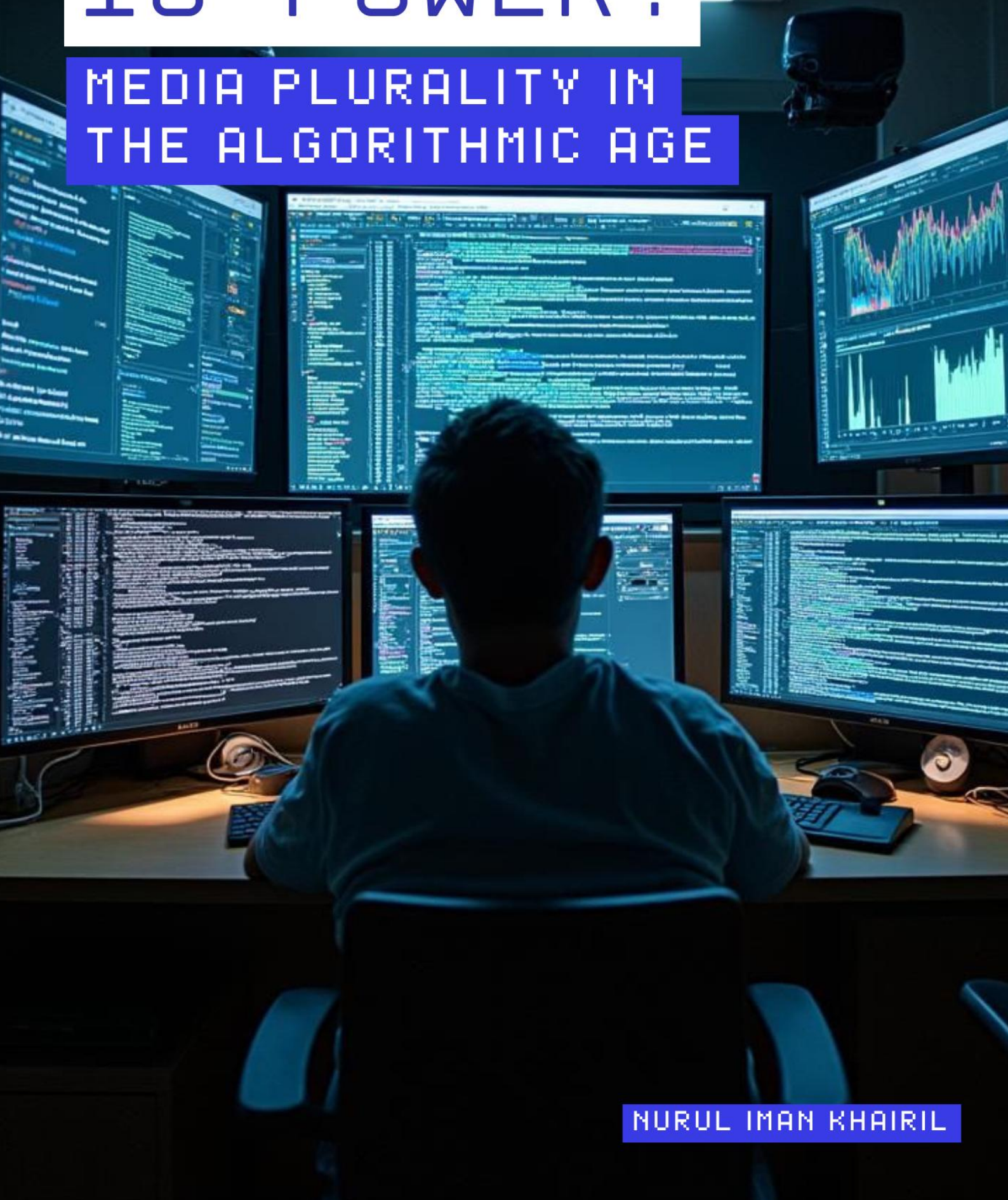


VISIBILITY IS POWER:

MEDIA PLURALITY IN THE ALGORITHMIC AGE



NURUL IMAN KHAIRIL

Abstract

This essay discusses how media plurality must be redefined in the algorithmic age as visibility is shaped by platform algorithms rather than editorial decisions. It examines Malaysia's 15th General Election to illustrate the impact of user-generated content and algorithmic amplification. This essay argues that while national regulation remains important, it must evolve through hybrid frameworks and regional cooperation.

Executive Summary

This essay explores how media plurality, once measured by the number of media sources, must now be reconceptualised in the algorithmic age where platform algorithms determine what content is seen and by whom. Drawing on examples such as Malaysia's 15th General Election, this essay illustrates how user-generated content and virality on platforms like TikTok have reshaped public discourse and political visibility.

It argues that power in the digital ecosystem no longer lies solely with the creators of media, but with the platforms and algorithms that control visibility. Malaysia's recent regulatory efforts, including a licensing regime for major social media platforms and amendments to the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 (CMA 1998), reflect an evolving understanding of these dynamics. Be that as it may, enforcement remains a growing challenge, highlighting the need for a more coordinated inter-agency approach.

This essay draws on regional developments, including the ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025 to emphasise that national regulation must evolve through hybrid models that take local values, regional cooperation, and accountability of social media platforms into account.

Essentially, this essay calls for a shift in how we define and defend media plurality. From focusing on who can speak to ensuring who gets seen. In a world where attention is a currency that is curated by code, safeguarding democracy depends on systems that promote not just expression but equitable visibility.

Introduction

In November 2022, while studying in Seoul, South Korea, I watched Malaysia's 15th General Election unfold entirely online, be it from media alerts or through articles received from family and friends, often accompanied by their own commentary. Thousands of kilometres away from home ground, I relied on TikTok and Instagram videos, WhatsApp forwards, and news portals to piece together the narratives that the candidates were painting. Based on what I gathered regarding the political developments happening in real time, I made a decision and cast my postal vote from Seoul, but the lens through which I likely saw Malaysia was algorithmically filtered, emotionally charged, and often contradictory. Despite having the world's information at my disposal with an abundance of information sources, something was uncomfortably clear - certain voices were amplified, repeated and reinforced, whilst others were submerged, dismissed or drowned out entirely. This was not reflective of source nor content credibility but because of how media platforms, both traditional and modern, prioritize engagement and virality. Media plurality is no longer just about the number of existing sources, but about who gets seen, and why. Attention is today's new currency in our hyperconnected and converged world, and algorithms decide how that attention is earned and spent.

Media plurality in the digital age is not just about how many voices exist, but which ones are made visible. The rapid convergence of user-generated and AI-generated content, platform power, and algorithms present evolving challenges for national regulators. Original frameworks were built to manage newspapers and broadcasters are increasingly ill-equipped to address a global digital ecosystem where information crosses borders, industries, and identities. Yet with this complexity, abandoning national regulation entirely risks leaving citizens vulnerable to scams, manipulation, disinformation, and invisibility in the marketplace of ideas. Who controls what we see? And how do we decide what matters?

What do We Mean by Media Plurality?

Media plurality is widely acknowledged as a foundational principle of democracy, grounded in the belief that "freedom of expression and its corollaries of freedom of the media and media pluralism are considered cornerstones of the rule of law and preconditions for a sound political debate (Brogi, 2020, p. 1). Historically, media pluralism was aimed to prevent any single voice from dominating public opinion. However, as Brogi observes, this definition has become increasingly contested as digital environments are shaped by algorithmic content delivery. Today, the challenge is not just the existence of diverse content but whether individuals are actually exposed to it. Viewpoints outside one's existing preferences are central to understanding media pluralism in the digital age.

Section I: The New Gatekeepers

For decades, media plurality was measured by the number of owners in a single market. Regulatory bodies would scrutinize media conglomerates, limit cross-ownership, and issue licenses in an effort to ensure that no single entity dominated public discourse. “The idea behind media pluralism is that there shall be no one entity that can control the public debate” (Kozak, and Ruiz, 2024). In Malaysia, this concern remains as traditional media is still highly concentrated, with conglomerates like Media Prima Berhad, Malaysia’s largest integrated media group as they operate across television, print, radio, and digital platforms. However, this ownership-based framework is increasingly outdated. While ownership still matters, it no longer guarantees influence. In today’s media ecosystem, algorithms—rather than editors—are the true gatekeepers of visibility.

Building on this shift, search engines and social media platforms have redefined how audiences’ access and engage with news. These platforms do not merely transmit information; they filter, rank, and amplify content based on engagement metrics rather than editorial value. As observed in the *News Plurality in a Digital World* report, “digital intermediaries play [a role] in the everyday lives of their individual users (Foster, 2015, p.7).” This influences not only what content is available, but how and when it is encountered. In effect, they have assumed an editorial role without the accountability traditionally assigned to media publishers.

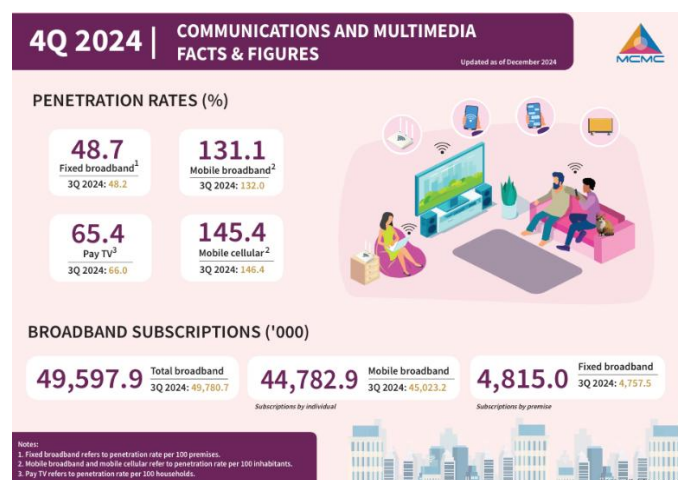


Figure 1: Communications and Multimedia Facts & Figures, Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2024

In Malaysia, internet and mobile connectivity have reached encouraging levels. According to the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC), mobile broadband penetration stood at 131.1%, with fixed broadband at 48.7% as of the fourth quarter of 2024. There were nearly 44.8 million mobile broadband subscriptions and 4.8 million fixed broadband subscriptions nationwide (MCMC, 2024). This widespread access to digital infrastructure enables more Malaysians to participate in the digital economy and public discourse, more than ever before. This reflects an almost fully

connected society, where platforms like TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube are not just entertainment outlets.

The 15th General Election (GE15) in 2022 highlighted the shift in information consumption. While traditional media remains in the media landscape, many voters, especially the younger ones, turned to social media for real time updates. Even when diverse media outlets exist, this does not guarantee discoverability. As Foster (2015) notes, “news search engines tend to favour mainstream news providers,” which may inadvertently reduce the visibility of smaller voices. In Malaysia, this often means independent voices struggle to gain traction, despite them being active participants in public discourse. The algorithm decides what we see – privileging certain narratives while others are effectively submerged.

The growing influence of digital platforms has attracted attention from policymakers around the world. As Kozak and Ruiz (2024) observe, platforms like Meta (who own Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp) can shape public discourse by influencing which articles are surfaced or deprioritised. This highlights the evolving nature of gatekeeping in today’s digital media landscape. Traditional regulatory tools such as ownership caps, cross-media rules, broadcast licensing, while still important, may not fully address the complexities of algorithm-driven content distribution. In an environment where attention is a limited resource, as content travels through borders, and as algorithms play a decisive role in visibility, regulators are increasingly called to revisit the foundation of media plurality. The responsibility for promoting media plurality must be shared between regulators, platform providers, creators, and audiences alike.

Section II: When Everyone is a Publisher

The digital ecosystem has transformed the way content is created, shared, and consumed as the barriers for content creation are lowered. Today, anyone with a smartphone and an internet connection can become a publisher, commentator, or content creator. This user-driven model has introduced more voices into the public sphere than ever before, contributing to a more participatory and expressive media environment. In theory, enriching media plurality as it allows alternative perspectives, minority opinions, and everyday experiences to complement traditional journalism and broadcasting.

I witnessed the impact of user-generated content most clearly during Malaysia’s GE15, while I was still studying in Seoul. Though physically distant, I was digitally immersed – scrolling through short videos, memes, and livestreams that were not created by official campaigns or newsrooms but by regular users. The speed and reach of this content made it clear that the most influential voices were no longer traditional broadcasters, but creators amplified by platform algorithms. For voters, this meant receiving information in a more interactive and accessible ways. However, it also underscored the

importance of being able to critically evaluate content. In a fast-moving digital space, entertainment and opinion blend with news, we, as users, carry a greater responsibility to verify what we see and share. While this environment has enabled richer civic participation, it also highlights the value of digital literacy and platform transparency in supporting an informed electorate.

TikTok's prominence in GE15 reflects why this regulation matters. Analyst Mohd Hafeez Nazri observed that the platform had become the new frontline for youth outreach, replacing Facebook's dominance from GE14 (Nur Hazlina, 2022). As TikTok reached 14.4 million users in Malaysia, and campaigns targeted four million first-time voters using short-form videos and memes to shape narratives in real time. According to Merdeka Center – an independent pollster – showed that youth internet usage is high, 32% for entertainment, 17% for studies, and 16% for news. However, media literacy remains uneven. Disinformation can spread rapidly when engagement and virality are the only filters. User-generated content is no longer secondary as platforms now actively encourage it. Globally, in 2024, TikTok users posted an average of 17 videos per month, while Instagram users with big followings posted 46 stories weekly (Dixon, 2025). Videos have become longer, averaging 42.7 seconds on TikTok, consequently have become more persuasive.

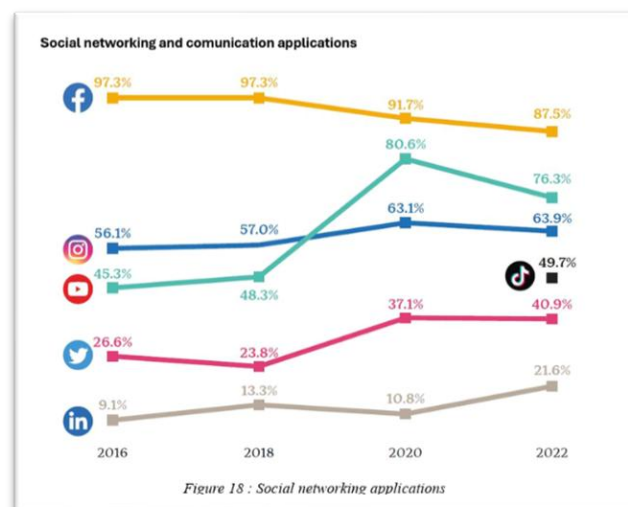


Figure 2: Social networking and communication applications, Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2022

The evolution of platform usage in Malaysia reflects this changing dynamic. As illustrated in Figure 2, Facebook remains widely used (87.5% in 2022), but platforms like TikTok have grown rapidly, reaching nearly 50% of internet users. YouTube and Instagram also continue to attract large audiences, indicating a sustained preference for visual and short-term content. These trends suggest that users are not only seeking information but also entertainment and relevance. Platforms like TikTok in particular, thrive on content generated by regular users and creators, whose visibility is shaped by recommendation algorithms. It creates a vibrant ecosystem for participation while spotlighting the need for platform responsibility and consumer awareness.

Amidst these challenges, Malaysia has taken a more proactive regulatory path: a licensing regime for major digital platforms. MCMC announced that social media and messaging services with over eight million local users must now apply for an annual license (MCMC, 2025). Tiktok, Meta, Telegram, and WeChat had either received or begun their licensing processes. This policy aims to strengthen platform accountability, promote user safety, and ensure that digital services operate in alignment with national laws and values.

This concern is not unique to Malaysia. Globally, platforms that curate user content “act like editors” yet are often not held to the same level of accountability for what they amplify (Kozak, and Ruiz, 2024). In response, the European Union (EU) now requires digital services to mitigate systemic risks to information diversity. Malaysia’s licensing framework represents an important first step in this direction. While takedown requests and licensing mechanisms provide a regulatory foundation, they are most effective when paired with broader initiatives such as algorithmic transparency, digital literacy education, and meaningful cooperation between regulators and platforms. As the digital public sphere will continue to reward virality over nuance, making media plurality a race not of ideas but of attention.

Section III: Local Mandates and Global Platforms

The rise of user-generated content and algorithmic gatekeeping has revealed important limitations in traditional media regulation. Malaysia’s existing frameworks were initially designed for print, broadcast and telecom, and are increasingly being tested by a hybrid, cross-border digital ecosystem shaped by global platforms and rapid innovation. This creates ongoing pressure between the imperative of democratic oversight and the demands of digital agility. However, with coordinated reform, there is potential for harmony between these priorities, where national objectives and digital innovation can complement rather than conflict with one another.

The Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 (CMA 1998) was last amended in December 2024, with the changes taking effect in early 2025. The amendments strengthened the MCMC regulatory functions by introducing broader auditing powers by enhancing content-related enforcement mechanisms and increased penalties. Particularly, to target harmful online content (Skrine, 2024). The realities of the digital age have prompted the government to align national regulations to reflect the changes. MCMC has framed the reforms as a part of a broader strategy to “enhance online safety, safeguard users, and improve regulatory oversight” (Malay Mail, 2025), acknowledging the influence of platform-driven content dissemination. Some civil society organisations, including Amnesty International Malaysia, however, in a joint statement, have raised concerns that the expanded powers could risk overreach if not accompanied by strong accountability safeguards (Amnesty Malaysia, 2024).

Oversight of Malaysia's digital and media ecosystem is currently distributed across several entities, including MCMC, the Ministry of Communications, the Ministry of Digital, the Royal Malaysian Police (PDRM), and occasionally the National Film Development Corporation (FINAS). While this institutional diversity reflects the cross-sectoral nature of digital regulation, it can also lead to overlapping mandates, and procedural ambiguities. The CMA 1998 itself was conceived in an era of infrastructure convergence – not one where algorithms and recommendation systems determine what content users see. A more concerted and streamlined approach to governance could help ensure that regulation remains consistent, efficient, and supportive of innovation.

As Malaysia accelerates its digital transformation agenda through national initiatives like Malaysia Digital Economy Blueprint (MyDIGITAL), the government envisions positioning the country as a regional leader in the digital economy by 2030. The Blueprint emphasize that it would “empower all Malaysians...to improve their lives in every aspect,” including digital literacy, job creation, access to digital healthcare, and enhanced public services. The initiative aims to contribute 22.6% to GDP by 2025, generate 500,000 digital economy jobs, and attract RM70 billion in digital investments (MalaysiaKini, 2021). To achieve its full potential, the Blueprint's success must be supported by streamlined regulatory processes and a clear, unified digital governance framework.

In the case of Malaysia's 2025 platform licensing regime, it reflects this shift in regulatory thinking. It formally recognises platforms with large user bases carry responsibilities akin to editorial actors. While this regime strengthens oversight, it also reinforces the need for regulatory coherence across ministries and enforcement bodies. This will ensure that platforms are accountable, without stifling innovation or legitimate expression, requiring careful balancing of national goals with platform realities.

Malaysia is not alone in navigating this evolving space. The EU's Digital Services Act (DSA) requires platforms to conduct systemic risk assessments, maintain transparency around content moderation, and face penalties for non-compliance – up to 6% of global turnover (Coulter, 2023). At the same time, the European Commission is looking to “cut overlap in tech directives,” that includes the DSA, Digital Markets Act (DMA), and the AI Act, to reduce bureaucratic burden while maintaining integrity, says Henna Virkkunen, their digital chief (Sterling, 2025). In Australia, public discourse around the News Media Bargaining Code continues even though platforms' responses are ambivalent. For example, Meta reiterated recently that “people do not come to Facebook for news and political content,” yet they being trialling their new algorithms that prioritise personalised political information in user feeds (Digital News Report: Australia 2025, 2025, p. 104). This illustrates how deeply embedded platforms remain in shaping news discovery – even when their role is contested.

Malaysia's licensing regime aligns with other global efforts, but long-term success will require regulatory responsibilities to be clear, proportionate, and flexible. Effective implementation must be

supported by inter-agency cooperation and meaning engagement with stakeholders, including social media platforms and civil society. Malaysia must evolve their regulatory framework that protects its citizens, and platforms while they support an inclusive digital media ecosystem that is grounded in its national values yet adaptable to global realities.

Section IV: Rethinking Media Regulation

Digital platforms now transcend national borders, presenting challenges for national regulatory systems seeking to safeguard media plurality. Global players such as Meta, Google, and TikTok are not bound by national editorial standards, yet they shape the visibility, virality, and the reach of content within our national societies. This raises an important question: how can countries ensure pluralism and protect democratic discourse when the digital ecosystem is beyond their direct jurisdiction?

Malaysia's recent amendments to the CMA 1998 and the introduction of a platform licensing regime represent important steps toward strengthening national oversight in a rapidly changing digital environment. These measures reflect the government's commitment to enhancing user protection, transparency, and accountability online. While global platforms operate under international policies that do not fully align with national ones, these developments mark the beginning of more structured engagement. By continuing to improve regulatory coordination and fostering collaborative relationships with digital service providers. Malaysia is well-positioned to address emerging challenges while upholding national values and safeguard social harmony, especially in a diverse society where topics around race, religion and royalty require cultural sensitivity. In recognition of the global nature of digital platforms, Malaysia is also advocating for a regional-wide regulatory dialogue within ASEAN to build shared leverage with Big Tech (Mahmud, 2025). This reflects growing regional recognition that no single country can effectively manage the cross-border dynamics of digital governance alone.

FIGURE C.5: RESPONSES TO Q7 - DO NATIONAL REGULATIONS NEED TO CHANGE TO HELP FACILITATE THE DIGITAL AGENDA IN ASEAN?

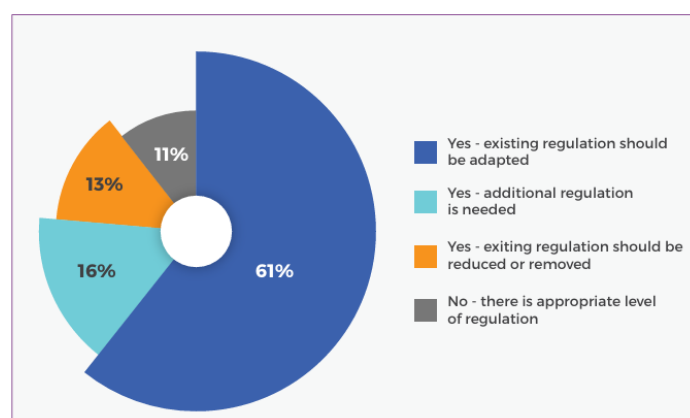


Figure 3: RESPONSES TO Q7 - DO NATIONAL REGULATIONS NEED TO CHANGE TO HELP FACILITATE THE DIGITAL AGENDA IN ASEAN?, ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025, 2021, p. 128.

The ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025 reinforces this position. In a regional stakeholder survey conducted for the plan, 61% of respondents agreed that existing national regulations should be adapted to better support the digital agenda. A further 16% called for new regulation, while only 11% believed that current frameworks were sufficient (ASEAN, 2021). These findings reflect a regional awareness that regulation is not obsolete but must adapt to the evolving nature of digital platforms and their societal role.

At the same time, definitions of ‘media’ and ‘pluralism’ must be reconsidered. Today, content is created and moulded by a wide range of actors – journalists, influencers, AI bots, and regular users alike. As Elda Brogi notes, modern media pluralism requires a “wide array of information as a precondition” (Brogi, 2020, p. 2), not just the existence of multiple sources. In a world where personalised algorithms exist, pluralism must be measured by diversity of exposure, rather than simply the number of available outlets.

Ultimately, safeguarding digital media pluralism needs a multi-tiered approach: modernising national legislation, encouraging co-regulation with platforms, enhancing regional cooperation, and investing in digital literacy. It may begin with national legislation, but it must be sustained through coordinated efforts across governments, platforms, and civil societies. The global scale of these challenges should not be seen as a barrier, but rather as a call for innovation and collaboration as we shape a digital ecosystem that supports informed, diverse, and inclusive public discourse.

Conclusion

In the algorithmic age, visibility is power. Media plurality is no longer about how many voices exist, but which ones are made visible, and why. Power lies not only in who creates media, but in who curates its reach. As regional efforts like the ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025 show, the future of media pluralism depends on rethinking regulation for a world where the currency of attention is curated by code.

Reflecting on Malaysia’s 15th General Election from abroad, I experienced firsthand how platforms and algorithms influence what information voters encounter and how quickly it spreads. The voices I encountered were not always the most credible, but they were the most visible. As digital ecosystems continue to evolve, protecting democratic participation will require frameworks that ensure not just the freedom to speak, but the opportunity to be seen, heard, and understood.

Bibliography

- “Amendments to the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 Tabled for First Reading: Skrine - Advocates & Solicitors.” *Skrine*, 2024, www.skrine.com/insights/alerts/december-2024/amendments-to-the-communications-and-multimedia-ac.
- “ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025.” *ASEAN*, 2021, asean.org/book/asean-digital-masterplan-2025/.
- Brogi, Elda. “The Media Pluralism Monitor: Conceptualizing Media Pluralism for the online environment.” *El Profesional de La Información*, 4 Nov. 2020, <https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2020.sep.29>.
- Coulter, Martin. “Big Tech Braces for EU Digital Services Act Regulations | Reuters.” *Reuters*, 2023, www.reuters.com/technology/big-tech-braces-roll-out-eus-digital-services-act-2023-08-24/.
- “DIGITAL NEWS REPORT: AUSTRALIA 2025.” *University of Canberra*, 2025, apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2025-06/apo-nid330740.pdf.
- Dixon, Stacy Jo. “Topic: User-Generated Content.” *Statista*, 2025, www.statista.com/topics/1716/user-generated-content/#topicOverview.
- Foster, Robin. “News Plurality in a Digital World.” *REUTERS INSTITUTE for the STUDY of JOURNALISM*, July 2012, pp. 1–58, https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2017-11/News%20Plurality%20in%20a%20Digital%20World_0.pdf.
- Kozak, Malgorzata, and Tais A. Ruiz Palacios. “Digital News Aggregators, Media Plurality and the Right to Information.” *Verfassungsblog*, Verfassungsblog, 16 July 2024, verfassungsblog.de/digital-news-aggregators-media-plurality-and-the-right-to-information/.
- Mahmud, Aqil Haziq. “Malaysia’s Bid to Rally ASEAN in Taking on Big Tech - Good Shot or ‘Insurmountable Challenge’?” *CNA*, 2025, www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/malaysia-asean-regulate-social-media-licence-big-tech-4890996.
- “Malaysia’s Social Media Licensing Takes Effect Today.” *Malay Mail*, Malay Mail, 1 Jan. 2025, www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2025/01/01/malaysias-social-media-licensing-takes-effect-today/161692.
- MCMC. 2022, *Internet Users Survey 2022*, <https://www.mcmc.gov.my/en/resources/statistics/internet-users-survey#>. Accessed 2025.
- MCMC. 2025, *Communications and Multimedia: Pocket Book of Statistics*, https://www.mcmc.gov.my/skmmgovmy/media/General/Resources/Statistics/2025/C-M-4Q-2024_BI.pdf. Accessed 2025.
- MCMC. “Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) | Suruhanjaya Komunikasi Dan Multimedia Malaysia (SKMM) - MCMC: ‘legal Action’ against Facebook’s Parent Meta for Failing to Cooperate, Take down Harmful Post.” *Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission*, 2023, www.mcmc.gov.my/en/media/press-clippings/mcmc-legal-action-against-facebook-s-parent-meta-f.
- MCMC. “Press Releases | FOUR INTERNET MESSAGING AND SOCIAL MEDIA SERVICE PROVIDERS APPLY FOR LICENCE TO OPERATE IN MALAYSIA.” *Malaysian*

Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2025, www.mcmc.gov.my/en/media/press-releases/four-internet-messaging-and-social-media-service-p.

“Mydigital to Transform Malaysia into a Digitally-Driven, High-Income Nation by 2030.” *Malaysiakini*, 6 Mar. 2021, www.malaysiakini.com/advertorial/565434.

Nur Hasliza. “The TikTok Factor in GE15.” *MalaysiaNow*, MalaysiaNow, 26 Nov. 2022, www.malaysianow.com/news/2022/11/27/the-tiktok-factor-in-ge15.

“The Passing of the CMA Amendments Is Another Step Backwards for Freedom of Expression.” *Amnesty Malaysia*, 10 Dec. 2024, www.amnesty.my/2024/12/10/cma-amendments-2024/.

Sterling, Toby. “EU Commission Looks to Cut Overlap in Tech Directives -Virkkunen | Reuters.” *Reuters*, 2025, www.reuters.com/technology/eu-commission-looks-cut-overlap-tech-directives-virkkunen-2025-03-27/.

Note on Generative AI

ChatGPT was used in the following manner for the creation of this document:

- Research
- Refinement of tone for written segments

Pixlr was used in the following manner for the creation of this document:

- AI image generation for cover photo

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this essay are solely those of the author in their personal capacity and do not reflect the official policy, position, or views of the author’s past, current and/or future employer.