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AN EXAMINATION OF SEBENARNYA.MY AS A FACT-CHECKER

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Abstract

Affordable, easy access to digital communication via smartphones has produced new groups in society, namely (i) bloggers, (ii) internet celebrities, (iii) netizens, and (iv) keyboard warriors. By disseminating information and opinions in cyberspace, these groups have become very influential in Malaysian society. Although, the accuracy of the disseminated information and opinions could be debatable. This could lead to a fake news crisis. Malaysia has established an online government-led fact-checker; SEBENARNYA.MY, to curb the dissemination of the fake news. It is the interest of this paper to examine SEBENARNYA.MY as a fact-checker based on its reported viral content-related incidents from January 2020 to July 2020. Data collected from the online website of SEBENARNYA.MY in August 2020 was analysed by ATLAS.ti by using thematic analysis. The paper, therefore, concludes that SEBENARNYA.MY not only serves as a government-led fact-checker, it could also be considered as a public communication of the government of Malaysia.

Keywords: Fake news crisis, fact-checker, government-led fact-checker, political communication, SEBENARNYA.MY

1. Introduction

The Fourth Industrial Revolution, which is also known as Industrial Revolution 4.0 or its abbreviated term as IR 4.0, has significantly changed the world. IR 4.0 has resulted in affordable, easy access to digital communication via smartphones, which later produced new groups in society namely bloggers, internet celebrities, netizens, and keyboard warriors. By disseminating information and opinion in cyberspace, these groups have become very influential in society. However, the accuracy of disseminated information could be debatable. Failure to address the problems of disseminating inaccurate information could lead to a fake news crisis. Consequently, Malaysia, under the premiership of Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, passed the Anti-Fake News Bill in April 2018. However, there was an attempt of the Dewan Rakyat, under the premiership of Tun Mahathir Mohamad, to pass a bill that repeals the Act of Anti-Fake News in August 2018 (Bernama, 2018). However, the repeal attempt failed due to the rejection by the Senators who wanted the law addressing fake news to be improved (Raj & Su-Lyn 2018). In addition to this, SEBENARNYA.MY, a government-led online fact-checker was established to address the fake news crisis with a tagline; "tidak pasti jangan kongsi" (unsure don't share). The paper, therefore, aims to examine SEBENARNYA.MY as a fact-checker.

2. Problem Statement

Fake news is a major challenge that the world is facing today. Tsfati et al. (2020, pp. 158) argue that "a main characteristic of the fake news genre is that original producers of the information are harder to trace given that they purposively hide their true identity when presenting the information as originating from a legitimate news outlet". However, their systematic analysis inclines towards an examination of fact-checking conducted by the journalists. This paper, instead, seeks to examine a government-led fact-checker, which conducts fact-checking based on viral content-related incidents. The paper defines a viral content-related incident as a "material which is offensive, morally improper and against current standards of accepted behaviour" (MyCERT, 2019). This differentiates the paper from others which mostly examined fact-checking conducted on news/media and speeches/statements by politicians (examples include Marietta et al., 2015; Walter et al., 2019).

Although the first viral content-related incident was in 2001 and its official launch in 2017, the paper only examines reported viral content-related incidents in SEBENARNYA.MY from January 2020 to July 2020. In determining the coverage of SEBENARNYA.MY, the paper examines the number and viral mediums of reported viral content-related incidents. Another aspect of fact-checker that the paper examines is identifying issues of viral content-related incidents reported in SEBENARNYA.MY. An examination of issues of viral content-related incidents enables the paper to understand better the context of such incidents. Furthermore, Tandoc Jr et al. (2019, pp. 9) found that relevancy of issue significantly influences the degree of their respondents reacted against viral content-related incidents when examining how social media users in Singapore responded to fake news. This infers the importance of the paper to identify and examine issues that reflect public concerns within the context of SEBENARNYA.MY. Choosing and using a credible reference source(s) are important aspects of fact-checker. Without credible

reference as its source, a fact checker might not be perceived as a trustworthy mechanism. Amazeen (2018, pp. 14) concurs by arguing that both credibility and defending ability of information are crucial when disseminating information This resulted in the paper examining verification sources of viral content-related incidents reported in SEBENARNYA.MY.

3. Research Questions

Research questions of the paper are:

- What were the numbers of content-related incidents reported in SEBENARNYA.MY from January 2020 to July 2020 in terms of monthly reports?
- What were the mediums used to disseminate viral content-related incidents reported in SEBENARNYA.MY from January 2020 to July 2020?
- What were the issues of viral content-related incidents reported on SEBENARNYA.MY from January 2020 to July 2020?
- What were the sources used to verify viral content-related incidents reported in SEBENARNYA.MY from January 2020 to July 2020?
- What were the verification outcomes of viral content-related incidents reported in SEBENARNYA.MY from January 2020 to July 2020?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purposes of the study are determining the number of viral content-related incidents reported and the mediums used to disseminate viral content-related incidents reported in SEBENARNYA.MY from January 2020 to July 2020 and examining the issues, verification sources, and verification outcomes of viral content-related incidents reported in SEBENARNYA.MY from January 2020 to July 2020.

5. Research Methods

This paper is a qualitative research paper. It seeks to analyse reported viral content-related incidents in SEBENARNYA.MY from January 2020 to July 2020 when examining SEBENARNYA.MY as a fact-checker. The paper defines a viral content-related incident as a "material which is offensive, morally improper and against current standards of accepted behaviour" (MyCERT 2019).
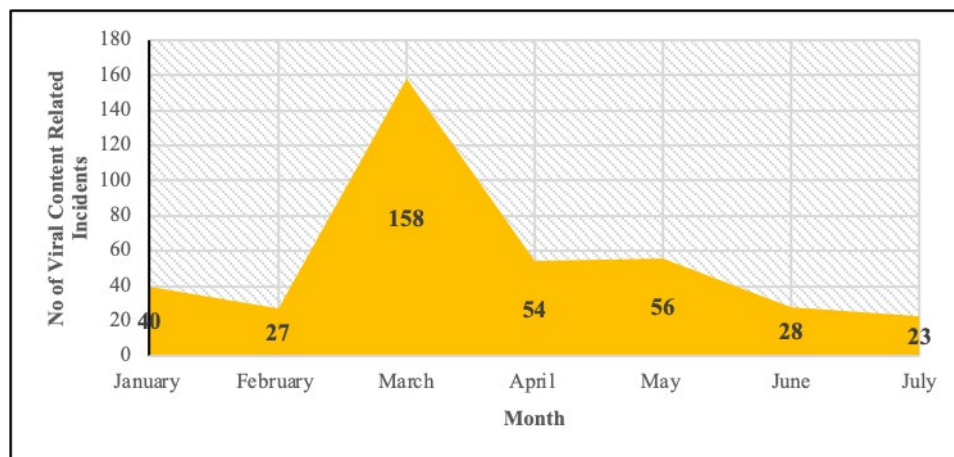
In essence, the authors adopted the approach of document analysis. They collected data from the online website of SEBENARNYA.MY in August 2020. The viral content-related incidents were downloaded in a pdf form and stored in respective reported month folders. There were 386 viral content-related incidents collected from the archived viral content related incidents reported in SEBENARNYA.MY in the months of January, February, March, April, May, June, and July of the year 2020. The authors later analysed collected data using ATLAS.ti software with their developed analytical themes.

6. Findings

This section discusses the findings of analysing SEBENARNYA.MY from January 2020 to July 2020 based on the research questions; What were the number of content-related incidents reported in SEBENARNYA.MY from January 2020 to July 2020? What were the mediums used to disseminate viral content-related incidents reported in SEBENARNYA.MY from January 2020 to July 2020? What were the issues of viral content-related incidents reported on SEBENARNYA.MY from January 2020 to July 2020? What were the sources used to verify viral content-related incidents reported in SEBENARNYA.MY from January 2020 to July 2020? What were the verification outcomes of viral content-related incidents reported in SEBENARNYA.MY from January 2020 to July 2020?

6.1. Number of Viral Content-Related Incidents

The viral content-related incidents demonstrated in SEBENARNYA.MY from January 2020 to July 2020 is 386 incident reports. The number of monthly viral content-related incidents varies as shown in the following Figure 01 Reported Viral Content-Related Incidents in SEBENARNYA.MY (January 2020 to July 2020).

Figure 1. Reported Viral Content-Related Incidents in SEBENARNYA.MY (January 2020 to July 2020)

The highest viral content-related incidents were in March 2020 with 158. This is followed by May 2020 with 56 viral content-related incidents and April, 54 viral content-related incidents. Meanwhile, the lowest viral content-related incidents were in July 2020, 23 viral content-related incidents.

6.2. Mediums of Disseminating Viral Content-Related Incidents

The mediums used to disseminate viral content-related incidents in SEBENARNYA.MY from January 2020 to July 2020 were social media, WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, and email. The most frequently used viral medium to disseminate viral content-related incidents was social media with 100 incident reports. This is followed by WhatsApp (43 incident reports), Facebook (15 incident reports), and

Twitter (3 incident reports). The paper, however, wishes to caution readers that some viral content-related incidents did not state the respective viral medium.

6.3. Issues of Viral Content-Related Incidents

The paper found that most issues of viral content-related incidents in SEBENARNYA.MY from January 2020 to July 2020 inclined towards the societal concerns; 300 incident reports. The most reported issues in SEBENARNYA.MY were related to Covid-19 [259 viral content-related incidents]. This is followed by scamming (35 viral content-related incidents) and government aid (4 viral content-related incidents).

Out of 259 reported viral content-related incidents of Covid-19, the most reported issues in SEBENARNYA.MY from January 2020 to July 2020 were the Covid-19 cases (89 incident reports), which included suspected Covid-19 patients, deaths of Covid-19 patients, and Covid-19 patients who ran away from hospitals. The second most reported Covid-19 related issues were Movement Control Order (35 incident reports) such as presumed effective dates of lockdown, durations of lockdown, and lockdown areas. This is followed by the Covid-19 case areas (27 incident reports), which concerned about the suspected areas of covid19 patient(s) whereabouts and suspected areas that had disinfection services due to Covid-19.

In terms of recycled viral content-related incidents, the paper identified 8 incidents reports, which were viral for the second time in the year 2020 with exception of monitoring phone calls, interaction in social media, and IMEI number by the authorities, which was viral for the fifth time since September 2017 (SEBENARNYA.MY, 2020a). The latter infers the government's invasion of privacy. Only two incidents share a similar issue; claims of being non-halal products sold in the local market in the forms of hot dogs (SEBENARNYA.MY, 2020b) and pork stock (SEBENARNYA.MY, 2020c).

6.4. Verification Sources of Viral Content-Related Incidents

Verifying the context of viral content-related incidents is an important aspect of any fact-checking mechanism; be it the independent non-governmental organization-led fact-checker, political fact-checker, or government-led fact-checker as in the form of SEBENARNYA.MY, discussed in the paper. Verification sources of viral content-related incidents employed by SEBENARNYA.MY were subjects to the jurisdiction of which government agencies responsible for such arising issue(s). For instance, a man, who was supposed to be home quarantined, went to Urban Transformation Centre (UTC) Seremban on the ground of renewing his passport (SEBENARNYA.MY, 2020d). His whereabouts in UTC Seremban resulted in a presumed Covid19 case area in which people who were in UTC Seremban then could be infected by Covid19 (SEBENARNYA.MY, 2020d). The government agency, which was responsible to deal with the refusal of home quarantine was the Police. In this particular case, SEBENARNYA.MY produced verification source from the official Facebook of Police Headquarter for Seremban District (IPD Seremban). On the same note, SEBENARNYA.MY also included Bernama, a Malaysian national news agency as its verification source for the very same incident. This infers that SEBENARNYA.MY also exercised fact-checking using the content published by online media and newspapers. It also demonstrated that fact-checking in SEBENARNYA.MY may contain more than one verification source.
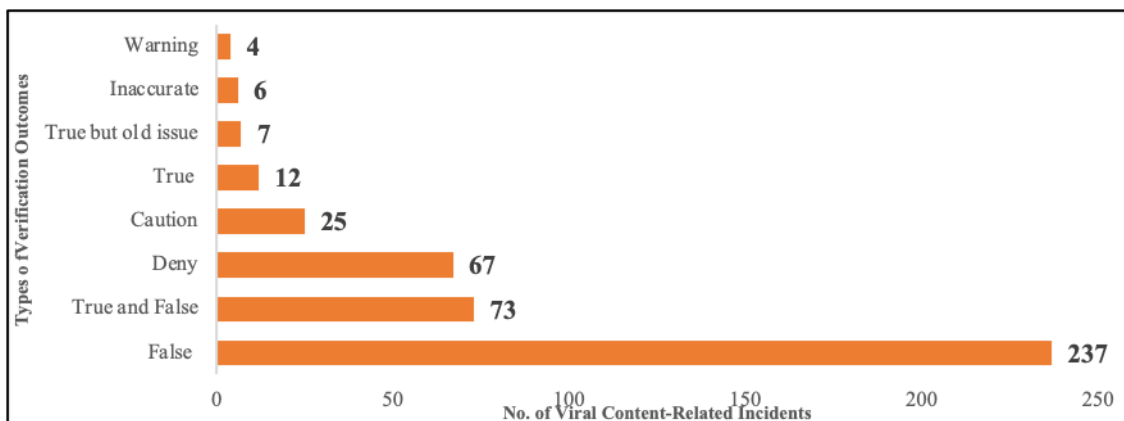
The approach of varying verification sources enables SEBENARNYA.MY to enhance its credibility as a fact-checker. This supports the observation of Clayton et al. (2019) concerning the various degrees of public trust in fact-checker. Nevertheless, SEBENARNYA.MY does not exercise fact-checking on fact information supplied by the verification sources.

6.5. Verification Outcomes of Viral Content-Related Incidents

The paper found that SEBENARNYA.MY produced several verification outcomes namely false, true and false, deny, caution, true but old issue, inaccurate, and warning. This differs from FactCheck.org, a political fact-checker in the United States of America, which only "[published] reports revealing falsehood" (Marietta et al., 2015, pp. 591). Publishing various types of verification outcomes also demonstrated the communicative action of SEBENARNYA.MY when fact-checking reported viral content-related incidents. In particular, SEBENARNYA.MY explained and clarified its verifications, instead of removing such viral content-related incidents, to the public. By doing this, SEBENARNYA.MY addressed viral content-related incidents as "a form of communicative action" as argued by Andersen & Søe (2019, pp. 2). In this respect, SEBENARNYA.MY enables the public to learn the truth of viral content-related incidents.

Some viral content-related incidents, shown in SEBENARNYA.MY, contained more than one verification outcome. An example is a viral content-related incident of scam; a fake investment venture using the logo and name of Amanah Saham Nasional Berhad (ASNB), an eminent government investment agency in Malaysia. In particular, the verification outcomes of such fake investment venture were caution and false (SEBENARNYA.MY, 2020e). The former was meant to caution the public about the fake investment venture using the logo and name of Amanah Saham Nasional Berhad (ASNB). The latter affirmed the false verification outcome of such investment venture since ASNB has never promoted any investment campaign using the ASNB logo (SEBENARNYA.MY, 2020e).

As shown in the following Figure 02, the most frequent verification outcomes found in SEBENARNYA.MY between January 2020 and July 2020 were false with 237 incidents. This was followed by true and false (73 incidents) and deny (67 incidents).

Figure 2. Verification Outcomes of Viral Content-Related Incidents in SEBENARNYA.MY (January 2020 – July 2020)

In addition, SEBENARNYA.MY also produced corrigendum on its verification outcomes. This was observed in two viral content-related incidents; 'Enhanced Movement Control Order for Kampung Dato's Ibrahim Majid and Bandar Baharu Dato' Ibrahim Majid, Simpang Renggam, Kluang, Johor' (SEBENARNYA.MY, 2020f) and 'Fake Promotion Announcement of Special Covid19 Relief Fund from National Disaster Management Agency of Malaysia (NADMA)' (SEBENARNYA.MY, 2020g). The verification outcome of the former was first released as false. However, SEBENARNYA.MY revised the checked context of the viral content-related incident by releasing the updated verification outcome of true after taking consideration of later development as indicated by the Department of Prime Minister (SEBENARNYA.MY, 2020f). Meanwhile, the latter explained that there was NADMA's Special Covid19 Relief Fund; nevertheless, NADMA did not announce such fund promotion in social media (SEBENARNYA.MY, 2020g). The capability of SEBENARNYA.MY in correcting information based on situational development eventually boosts its credibility as a transparent fact-checker.

Interestingly, SEBENARNYA.MY also produced verification outcomes of viral content-related incidents as both true and false. For instance, a viral video claimed that there were five cases of Covid19 positive at Klang Hospital (SEBENARNYA.MY, 2020h). SEBENARNYA.MY (2020h) reported that there was no positive Covid-19 case at Klang Hospital. Rather, the five persons were there for the Covid-19 screening test given a situation of being the close contacts to a Covid-19 case. This particular viral content-related incident demonstrated the misinterpretation of the actual incident. However, it was unknown whether such an incident which was reported by SEBENARNYA.MY (2020h) fells into the category of misinformation or disinformation (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2018)

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper has examined SEBENARNYA.MY as a fact-checker from January 2002 to July 2020. It found that the number of reported viral content-related incidents varies from one month to another. The mediums used when disseminating viral content-related incidents in SEBENARNYA.MY were social media, WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, and email. Societal issues dominate the genre of content-related incidents in SEBENARNYA.MY. Verification sources of viral content-related incidents employed by SEBENARNYA.MY were subjects to the jurisdiction of which government agencies responsible for such arising issue(s). SEBENARNYA.MY produced several verification outcomes namely false, true and false, deny, caution, true but old issue, inaccurate, and warning. Drawn from this basis, SEBENARNYA.MY could be considered as public communication because of its characteristics in "mitigating the spread of disinformation and supporting healthy media and information ecosystems while bringing governments closer to their citizens" (Matasick et al., 2020, pp. 8).

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