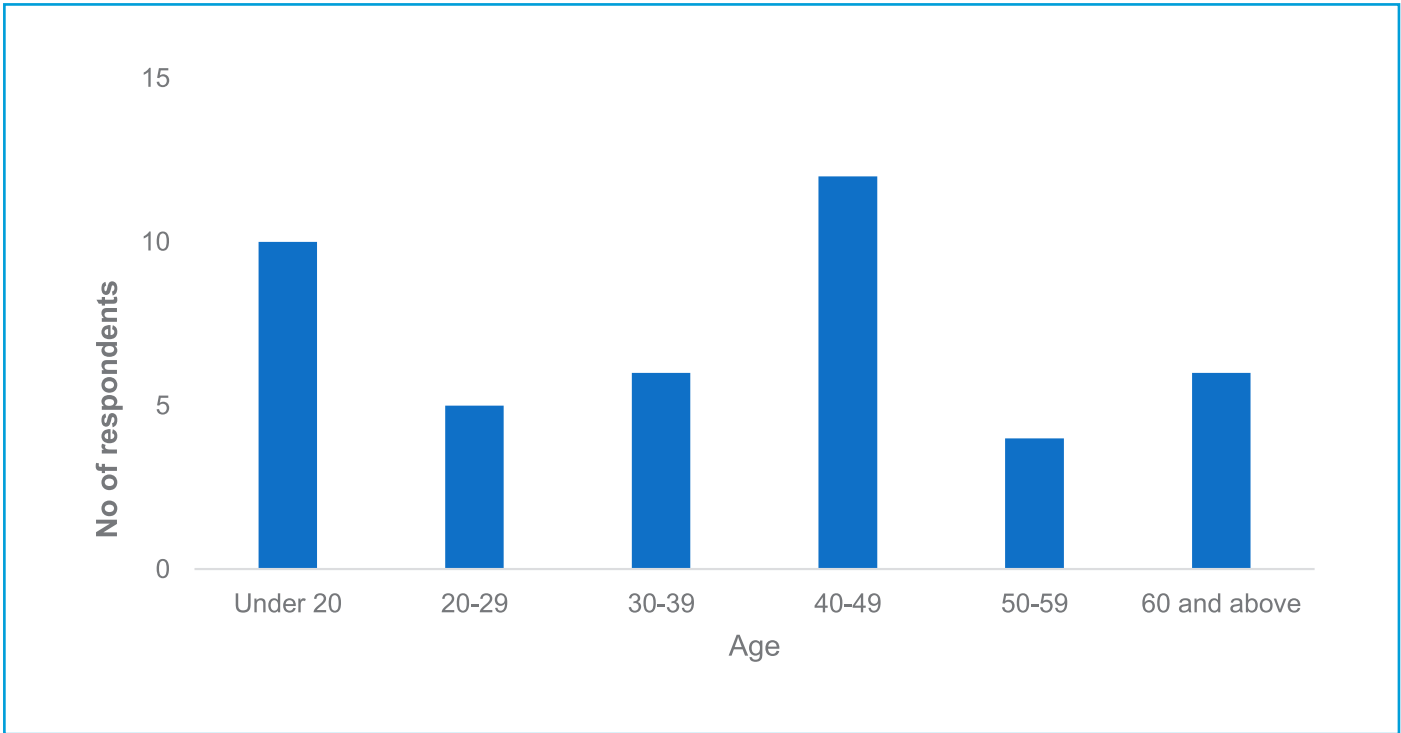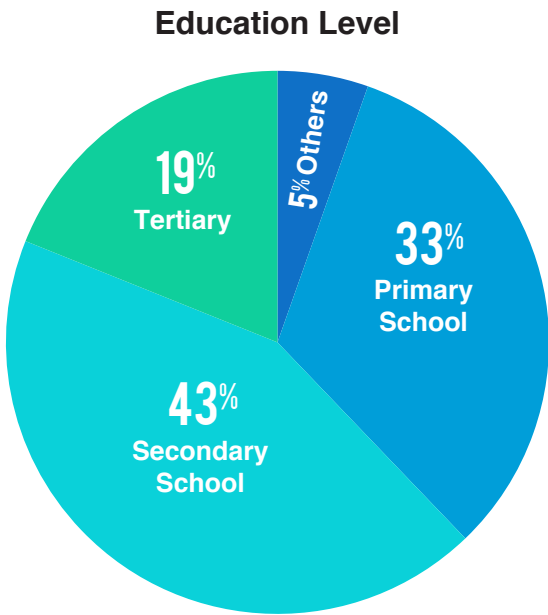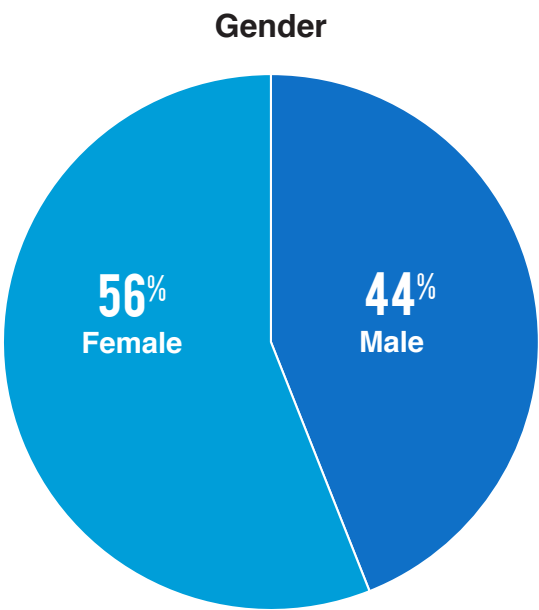opportunities

# LOCAL NEWS THAT ARE RELEVANT

is in demand. Only 1 out of 4 respondents in remote Nanga Bekatan declared they are affected by the information they receive

# Methodology

IEA employs qualitative and quantitative approaches in assessing the information ecosystem in Kg Lebor and Nanga Bekatan. In September 2020, surveys were carried out for 37 respondents on both sites. Due to apprehension of Covid-19 and political reasons, coupled with time constraints, FGD was facilitated only in Nanga Bekatan. Access to these communities depended on consent from their leaders. Ultimately, community researchers led by the residents of Kg Lebor conducted house-to-house visits and face-to-face interviews in the community, while Resource Person was allowed to do IEA in Nanga Bekatan after meeting with the Village Chief at Julau town. Here, Resource Person and five community researchers and translators conducted the survey in a meeting called by the Village Chief. Six women from Nanga Bekatan participated in FGD, which was conducted in Iban and Malay languages.

The team of Resource Persons faced challenges such as political differences, lack of interest by the community in Kg Lebor and difficulty to establish connection with the head of RH Micheal. They had to travel a couple of days before reaching Nanga Bekatan.

It shall be noted that the ensuing assessment takes into account, the difference in the demography of respondents between the two sites. All Nanga Bekatan respondents are over 35 years old, since during the time of the assessment, children and youths stayed at their school. They usually come back to the village every fortnight. It is easier to get young participants in Kg Lebor. Despite this distinction, the community researchers got useful insights on information dynamics, gaps and needs of the two seemingly different worlds.

**Gender**



56% Female
44% Male

**Education Level**



5% Others
19% Tertiary
33% Primary School
43% Secondary School

# Information Ecosystem

## A. Macro Environment

### Information Landscape



Sarawak is the largest state in Malaysia and home to 27 ethnicities with 45 dialects[69.] . Dayak indigenous people, comprising Iban, Bidayuh, Kedayan and others, accounts for being the largest ethnic group in Sarawak, followed by Malays and Chinese.  Major newspapers serving the 2.8 million Sarawakians are Borneo Post, Dayak Daily and New Sarawak Tribune, in English as well as Utusan Borneo and Utusan Sarawak, in Malay. There is a pull-out section of Utusan Borneo, Berita Iban for Iban language readers.  The landscape of broadcast radio is even more varied with Sarawak FM, Klasik FM, Cat FM, RedFM, WaiFM and other regional stations.  ASTRO radio stations, namely MY FM, HITz FM have their own Sarawak version and Radio BERNAMA (National News Agency) is broadcasted in Kuching area. The first community radio in Malaysia was hosted in Bario for Kelabit communities.

To improve rural Internet connectivity, the Federal Government built Pusat Internet 1Malaysia (PI1M) since 2013. It is usually a small centre, equipped with Internet, computers and class equipment, offering classes like entrepreneurship and creative multimedia.  There are 130 PI1M across Sarawak.

| Village names | Balairaya (Community Hall) | Market/ Tamu | Sundry shop | Preschool | Primary school | Secondary school | Chapel | Health clinic |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Kg Lebor | x | | x | x | x | x | | x |
| Nanga Bekatan | | | | | | | x | |

Information landscape between Kg Lebor and Nanga Bekatan is very different. **Kg Lebor has a well-maintained road that connects it to the Serian township. The residents pay for electricity and clean water and served by news sources like any other developed areas in Sarawak. Television set is a fixture in almost every home.** It seems that the switch from analogue TV to digital TV caused no grouses among respondents of the IEA. The area is also served by major telecommunication service providers.

**The most visited place in Kg Lebor is none other than a very active Pusat Internet 1Malaysia (PI1M).** The centre is frequented by villagers, especially young children. It hosts computer classes and entrepreneurship courses including baking, cooking and grooming. Due to its popularity, occasionally villagers post notices on the centre's announcement board instead of the board at their *balairaya* (community hall).

In the case of Nanga Bekatan, their only in-house facility is a Catholic chapel. Priests visit them once or twice a year during Advent (for Christmas) and Lent (for Easter). Their sole transportation is boat, by which they travel 5km to primary school and health clinic in Nanga Ensiring. To buy groceries, they must travel 58km to the nearest shop or even 100km to Julau town, which has better and cheaper options. On a positive note, **Nanga Bekatan residents enjoy free 24-hour electricity from micro-hydro dam.** They helped build this micro-hydro dam under the 1Malaysia Sarawak Advisory Council back in

2013. The nearby river provides them with free water supply.

**Newspapers is not accessible in this area, understandably because of the long distance to Julau town. The residents do have access to Njoi satellite TV and only one radio station: WAIfm,** an Iban language entertainment and news channel by RTM. Unfortunately, for reasons unknown, the longhouse is only able to access this station from 6am to 10am before the channel goes silent and begin its broadcast again at around 4pm until late at night.

## Dynamic of Access

Similar to IEA findings in Sabah and Kelantan, communities' access to information can be affected by availability of information infrastructure, as well as reliability of services, namely electricity and phone signals. Another additional factor is distance, the closer to town, the better access to information. Newspapers are found in major towns although most news outlets have migrated their content onto digital platforms. This means the remote areas are missing a lot of news if they do not have mobile phone connection. The Government of Sarawak recognises this problem, thus recently announced its plan to setup telecommunication service[70].

**Kg Lebor and Nanga Bekatan considered different factors as affecting their access to**

## What are the factors constraining your access to media?



| | Kg Lebor | Nanga Bekatan |
| --- | --- | --- |
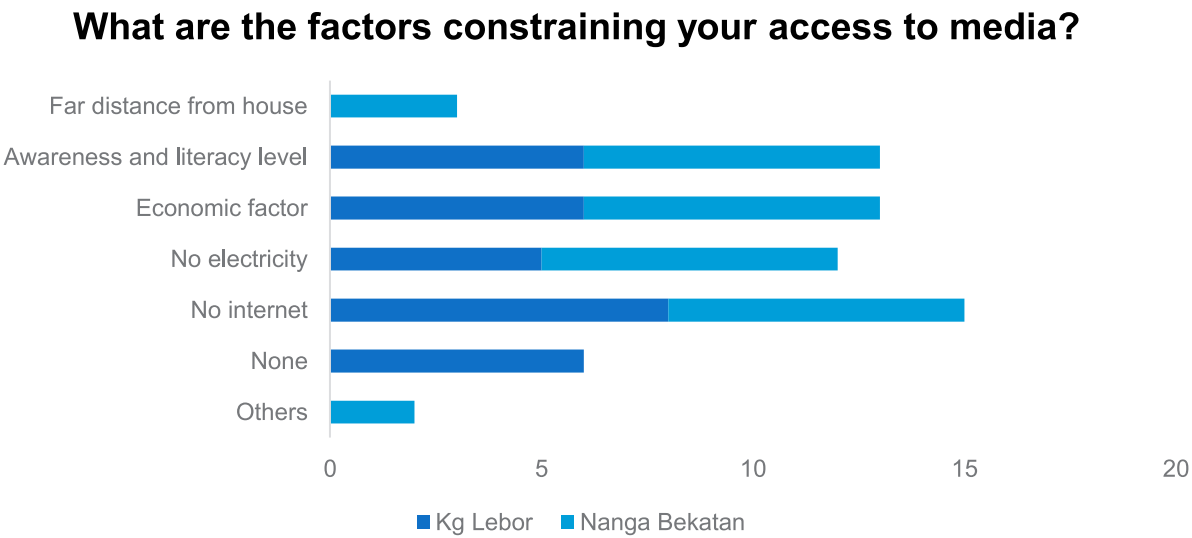
**media. There are respondents from Kg Lebor who have no issues at all, while some from Nanga Bekatan cited the factor as being the distance between their residential area and the source of media. Forty-one percent of total respondents viewed a lack of Internet as problematic.** Kg Lebor respondents reported that occasionally, they experience power failures which means the nearby telecommunication tower would not function and the mobile signal gets lost. This affects those who rely on their smartphones for information, communication and education. Teachers also use WhatsApp to send homework to their students, usually through parents' phones.

As of RH Micheal in Nanga Bekatan, the residents need to climb a hill (10-minute ascent) behind their longhouse and pray that they would be able to pick up stray signals from Maxis and DiGi (telecommunication providers). Consequently, any attempt to contact the community would depend on whether the village chief is available to climb the hill and check his WhatsApp messages. Since MCO, classes and homework have been delivered online. Therefore, the hill become youths's permanent hangout to do their schoolwork. Some parents even built a shelter there for their children's comfort.

In the FGD, it was mentioned that there is no guarantee they will get Internet signal every day. Sometimes, signal will be off for a few days. Although all residents have mobile phones, most of them need to change their numbers almost every year because they would forget to top-up their mobile plan and their numbers would expire.



*Residents in Nanga Bekatan have to climb 10 minutes to the top of a hill for stray mobile signal while residents in Kg Lebor can surf internet at the Pusat Internet 1Malaysia daily. Credit to PI1M Kg Lebor*

# B. Content Distribution and Environment

## Information Needs

### Information Needs
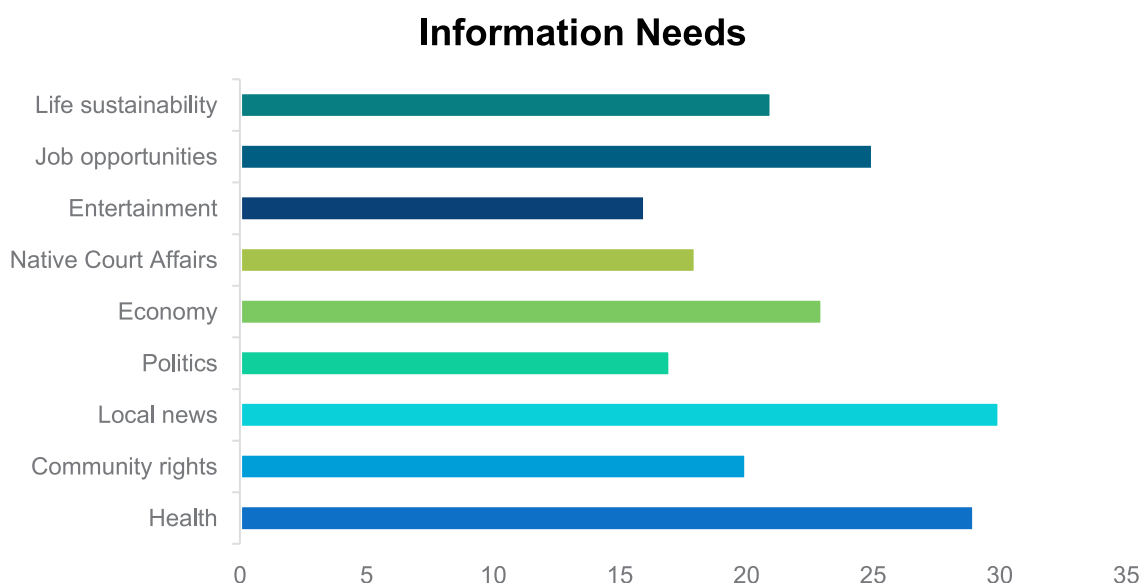


Both communities want more local news that are relevant to their lives. Example of local news are new projects for their locality, current prices of black pepper, what their assemblypersons have been doing for their constituencies and whether their requests for new infrastructures have been addressed. Health-related information is also as important, particularly about Covid-19 pandemic. Both men and women are interested to know more about reproductive health.
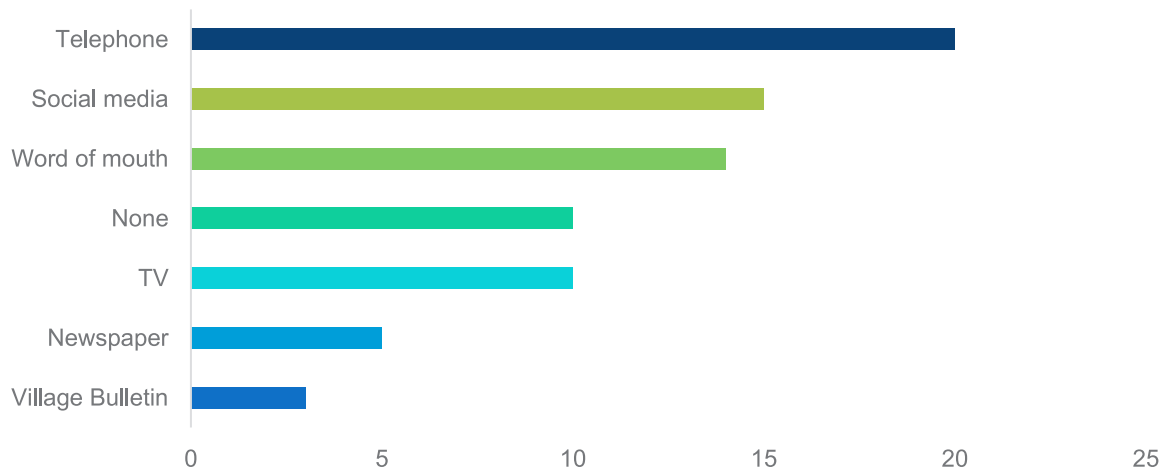
Native Customary Reserve (NCR) land is a major issue for Nanga Bekatan residents. They have had many bad experiences with logging companies, whom they claimed encroached their NCR land as well as government officials who protect these entities. The village chief reported that his people had learned about their native rights from Sarawak Dayak Iban Association (SADIA). Many respondents agreed that mainstream media should highlight more stories about how other indigenous communities defend their rights.

Furthermore, 68 per cent expressed the need for information about job and market opportunities. Women in Nanga Bekatan are also keen to learn about marketing their handicrafts and making their products better, while the men want to search for other lucrative markets for their black pepper produce.

## Production and Movement

Information for rural areas are produced by many actors, such as media, government, religious leaders, non-profits and teachers, that trickle down to communities through various mediums. In Sarawak, media is available in major languages including Iban, which can be taught in school if there are requests from parents. Word of mouth, community meeting, hangout sessions and physical medium such flyers and posters are primary channels of communication, gradually to be unseated by digital media as mobile signal becomes available in remote areas.

# What are your primary sources of information?

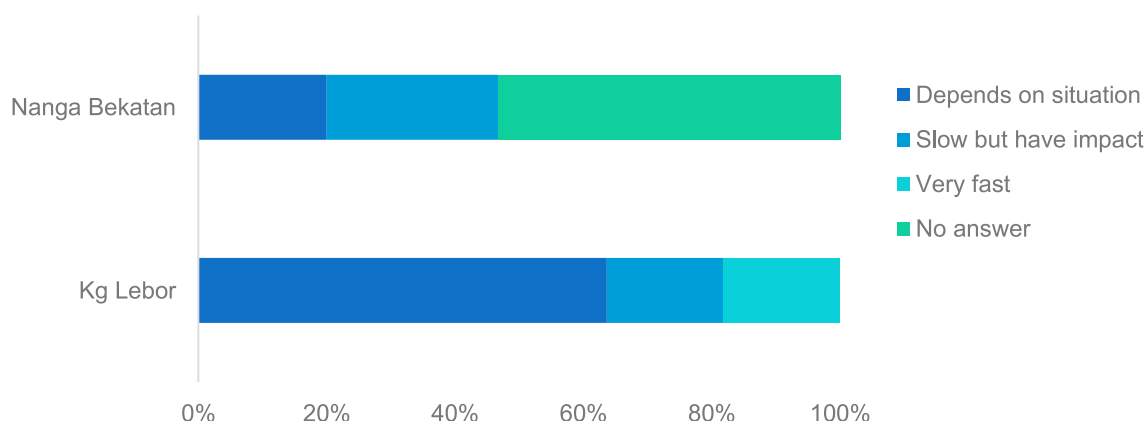| Source | Value |
|---|---|
| Telephone | 20 |
| Social media | 15 |
| Word of mouth | 14 |
| None | 10 |
| TV | 10 |
| Newspaper | 5 |
| Village Bulletin | 3 |

**Telephone is still popular among respondents, followed by social media and verbal communication. In the case of Kg Lebor, the residents receive their news first-hand through mainstream media.** Government officials routinely visit the village to inform the villagers of the government's plans and upcoming projects. Respondents acknowledge they receive their information almost immediately through their phones or family members. Otherwise, information comes from the Village Chief, especially local issues such as the recent enforcement of village closures. On top of these, WhatsApp and Facebook are used for sharing news with one another.



*Residents of RH Michael watching TV at the house of the Village Chief*

In comparison, Nanga Bekatan is more laid back. Both men and women do not seem to care much about the outside world, perfectly content minding their own business. Any information that needs dissemination will go through their charismatic village chief, who is trusted and respected by the community. The TV is used mainly for the 8pm primetime news. At night, community members gather at the *ruai* (a 30feet long corridor where community members can socialise) to discuss their day while relaxing with a glass of *tuak*. For men, they would update each other about the movements of government officials in and around their NCR lands. This information is obtained through villagers from other longhouses who have the same concerns of land rights violation.
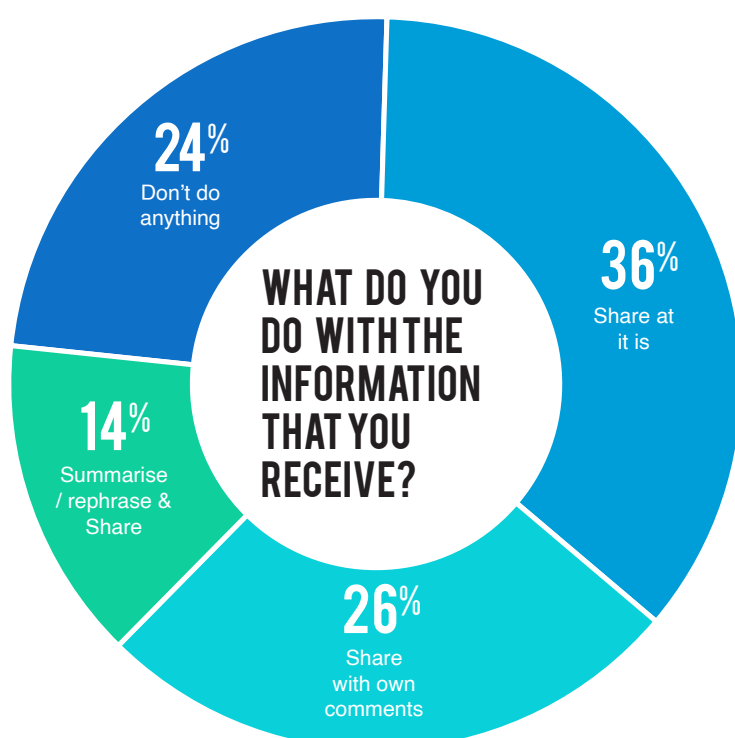
## How fast does your community receive information?



Legend:
- Depends on situation
- Slow but have impact
- Very fast
- No answer

Categories: Nanga Bekatan, Kg Lebor
X-axis: 0%, 20%, 40%, 60%, 80%, 100%

**The speed of information is influenced by socio-economic factors, information landscape and the location of the communities. Some respondents from Kg Lebor get their information almost instantly. They even expect to receive news at this pace. Others acknowledge that it depends on the situation. Compared to Nanga Bekatan, the pace of information flow is expectedly slower.** Villagers usually receive news such as the passing of a resident of neighbouring longhouse within an hour as villagers from that longhouse will spread the news to other longhouses along the Kanowit River. Death of family members who live beyond Nanga Bekatan would only be known once the residents climb the hill and check their phone.

## Information Use

**Majority of IEA respondents use digital (new) media for communication while the youths cited entertainment as their main purpose of using digital platforms.** A group of youths from Kg Lebor mentioned they usually play games on this media. Ten per cent of the respondents claimed they do not own or know how to use smartphones due to lack of interest or skills to use this technology. In Nanga Bekatan, longhouse residents use their phones to communicate with potential customers. They take pictures of their product such as homemade *tuak* and sitting mats and send them to prospective buyers.



**WHAT DO YOU DO WITH THE INFORMATION THAT YOU RECEIVE?**

- 24% Don't do anything
- 36% Share at it is
- 26% Share with own comments
- 14% Summarise / rephrase & Share

**76% of respondents forward messages they received, either summarised, with or without personal comments.** Those who summarise or share with comments said they do so in order to determine the truth of the information.

# C. Human and Social Insights

## Influencers

It is observed that patriarchal structure is embedded in both communities. However, the community in Nanga Bekatan is more open and inclusive compared to those in Kg Lebor.

## The most influential people in your community
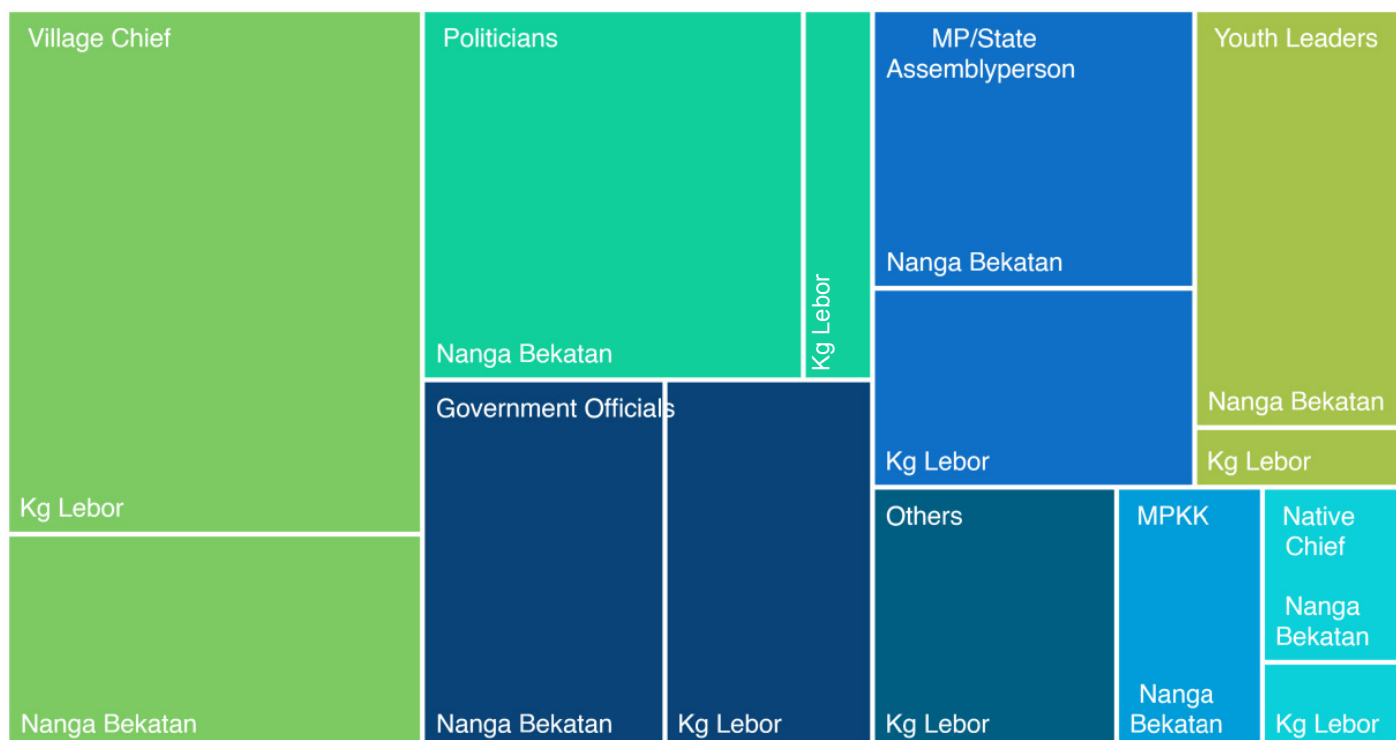


**This explains why 65 per cent of respondents listed village chiefs[71] as the main influencers in these communities.** Outsiders such as government officials, assemblypersons and politicians also exert influence, to a certain degree, on lives and the decision-making process. Who these communities refer to as politicians are members of political parties who would go to their villages to campaign for their leaders.

**All male respondents in Nanga Bekatan listed politicians and their village chief as their main influencers. However, women reported they only listen to their village chief and generally disdain politicians.** Their village chief is a fair leader who includes every single villager, including women in his decision-making especially in the issue that affects the whole longhouse community. Kg Lebor has a strong village chief who is also the MPKK chairperson. However, there are several individuals who felt he did not support them enough when the government chased them away from their NCR land a few years ago.

# Social Trust

**What is your perception of digital media?**

**49%**
No opinion
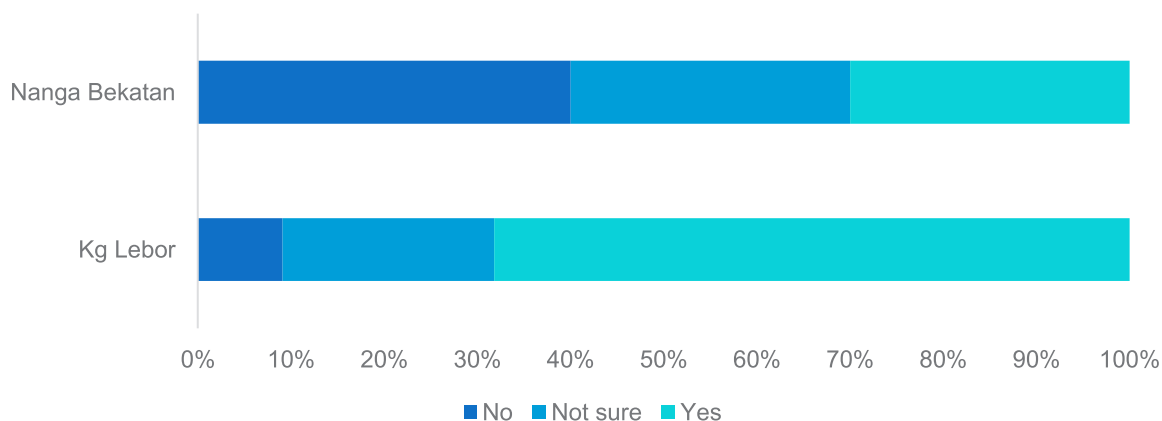
**38%**
Can be trusted

**13%**
Cannot be trusted
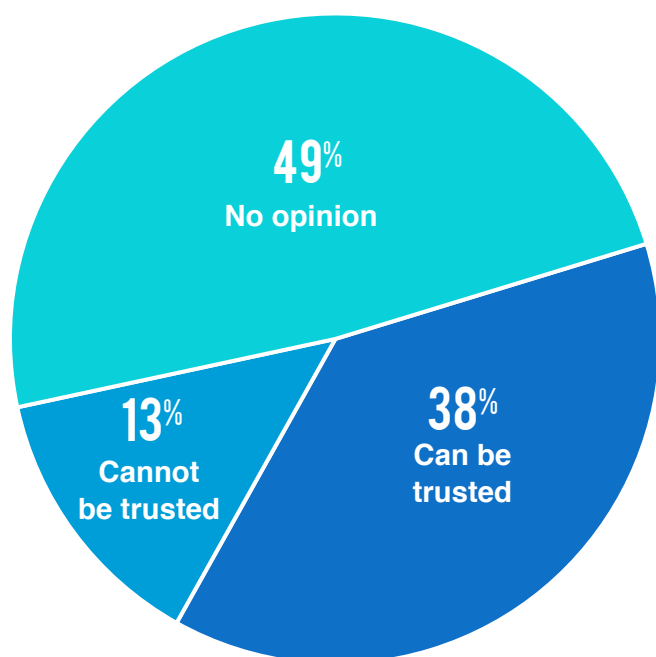
Rural areas, with fewer population mobility and a stronger sense of traditional norms, have social trust built upon leadership, unity and close relationships with family members and neighbours. For Kg Lebor, although several decisions made by their leadership were done without a full consultation with everyone, some of the respondents said they do not mind as long as the village is prosperous, and the infrastructures are maintained. In Nanga Bekatan, one woman acts as the women's group main marketer as she would be the one to send pictures of finished products to potential buyers.

IEA Sarawak also probed on communities' perception of digital media. Since the news is received and shared through messaging apps and social media, particularly WhatsApp and Facebook, the responses from survey and FGD participants were based on these two mediums.

**The result is mixed with almost half with no opinion on this media. Those who trust digital media mentioned the way information is presented, especially when accompanied by videos, make digital content looks more real than word-of-mouth, or even newspapers.** Furthermore, they believe recipients can track the source of the information. Their trust in digital media is also founded whether the same news is reported by various sources. Majority of respondents revealed they are not sure if all the information they receive are censored. However, they are aware of the policies of the authorities of banning some websites deemed to be too provocative and can sow seeds of disharmony among Sarawakians. Hence, they will do self-censorship especially if they think the information might offend other people.
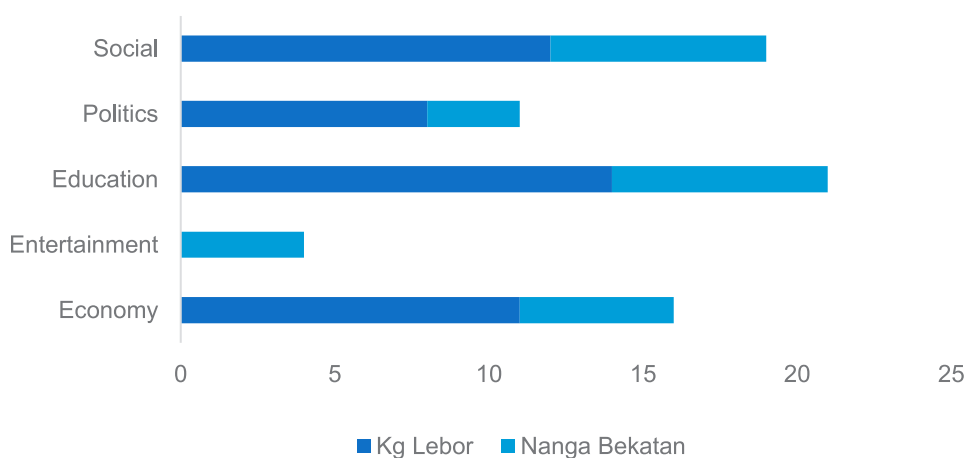
# Information Impact

## Do you think information that you receive have impact on your life?

**Nanga Bekatan**

**Kg Lebor**

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

■ No ■ Not sure ■ Yes

**Only about one out of four respondents in Nanga Bekatan declared they are affected by the information they receive. One of the information that had impact on them was the price of black pepper.** The rest of the respondents are indifferent towards the news, including reports on COVID-19 pandemic. However, they would pay serious attention on weather reports during the dry season, since their electricity supply comes from a micro-hydro dam.

**Conversely, in Kg Lebor, 68 per cent of the respondents said they take seriously the information they receive regarding the notably new projects nearby their village, Covid-19 and the progress of their NCR land.** Respondents here always refer to the latest information about government SOPs, so much so that a couple of them were worried they would be fined for not wearing facemasks whenever they are outside.

## Does the information about this topic influence you to take further action?

**Social**

**Politics**

**Education**

**Entertainment**

**Economy**

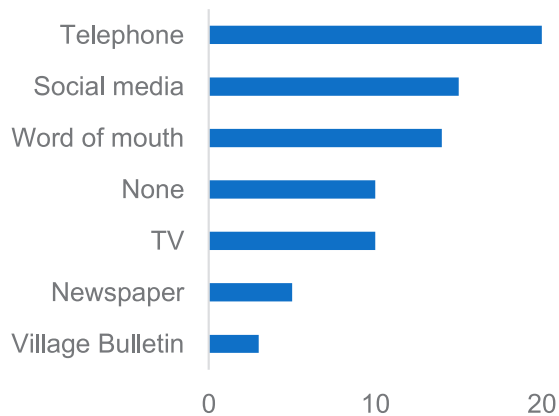0 5 10 15 20 25

■ Kg Lebor ■ Nanga Bekatan

**Topics that motivate these communities to take action are primarily education, social issues and economy.** One respondent talked about how he was affected by the price of goods. Another thought information of social issues increases her awareness on how she must be prepared for social changes and attaining good education.
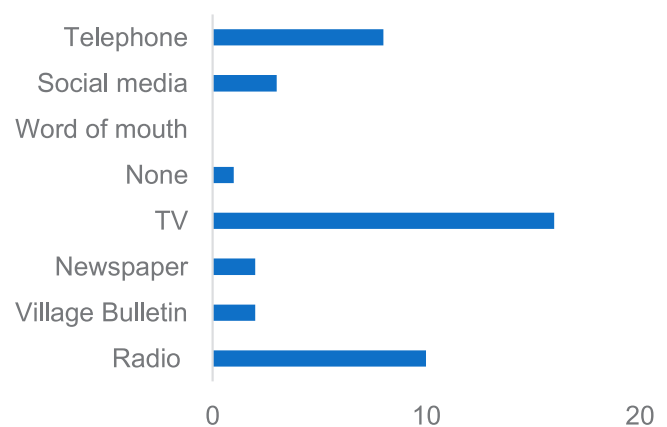
# Findings

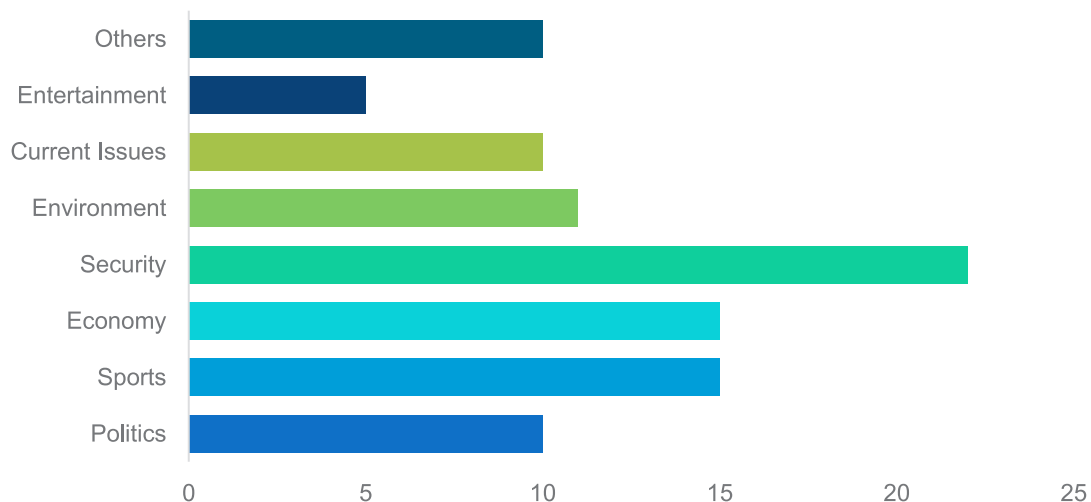## A. Media Consumption

### What are your primary sources of information?

| Source | Value |
|---|---|
| Telephone | ~21 |
| Social media | ~15 |
| Word of mouth | ~14 |
| None | ~10 |
| TV | ~10 |
| Newspaper | ~5 |
| Village Bulletin | ~3 |

### What is your most trusted information source?

| Source | Value |
|---|---|
| Telephone | ~8 |
| Social media | ~3 |
| Word of mouth | 0 |
| None | ~1 |
| TV | ~16 |
| Newspaper | ~2 |
| Village Bulletin | ~2 |
| Radio | ~10 |

**Telephones including house phones are the main source of information in both communities. Forty per cent stated social media, primarily WhatsApp, as it is free.** At least two respondents said they use smartphones only to make calls as they do not know how to use them for other purposes. In Nanga Bekatan, one of the female FGD participants admitted that she uses her phone weekly to contact her son in Brunei. The residents here often gather at the *ruai*; thus their information is disseminated through word-of-mouth or TV. Radio is overwhelmingly popular as villagers can bring their battery-powered radio to their farms and listen while they are working.
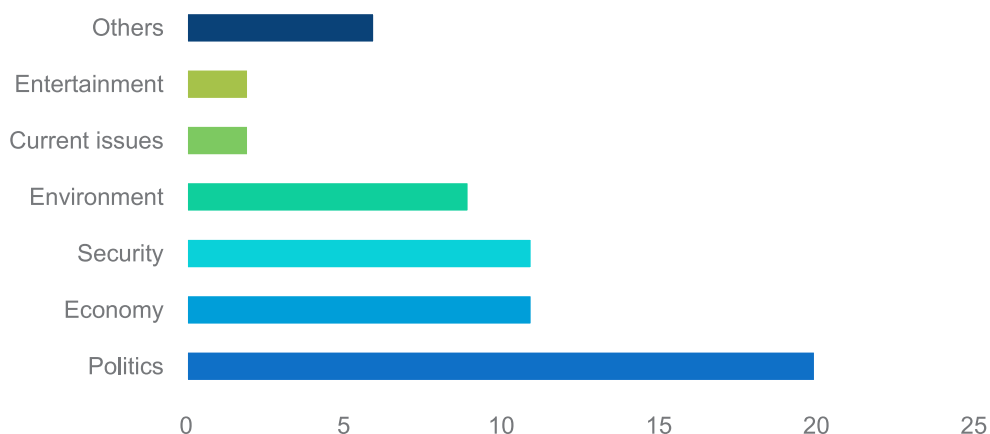
**News on TV is trusted as both communities think they are more reliable in terms of facts and because they like the deliveries with interesting videos and sounds.** The second most trusted source of information is radio. For some Nanga Bekatan respondents, radio is their only and main source of information. Since the radio is a local channel, many of the information disseminated are relevant to both communities.

### The most trusted content

| Content | Value |
|---|---|
| Others | 10 |
| Entertainment | 5 |
| Current Issues | 10 |
| Environment | 11 |
| Security | 22 |
| Economy | 15 |
| Sports | 15 |
| Politics | 10 |

**Our findings from this survey was that security-related information is the most trusted, which include court news, crimes and police statement.** Since majority of the respondents are farmers, they keep themselves up to date with information such as prices of black pepper and rice. Furthermore, news about environment is also trusted particularly about the government's decision to degazette forests for logging activities.
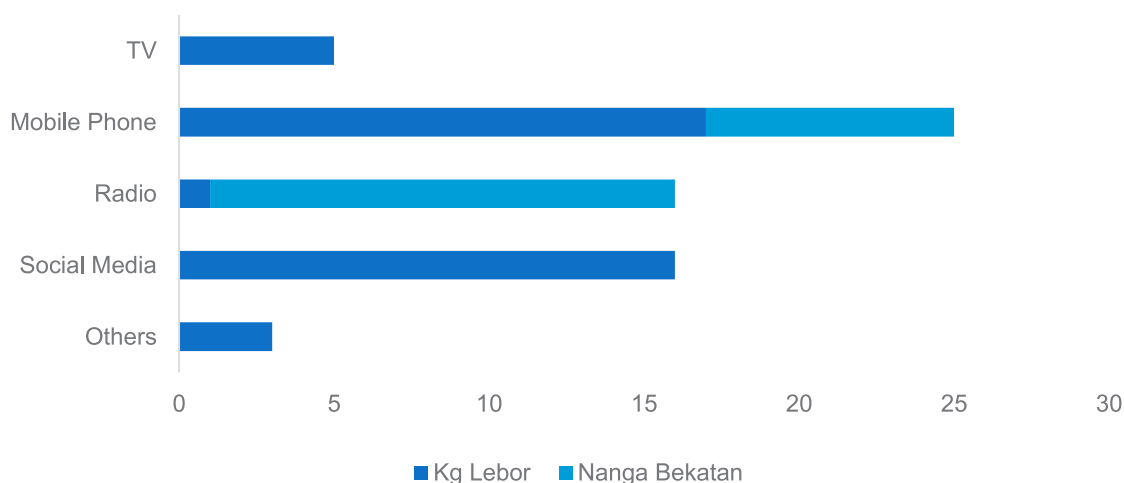
## Least trusted content

| Category | Value |
|---|---|
| Others | 6 |
| Entertainment | 2 |
| Current issues | 2 |
| Environment | 9 |
| Security | 11 |
| Economy | 11 |
| Politics | 20 |

**When it comes to the least trusted news content, 54 per cent of total respondents said they tend to dismiss any news related to politics since most of the information are confusing.** One respondent believed political contents are made with so much hate towards political opponents. Young participants said they are not interested in politics and would vote for whomever their parents vote. In Nanga Bekatan, the villagers believe news about COVID-19 may have been exaggerated. Another topic that is always deemed to be misleading is advertisement of products.
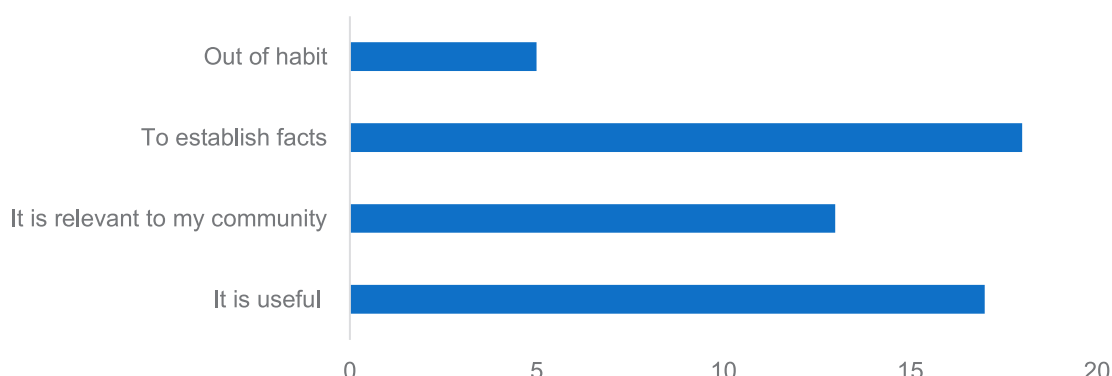
## B. Media Ownership

### Which media do you own?

| Media | Kg Lebor | Nanga Bekatan |
|---|---|---|
| TV | 5 | |
| Mobile Phone | 17 | 25 |
| Radio | 1 | 16 |
| Social Media | 16 | |
| Others | 3 | |

■ Kg Lebor  ■ Nanga Bekatan

**Near 70 per cent of them who were surveyed have mobile phones and almost half stated they own personal social media accounts. Further analysis revealed that many Nanga Bekatan respondents do not have phones**. Even if they do, their mobile number had expired and they did not feel it is urgent to get a

new one. None of the male respondents in Nanga Bekatan have any social media account. One woman here reported she only uses her children's social media account. **Almost all respondents in Nanga Bekatan have radios in their homes as it is an important source of information and entertainment.**

## Why do you share information that you receive?

| Category | Value |
|---|---|
| Out of habit | 5 |
| To establish facts | 18 |
| It is relevant to my community | 13 |
| It is useful | 17 |

Respondents reported they received information about government policies such as MCO and Covid-19 SOP, health and life sustainability . **Some of this information they share or forward, mainly to verify it or because it is deemed useful to others.**

## C. Community Access and Ownership

■ **Are the information you receive relevant to your community?**

**27% No**

**33% Not sure**

**40% Yes**
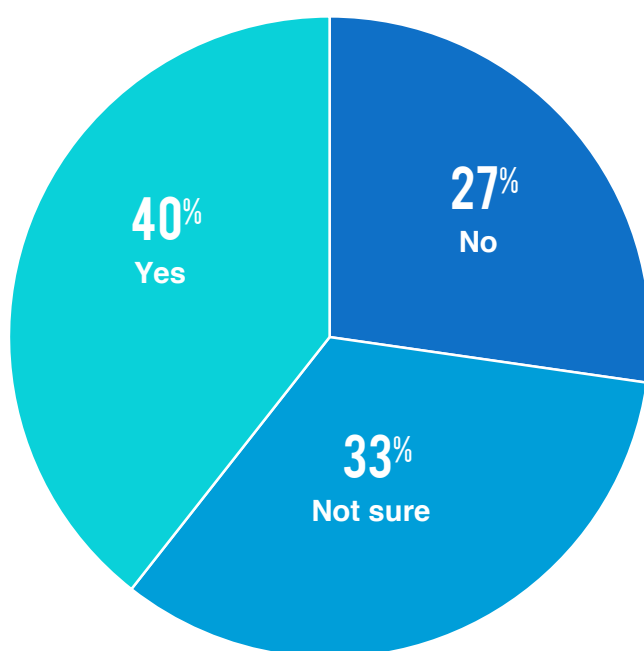
**The respondents are divided on whether the information they receive are relevant to their communities or not.** For Nanga Bekatan respondents, the government's directive to contain the COVID-19 virus does not affect their livelihood too much. Their village chief set up a TV set at the longhouse 'ruai' (long corridor) for villagers who want to gather around and watch TV3's Buletin Utama (the most watched primetime news segment in the country). However, the content usually does not concern them except when it is about Sarawak.
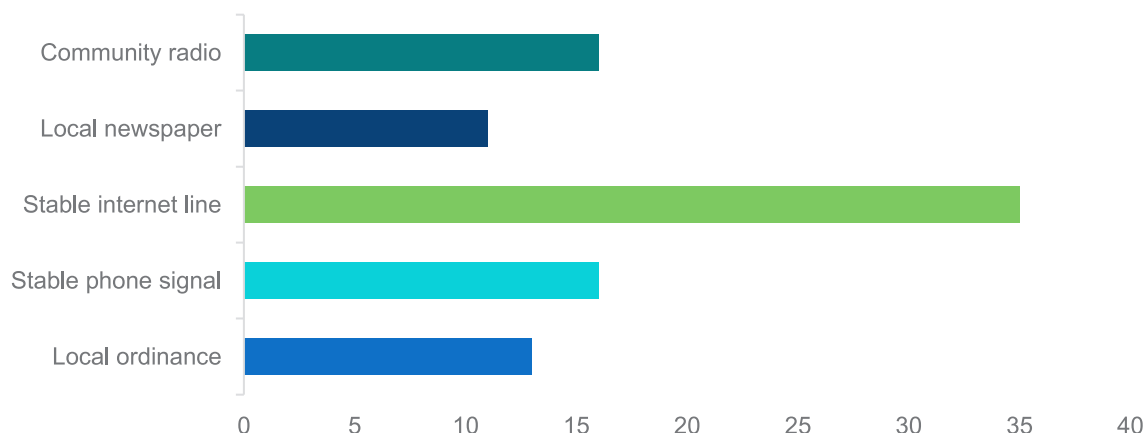
## What are the factors that influence the structure of the community?

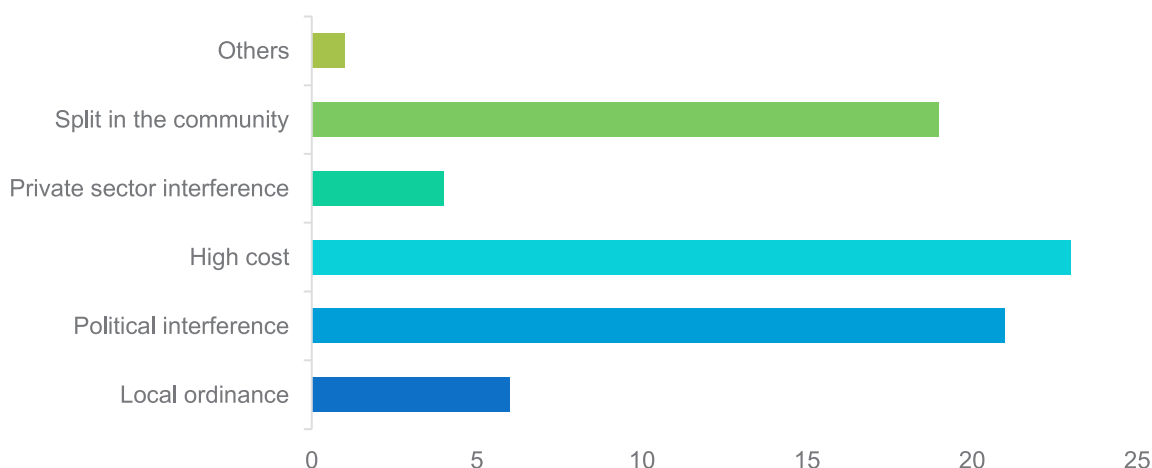| Factor | Value |
|--------|-------|
| Gender | ~9 |
| Education | ~21 |
| Age | ~15 |
| Economy | ~28 |
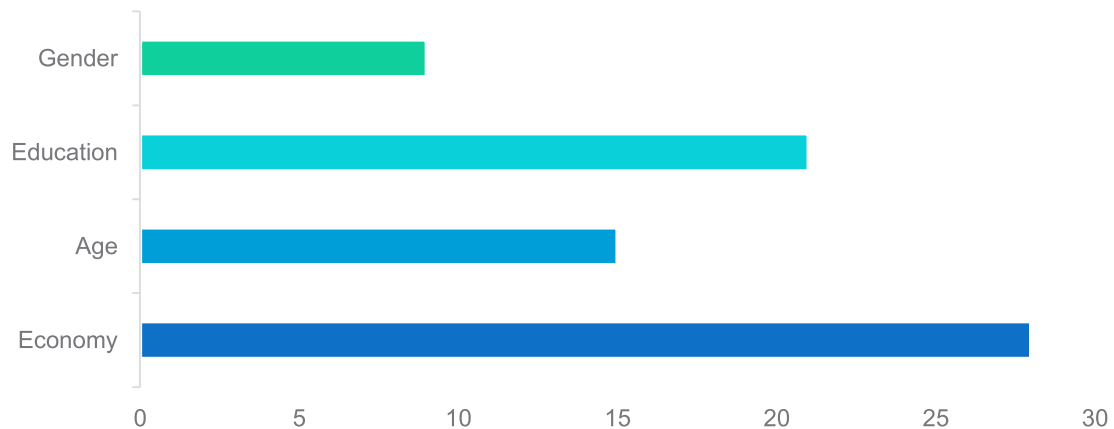
**Three out of four respondents believe economic status shape the structure and leadership of their communities.** Many, especially from Kg Lebor wish for the leadership to be more inclusive. Although there is a WhatsApp group created by the village chief, its purpose and type of information shared are unclear. Respondents also questioned whether the group is only open to certain individuals or for everyone. Nevertheless, the main mode of communication is through meetings, usually held in the *balairaya*.

In Nanga Bekatan, the villagers are satisfied as long as their livelihood are not disrupted by outsiders. They stated that they will vote out whichever government that does not prioritise sustainable development of rural communities and continue to implement unfair policies. Unfair policies include the government's decision to convert some parts of their NCR land into forest reserves without getting their consent.

# D. Sustainability

## What are the factors that support community media?

| Factor | Value |
|---|---|
| Community radio | 16 |
| Local newspaper | 11 |
| Stable internet line | 35 |
| Stable phone signal | 16 |
| Local ordinance | 13 |

## What are the factors that can threaten community media?

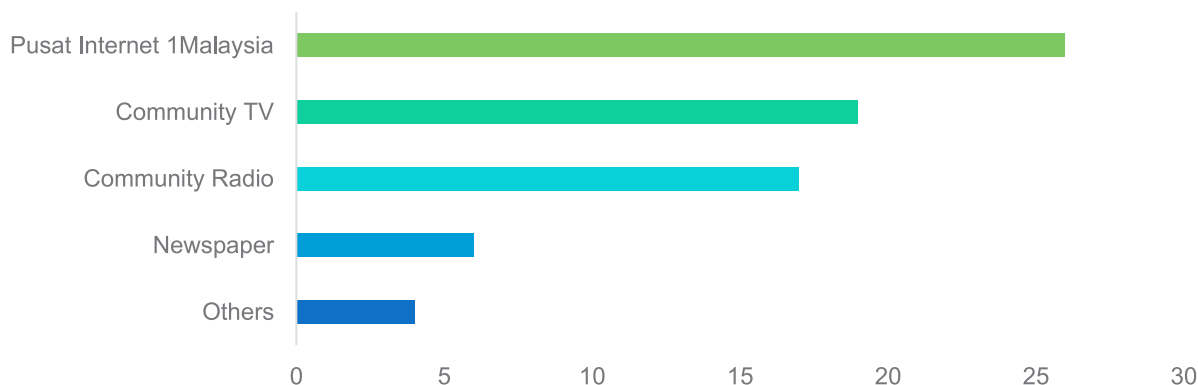| Factor | Value |
|---|---|
| Others | 1 |
| Split in the community | 19 |
| Private sector interference | 4 |
| High cost | 23 |
| Political interference | 21 |
| Local ordinance | 6 |

**Both communities unanimously agree that stable Internet connection is a requirement for community media but were concerned about costs associated with running the platform.** Two more factors that can hinder successful community radio in Kg Lebor and Nanga Bekatan are disunity and political interference. In response to these possibilities, respondents want a specific committee and training of community media, which will ensure verified content, no information on political issues and good maintenance of equipment.

In the case of Kg Lebor, it already has good infrastructure with another Pusat Internet 1Malaysia to be built not far from the current centre. Their worries are occasional power interruptions and internal rifts due to differences in political affiliations. On the other hand, the villagers in Nanga Bekatan do not have phone signals, Internet connection nor roads on which they can transport their agricultural produce to town. They believe a community media would benefit not only their village, but also more than 20 other longhouses along the river. Having built their own micro-hydro dam back in 2013, they felt they could undertake any project as long as they are given proper training.
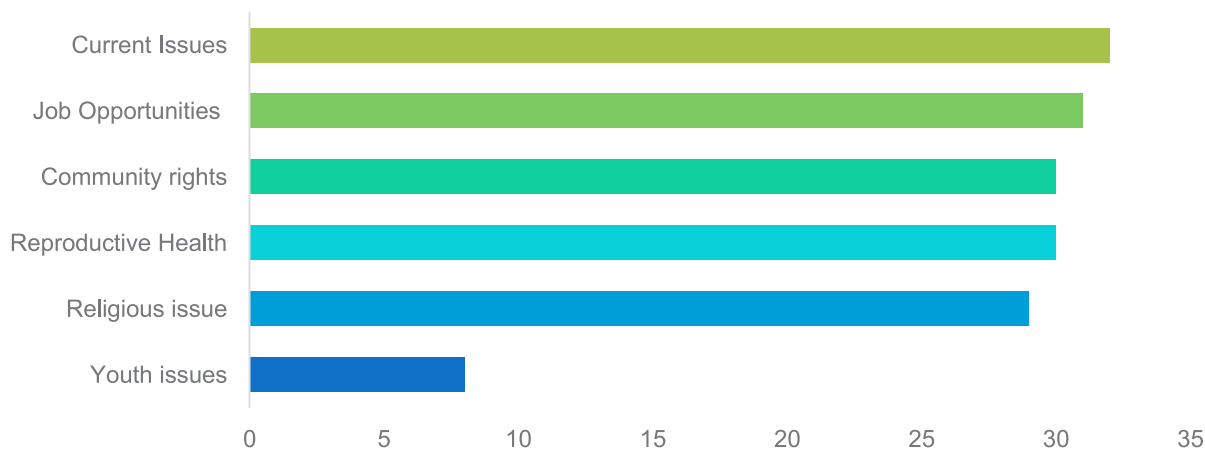
# E. Exploring Types and Opportunities

## Most preferred type of community media

| Type | Value |
|---|---|
| Pusat Internet 1Malaysia | ~26 |
| Community TV | ~19 |
| Community Radio | ~17 |
| Newspaper | ~6 |
| Others | ~4 |

(x-axis: 0, 5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30)

**Similar to the findings of IEA Kelantan and IEA Sabah, the majority of the respondents opted for Pusat Internet 1Malaysia (PP1M).** They believe it could open doors to many opportunities and it will improve the telephone signal and Internet connection in their area. Those who prefer community TV stated that the presentation of information on TV is much more interesting to them. **All respondents in Nanga Bekatan think community radio is suitable for their community, as long as the operation does not need Internet connection.**

## Content that you want to get and share through community media

| Content | Value |
|---|---|
| Current Issues | ~32 |
| Job Opportunities | ~31 |
| Community rights | ~30 |
| Reproductive Health | ~30 |
| Religious issue | ~29 |
| Youth issues | ~8 |

(x-axis: 0, 5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30, 35)

Some respondents think that all types of content listed in the survey can be included in community media. Nonetheless, they would like **better and faster information on current issues.** One man from Nanga Bekatan wanted prices of commodity like palm oil and rubber to be constantly disseminated in this media. All youths who participated in this IEA want youth issues to be highlighted.

# Recommendations

## Programmatic Recommendations

### Supply-side of Information Ecosystem

**Addressing the gaps for bottom-to-top feedback loop and engagement** : Stakeholders and Internews to identify potentials for ways or spaces of engagement for rural communities to become more informed and build capacity for effective localised response and communication, enabling more bottom-up forms of decision-making.

**Capacity-building specific to community media**. There is a vast potential of community media to serve local and niche information, which is to be supported by tapping into Internews' global experience in setting up local media.

### Demand-side of Information Ecosystem

**Inclusivity in capacity-building**: broadening the pool of grassroot activists in marginalised communities who are information-savvy, with the inclusion of women and youths. There is a need for women-only workshops, female trainers and mentors, or women-friendly locations for training.

Managing trust deficit on political information. These communities, especially the youths, are sceptical about politics, which may prevent them from active civic and political participation. Internews and partners can embark on **media literacy and citizen journalism** initiatives which can be potential solutions to amplify the voice of youths and women.

## Policy Recommendations

### Supply-side of Information Ecosystem

**Policy and technical feasibility studies** to be carried out for community media, including radio, TV and Pusat Internet 1Malaysia

**Information infrastructure** issue to be addressed especially on the recurring power outages and mobile signal.

**Developing youths policies that respond to locally identified needs** and to encourage community leadership which is youths-led.

**Freedom of Information** legal provisions at state and Federal level which enable communities to get information about their NCR land matters and be represented in consultation with state land policies.

# Way Forward

## Going back to respondents and their community

Subject to health and travel advisories, Internews and partners will revisit communities in Sabah, Sarawak and Kelantan to share the findings of Information Ecosystem Assessment from their respective communities. This is also an opportunity for further consultation on how these communities can develop programmes or community media that truly address the challenges in their own information ecosystem.



*Validation exercises with target communities were carried out online to validate report findings*

## Presentation to stakeholders

Internews will launch this report including a presentation to relevant stakeholders in March 2021, allowing partners and Resource Persons to share their insights to Civil Society Organizations, media practitioners, policy makers and regulators.

"Such project (community media) would surely raise our standard of living and we can be on the same level as the other communities around us".

**Kg Datong respondent, 18 years old**

# Biodata of Resource Persons

### Dr. Mohd. Khairie Ahmad

Dr. Khairie received his bachelor's degree in Public Administration from Universiti Utara Malaysia in 1997 and a Master of Arts in Communication from Universiti Sains Malaysia in 1999. He obtained his PhD in Communication from the University of Queensland, Australia. His research and scholarly efforts include Communication for Social Change, Health Communication, Cyber Communication, Political Communication, and Communication Management. He is currently a Senior Lecturer and the Head of Advanced Communication Research Unit (ACRU) at the School of Multimedia Technology & Communication, Universiti Utara Malaysia. He is also one of the Berita Nasional Malaysia (BERNAMA) analysts for communication and media issues.

### Mustafa bin Along

Mustafa is a 34-year-old indigenous rights activist and founder of the Jaringan Kampung Orang Asli Kelantan (JKOAK), a grassroots indigenous network in Kelantan. Passionate about his community's rights and heritage, he began his journey in the world of activism in 2008 when he was 21-years old; in 2010 he established JKOAK. He was elected as the current president of JKOAK after serving as secretary of the organisation. He has been arrested several times and is currently facing several charges in court due to his blockade efforts which are still ongoing. Mustafa is passionate about the Orang Asli land rights issue, along with education, health, and the development of the Orang Asli.

### Niloh Anak Ason

Aged 60, Niloh hails from Sarawak and has worked with the Sarawak Dayak Iban Association (SADIA) since 2009. SADIA is a grassroots/community organisation representing the indigenous/native Iban ethnic community in the state. The organisation's focus is on championing for rights such as self-determination, cultural and land rights as well as the protection of natural resources.

### Tracy Patrick

Forty-three-year-old Tracy is currently attached with Tanah Dahai, which is a coalition of communities impacted by the environment in Sabah dealing with human rights under the Sabah Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA). She has wide experience in engaging with local communities on land issues, oil palm workers as well as facilitating and training through the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO). Her future projects include working with indigenous communities in the interior of Sabah in Nabawan and with the Palauh community in the coastal town of Semporna.

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