
Received: 19 September 2020; Accepted: 14 December 2020

Trend Of Media Reporting On The Issues Of Liberal Islam And Religious Pluralism

Latifah Abdul Majid

Email: umilm@ukm.edu.my

Centre for al-Quran & al-Sunnah, Faculty of Islamic Studies,
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), 43600 Bangi, Selangor

Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the latest trend of the official print media on the Liberal and Religious Pluralism schools of thought. The present study follows a contextual and analytical methodology to identify the practices of freedom of expression by the mass media in the issue of Liberal Islam and Religious Pluralism. This paper demonstrated that the mass media needs to be prudent in exercising freedom of expression, especially in reporting matters of communalism/racism and religion. Even so, this liberty may disrupt the harmony of a plural society if there is no control or guideline, particularly in issues relating to Islam. In addition, it may also cause the Muslim society to be confused or misunderstand and deny the views of the authorities on these thoughts. This paper discovers that Liberal Islam and Religious Pluralism are schools of thought which require openness of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) beyond the limits or restrictions in Islamic Shariah. It is increasingly spreading unnoticed by the society. One of the mediums which play a big role in spreading these thoughts is the mass media, particularly the mainstream print media and internet surfing.

Keywords: Convergence, freedom of expression, liberal Islam, mass media, religious pluralism, trend.

1. Introduction

Media is the primary source of information in the context of mass communication. Agents of communication such as newspapers, radio, television and new media such as mobile phones and internet play an important role for the society and development of human civilization. Media control may be considered as a key power in governing a state. If previously media was the means of communication, they have now become a very essential power such that it controls the media (information) is the master who rules (Melki, 2017).

Theoretically, accurate and reliable information spread through mass media is the pulse of democratic process. As a government system which gives priority to freedom and transparency of media, media plays an essential role in this society. At the same time, the role of mass media here is determined by the process of social responsibility for society through the dissemination of the most accurate and precise information (Budirahayu, Wijayanti, & Baskoro, 2018).

Mass media are the means or technology for dissemination to the general public such as newspapers, books, magazines, radio, television and internet, which can reach a massive audience such as the population of a country. The term mass media was first introduced in the 1920s with extensive radio network technology and large-scale distribution of newspaper and magazines (Adnan, 2015). However, some forms of mass media such as books and manuscripts have already been in use since centuries ago. The term public media has the same meaning as it covers news and entertainment genres published in newspapers, television, radio and any other forms of broadcasting (Adnan, 2015). Mass media main targets are localism and globalism but it is open to local values and selected expressions of modernism (Faisal Bakti, 2018).

It is asserted also that social media has a great impact on society specially in the development of secular society (Budirahayu et al., 2018; Hughes, 2018). Media ownership is controlled by groups with political agendas. Intolerance of 'the other', from Islam and migrants to people of colour, show the rise of fundamentally prejudiced groups who relate well to negative media representations of 'the other', further fuelling financial support for dominant public voices, at the expense of those silenced by discrimination. Media studies on Islam show negative portrayals in Western media which neglect the Muslim voice (Bleich, Souffrant, Stabler, der Veen, & Maurits, 2018). Some reasons include news culture, lack of knowledge about Islam and unawareness of the consequences from such narratives (Rahman & Emadi, 2018). The research showed that the rigidity of religion is being softened gradually, and more and more people are becoming of the view that humanity is

above Islam or any other religion but on the same time, most of the people declare their religion online. It is evident that as the time passes, social media will become one of the main influences on the minds of youth and it will also change dimensions of religion and religiosity among people (Hughes, 2018). For example, the Islamophobia engineered by the French media remains a more influential force. As long as the media continues to conflate Islam with violence, Muslims will continue to be interpreted as a threat to French security and will continue to be represented through securitized discourse. The French media bias against Islam and the securitized discourse about Muslim. The tendency of the French media to resist political parallelism and to produce a singular, monochromatic narrative about Muslims that employs the islamophobic assumptions and stereotypes of the masses has created a political climate that allows for the securitization of Muslims by mainstream French politics.

Liberal Islam is presently considered a threat to the direction of Muslim thought, particularly in Malaysia (Awang et al., 2012; Latifah et al., 2011). According to Latifah *et al* (2011) Liberal Islam was first used by Western scholars such as Leonard Binder and Charles Kurzman. Binder used the term 'Islamic Liberalism', while Kurzman used 'Liberal Islam'. Both implicitly believe that Islam is a lot; Liberal Islam is one of them. Debate about the Liberal Islamic faith has been the issue either among the supporters of the Liberal Islamic faith itself or among the critics of the faith. Generally, the term Liberal Islam does not refer to a form of a new religion, yet it means a form of faith that have patterns of thinking that are very concerned about freedom and change, more than anything inherent in the pure and genuine Islamic *shariah*. Discourse of the current Islamic thinking has seen the emergence of the Liberal Muslims who feel the flow of Muslim beliefs should be freed from the shackles of tradition and the clutches of the clergy domination. Based on the spirit of the liberation of the mind is centred on calls for reassessment of laws and the laws that already exists in the Quran. This notion has begun to find a place within the Muslim community in Malaysia and this is seen as one that could threaten their faith.

According to Najiah Athirah and Haslina (2019) religious pluralism emerged in Malaysia in the late 20th century. Hence it is still new and not yet known to many of the Malaysian community. Nonetheless, this does not mean that its followers or also called the pluralist dis not exists in Malaysia. Infact they have been consistently advocating and promoting the ideas of religious pluralism in the mind of people in the name of religious tolerance (Bunk, 2019).

2. Methodology

Content analysis method was used from the communication media materials gathered from the Malaysia news portals of *Berita Harian*, *Utusan Malaysia*, *The Star* and *Malaysiakini*. A total of 385 articles were collected from 1st January 2015 until 31st December 2018 with focus on themes of Liberal Islam, Religious Pluralism, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) and Non Government Organization (NGOs) reported as liberal. Research results from content analysis are tabulated in the form of numerals and percentage. Based on the numerals and percentages, a descriptive elaboration was used to assess the trend of media reporting on the issues of Liberal Islam and Religious Pluralism.

3. Result And Discussion

Convergence of Mass Media in Malaysia

In the context of the current global modernization, conventional information technology (IT) such as newspaper, television and radio are the main agents of communication and news dissemination to the public (Yunus, 2017). However, with globalization and development of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) around the 1960s, internet networking began to be the alternative media for mainstream media such as radio and television. Internet or, more specifically known as the *World Wide Web* (www) offered through the computer has brought tremendous implications in the development of world communication and is even categorized as the new rapidly growing media. Hence, mass media can be divided into two categories; print and electronic media.

Technology development, particularly relating to media has a significant impact on newspaper publishing industry in this country. Since the 1980s and 1990s, the technology which developed from time to time has enabled the merging of massive conventional telecommunication with interactive computer technology (Sannusi & Mustaffa, 2015). The merging of these two technologies has given birth to the phenomenon of convergence, and with it the resulting radical transformation in aspects of handling, preparing,

disseminating and processing of all forms of information, whether audio and visual (Preston, 2001; Shishkina & Issaev, 2018).

The emergence of various forms of more interactive channels such as internet technology has driven migration among the masses, particularly in the context of information access. Therefore, the traditional role of conventional media as a platform to convey information to the audience after so long is now faced with competition from new media. In the United States, for example, sales of main newspapers in the last ten years showed signs of worrying decline (George & Waldfogel, 2006).

In the context of Malaysia, the use of communication technology in the media industry began since the early 1980s. However, at that time, media application was more concentrated in newspaper companies which applied computerization in aspects of news writing and editing. In line with development of media technology in Malaysia, new media is now the means of communication for Malaysian society across the global world. Development of this technology created a new dimension in information dissemination, that is, electronic media or better known as online media (Badarudin, 2002).

Statistical data obtained from the Economic Planning Unit found that in the first quarter of the year 2008, the number of dial-up internet subscriptions in Malaysia reached 4 million users. The pattern as well as consistent increase in internet use in Malaysia gives rise to the assumption that internet is now a necessity and the new venue of communication is not only for adolescents, but various generations without age limits (Nur Azween & Nidzam, 2008). The issues put forward through forums and blogs relate to current phenomena, whether global or local. Participation in this medium may have a significant impact on the pattern of social changes and social perception of an issue (Moaddel & Karabenick, 2018; Nur Azween & Nidzam, 2008).

The impact of internet use in Malaysia has affected the subscription sales of printed newspaper in comparison to online news. A report of the Audit Beureo Circulation Malaysia (2018) showed that the sales of printed newspaper increasingly declined so as to make the future of printed newspaper an issue. For example, the *News Straits Times* recorded a drop-in sale of 32.4 percent followed by 25 percent for *Harian Metro*. On the contrary, subscription for online news showed an increase when subscription of digital news of *Utusan Malaysia* recorded a 60 percent rise and that of the *The Star* increased by 64 percent (Sannusi & Mustaffa, 2015). Hence, the process of media convergence in industry plays an important role and becomes the new medium to deliver information to society.

Popularity of Digital News

The Internet has transformed journalism, especially the roles of journalists and audiences, in ways that have profound implications for media literacy (Bleich, Souffrant, Stabler, & van der Veen, 2018). Digital news is created in iterative, integrated environments, in which both human and nonhuman agents influence how news is created, filtered, distributed, and consumed. In particular, social media, algorithmic filtering, and audience participation have transformed how news users interact with news products.

Malaysia as a developing nation is still considered relatively new in the application of digital news and electronic media as the venue to express views and share ideas within society. There are several factors which encourage the development of digital news and electronic media as alternative media in Malaysia. The first factor which drives the expansion of alternative media is the result of restrictions imposed on mainstream media. The ownership of mainstream media dominated by political elite groups with vested interest leads to control of information delivered (Nur Azween & Nidzam, 2008; Rahman & Emadi, 2018). *United Malays National Organisation* (UMNO), the political party, which is the main component of the federal government, is the investor of *Fleet Holdings* and *Renong Bhd.*, leading to joint ownership of the newspapers *Utusan Melayu* and *New Straits Times Press* (NSTP) (Nur Azween & Nizam, 2008).

Zaharom (2002) in his writings clearly showed how strong the government's control on media is. Almost all mainstream media are controlled by *UMNO* or *Malaysian Chinese Association* (MCA) or *Malaysian Indian Congress* (MIC), especially in the Malay Peninsula. Zaharom (2002) in his review of the shareholdings or share-capital in publishing clearly showed the iron grip the ruling parties have on this industry.

Media control through direct or indirect government ownership (refer to Table 1) and the presence of a gatekeeper who monitors the trend of news release is the driving factor for the development of blogs and internet as the new media in Malaysia. In addition, some statutes which impose restrictions on the freedom of conventional media such as *Printing Press and Publications Act 1984* and the *Communications and Multimedia Act 1998* (replacing the repealed *Telecommunications Act 1950* and *Broadcasting Act 1988*) also restrict

virtualization. The decade of 2000s witnessed the regulatory transformation of media ownership landscape in Malaysia (Zaiton & Mazlina, 2013).

Table 1 *Media Ownership in Malaysia up to October 2012*

Ownership	Newspaper	Television	Radio
UMNO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utusan Melayu, Kosmo! 	-	-
MIC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tamil Nisan • Malaysia Nanban 	-	-
MCA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Star • Nanyang Siang Pau, • China Press 	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 988, • RedFM104.9
Believed to be linked to UMNO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New Straits Times, • Malay Mail • Berita Harian • Harian Metro 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TV3, • Ntv7, • 8TV, • Channel 9 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WaFM
Ownership by Federal Government	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TV1 • TV2 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TraXX.fm, • Klasik.FM • Muzik FM, • Asyij FM, • Nasional FM, • KL FM, • Ai FM, • Minnal FM

From Zaiton & Mazlina (2013)

The implications of media control cause society to incline towards portal and digital news as sources of information. Google Inc. through application of Google Trends showed that the highest search rate for portal news in the year was led by 2018 *Malaysiakini*, and the fifth highest was for *Berita Harian*, the eighth highest search was for *The Star* and *Utusan Malaysia* came last in the search for digital news.

The data shows that there are fluctuations in the search pattern for digital news. The pattern of search for the portal *Malaysiakini* is still the highest search even though there are fluctuations throughout the year 2018. As for the other digital news portals, *Berita Harian*, *The Star* and *Utusan Malaysia*, there seems to be a consistent rate with a slight decline throughout the year 2018.

Figure 1 shows the search rate based on area. The highest search rate for the Federal Territory Putrajaya covers the digital news portals *Malaysiakini*, *Berita Harian*, *Utusan Malaysia* and *New Straits Times*. The Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur shows the highest search portal for *Malaysiakini*, followed by *The Star*, *New Straits Times*, *Berita Harian* and *Utusan Malaysia*. The Federal Territory of Labuan shows the highest rate is for *Berita Harian* and less response for other news portals. Figure shows that for the Federal Territory the majority search recorded is for the portal *Malaysiakini*. There was less response for the mainstream digital news controlled by the ruling party compared to the independent portals.

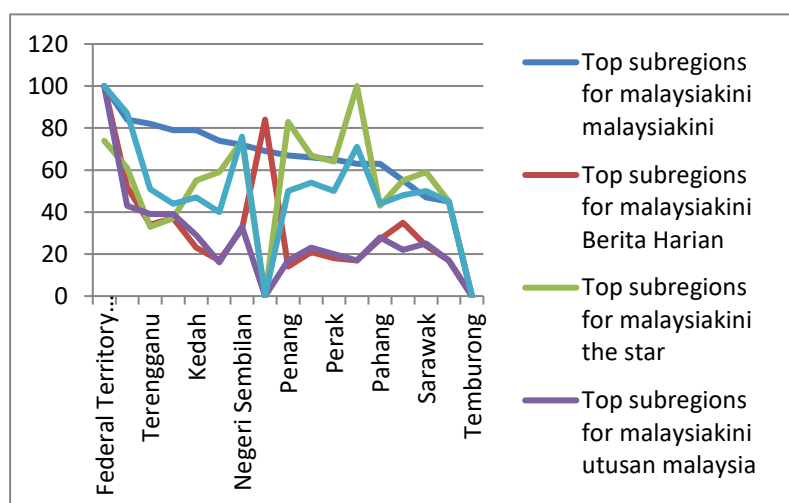


Figure 1: Search Rate according to Area (Sub-regions). From Google Trends (2018)

This situation is most probably the result of statutory restrictions imposed on media freedom so that the society perceives the official media of the ruling party to be less reliable, less transparent and biased. Society's perception of the credibility of a news company and journalists affects social confidence in a newspaper (Folkerts & Stephen, 2001). A study in the year 2013 found that youth prefer to believe in sources of *Malaysiakini* compared to the government's official newspaper (Norrita, Mohd Fuad, Junaidi, Noor Aishah, & Siti Amani, 2013). The society even assumes that the mainstream media is not transparent due to political influence (Yahya & Sidin, 2011). This causes the society to select an independent news portal such as *Malaysiakini* and *The Malaysian Insider* to obtain accurate information.

Trend of News Reporting

In this research, framing theory is the main theory used in studying the framing of digital news by *Malaysiakini*, *Berita Harian*, *The Star* and *Utusan Malaysia* concerning these controversial issues. Framing is an important component in studying news selection and interpretation. It influences how a story is presented and public perception as well. The concept of framing is really powerful, and society is frequently unaware of its process and its influence on their assessment of responsibility and causes (Bullock, Wyche, & Williams, 2001).

Framing is frequently done by the gatekeeper responsible for deciding the media agenda and form of news release to the public. Deliberately or otherwise, the task of the gatekeeper is to cause different media to highlight certain aspects or angles, flood or minimise information in news or cover up a certain angle or aspect from the public view. It can be said that no media is neutral and objective about truth. The media cannot be detached from bias in issues relating to ideology, politics, economics, socio-cultural and even religion (Eriyanto, 2002). Thus, the gatekeeper plays a decisive role. McQuail (1987) points out that mass communication is a process of media organization to produce and channel information or message to the public and this message will be seen, used and understood by the audience, at the same time influencing them.

Islamic thought as a dynamic reality. It means, the thinking has always grown and developed in line with human development and the time. This is part of nature. This is because of the Islamic thought which is a creation of the reaction process of the Muslim mind to the various forms of environmental challenges that constantly fill the ever-changing life (N. Z. Zainol, A. Majid, & Faizulamri, 2018). In other words, the dynamics of the Islamic thought occur because of the reaction against the reality of the ongoing change which is the key element in the reality of nature and life (Zainol & Majid, 2017).

Islam is the official state religion of Malaysia. Thus, Islam is not exempted from being discussed in news reports. The image of Islam is highlighted in various forms, whether positive, negative or neutral. In this

matter, media is seen as playing a role in highlighting a certain image. Western media often negatively portray Islam as linked to violent, fundamentalist, radical or militant images. Government censure on issues such as Liberal Islam, Religious Pluralism, LGBT and NGOs reported as liberal also draw the focus of the press in reporting such issues. Islam is the only religion on social media which is being portrayed in a negative fashion. The hot discourses we have found are jihad, niqab, hijab, mosques, terrorism, which are the most common discourses on Facebook (Ittefaq & Ahmad, 2018).

Table 2 shows the number of articles selected by the researcher based on certain themes. The articles are taken from news portals of *Malaysiakini*, *Berita Harian*, *The Star* and *Utusan Malaysia*. Selection of news portals is based on search popularity and subscriptions according to newspaper portal audit as well as analysis by Google Inc.

Table 2 Number of News Articles according to Theme

Issues	Malaysiakini		Berita Harian		The Star		Utusan Malaysia		Total
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
Liberal Islam	37	32	30	26	33	29	15	13	115
Pluralism	30	32	10	10	39	41	16	17	95
LGBT	36	27	12	9	51	38	36	26	135
Liberal NGOs	18	45	11	27.5	-	-	11	27.5	40
Total	121		63		123		78		385

Based on Table 2, there seems to be a difference between published news articles influenced by the government and non-government. The published articles on themes of Liberal Islam, Religious Pluralism, LGBT and reportedly liberal NGOs differ in numbers among the selected news portals. The lowest number published is by *Berita Harian*, that is, 63 articles, followed by 78 articles by *Utusan Malaysia*, whereas *The Star* published 123 articles compared to *Malaysiakini* which published 121 articles. Percentagewise, *The Star* and *Malaysiakini* respectively published 31 percent, *Berita Harian* 16 percent and *Utusan Malaysia* 20 percent.

Data also finds that there is a difference of 15% (60 articles) in articles published about Liberal Islam between *The Star* and *Berita Harian*. This number almost equals the number of articles published by *Berita Harian* throughout the year 2015. Comparison is done between the two news portals because both are the highest in search by users based on Figure 1. Next, comparison is done on the stance taken by the articles on the issue between the two portals, whether supportive, critical or neutral stance (Table 3).

Table 3 Comparison of Stance by Article

News Portal	Support		Neutral		Criticism	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
<i>Berita Harian</i>	-	-	33	52	30	48
<i>The Star</i>	26	21	79	64	18	15

Table 3 above shows that the news portal *Berita Harian* does not at all contain any theme which supports the schools of Liberal Islam or Religious Pluralism. Instead, it contains themes which are neutral (52%) and which criticise (48 %). In contrast, *The Star* contains themes which support Liberal Islam and Religious Pluralism

thoughts (21%). It also contains 64 percent neutral articles and 15 percent which criticise.

Research data shows that *Berita Harian* news portal rejects Liberal Islam and Religious Pluralism by not publishing any article which supports them. In fact, 48 percent of articles written criticise Liberal Islam and Religious Pluralism. This is perhaps due to *Berita Harian* being tied to government policy which rejects any ideology which contradicts the Sunni ideology (*Ahli Sunnah wal Jemaah*). Thus the role of the gatekeeper in this portal is to comply with the rights of ownership and government policy as previously stated. The gatekeeper also functions as a medium to convey the government's voice in order to maintain political stability in Malaysia.

According to Shishkina & Issaev (2018) and Chermak (1995) news exposure will benefit an organization if the image exposed reflects the desired image expected by society, how the organization provides services, executes its directives and behaves. This information is important in order to control the behaviour of members of the organization involved and at the same time try to educate the society on the proper image of Islam. This statement is proven by research in the West which found that media news significantly contributes to the positive image of a society (Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1991; Hughes, 2018; Wartick, 1992).

In comparing the portals *Berita Harian* to *The Star*, there is a difference in that *The Star* has 21 percent of its articles which support Liberal Islam and Religious Pluralism while 64 percent are neutral, and 15 percent are critical. Based on this percentage, it is found that a big part of writings in *The Star* take a neutral stance not inclined either way and this situation is similar to the reporting style of *Berita Harian*. But, however, 21 percent of articles in *The Star* are supportive in comparison to 0% in *Berita Harian*. Further, percentage of articles which criticise Liberal Islam and Religious Pluralism are 48 percent for *Berita Harian* and 15 percent for *The Star*. The percentage of articles which support and criticize in the two portals show that there are different policies and methods applied to publishing the articles between the two portals.

Difference in ownership plays a role in the form of reporting by the two news portals. We believed that media ownership is controlled by groups with political agendas. Table 1 shows that ownership of *Berita Harian* is linked to UMNO and *The Star* to MCA. Basically, UMNO is a Malay-Muslim organization. Thus, indirectly the form of news reporting by *Berita Harian* needs to take care of the sensitivities of the Muslim community in Malaysia, in addition to the political balance of the organization. MCA is owned by the Chinese community which is multi-religious. Thus, besides being more open about religion, MCA's sensitivity to the issues of Liberal Islam and Religious Pluralism has been given less attention.

Even though the reader percentage of *The Star* is less than for *Berita Harian*, the methods and form of news reporting still influence the readers. A study by Faisal Bakti (2018) through interviews with public liaison practitioners found that media has a strong effect when the reader analyses and interprets news from a third party (media) and then assesses it from his personal viewpoint. The Noelle-Neumann Strong Effect Model shows that media has a long-term effect on members of society and policymakers through the method of reporting. This indirectly shows that reports on issues of Liberal Islam and Religious Pluralism, if not well-handled, will cause society to be influenced in the long run. Therefore, ownership of a news portal and the process of framing in news reporting play an important role in delivering accurate and true information to the public.

4. Conclusion

Advances in technology have brought changes to the current direction of mass media. Convergence or merging of old and new media has brought progress to this institution. The result of convergence has created electronic news portals. This change facilitates dissemination of information to the society, and also acts as medium of information between the government and the people. The purpose of control and framing of news reports is to monitor information to be delivered to the general public. This process also occurs in issues of Liberal Islam and Religious Pluralism so as not to contradict the will and policies of ownership. Even though there are reports which support Liberal Islam and Religious Pluralism, the percentage of neutral news reports and criticism exceed such reports. Thus, the concept of responsible news reporting is important in determining social agenda because of the long term influence on readers. It is because this situation will indirectly hinder the government in implementing the strategic 11th Malaysian Plan, that is, maintaining national stability to ensure social well-being and all parties need to jointly implement this effort to achieve the national aspiration. Mass media therefore is frequently considered at liberty to convey facts, opinions or arguments, for example, on the issues of Liberal Islam and Religious Pluralism by exercising freedom of expression as provided in the

Federal Constitution.

According to liberal and pluralist theorist, media and therefore the news is the main foundation of liberal thinking. Media is name as the fourth power and news is the distinctive content of this context. Media works as a uniting institution between the authors and the public opinion. Besides, media supplies a free public sphere to argue social, cultural and politic ideas in all aspects. While analysing media texts, the politics of media should be taken into consideration where media ideologically serve those who are in power and have privilege to manipulate language and portray the situations in different ways in order to evoke people's emotions toward some critical, special and important events. Therefore, what is said in news text is as important as how the discourse is constructed and how it is said. Defining this construction require the investigation of many issues, like news production process to how the content is percieved; objectivity to manipulation; reality to imitation.

Reasons for filtering cyberspace include ensuring the security of the current government, attempts to limit all kinds of opposition movements, and the protection of the religious and moral norms of society. The Malaysian experience indicates an enforced media monopoly, which allows the formation of one gigantic conglomerate controlling the majority of the market. This suggests that, in the modern world, new methods of communication and information transfer are actively involved with the interaction of social and political processes, creating new channels and techniques for interaction between the authorities and society, and the study and proper use of such channels can reduce the risks of political destabilization.

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