# Media Literacy: Accessibility and Skills among Malaysian Women

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The advancement of empowerment of women is a vital factor to ensure an improvement in the quality of lives in developing countries. To achieve this, there is a need for media literacy among women. Media literacy in the context of this article is defined as the accessibility and skills in using the computer, the Internet, telecommunications, and electronic media. The purpose of this article is to discuss the accessibility and level of media literacy among women in Malaysia. It also focuses on the purposes of using such media. A survey was conducted of 957 respondents from two districts in the state of Kedah, Malaysia. The instrument used was a questionnaire based on the Computer Skills Checklists taken from the World Wide Web. The findings showed that the level of accessibility of media, specifically fixed line telephone, cellular telephone, radio, and television is significantly higher than the computer and the Internet. The majority of the respondents claimed that they have good knowledge in terms of basic computer and Internet skills but many of them have no skills in advanced features of the computer and the Internet.

The role of media in disseminating information has become increasingly more important nowadays. Media are used in everyday activities, whether at home or in the office for entertainment and leisure, education, and many other purposes. Media can be used as a tool to empower human beings and in this context, women. However, there is a need for women to be media literate before media can be used to empower them. Without progress towards the empowerment of women, any attempt to raise the quality of lives of people in developing countries would be incomplete (Nath, 2001).

Media literacy is defined as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages in a wide variety of forms (Aufderheide, 1993 as cited in Hobbs, 1998). Media literacy in the context of this article is defined as the ability to access and use the computer, the Internet, telecommunications, and electronic media. Media literacy teaches critical and analytical skills to people of all ages, so they can better understand and navigate our media culture. Print literacy, which is defined as the ability to read and write, is no longer adequate in today's discussion. Everybody needs to learn how to 'read' visual image messages: i.e., TV, movies, and advertisement, in addition to printed words. A media-literate person does not necessarily know the answers to all questions but knows how to ask the right questions: (a) Who created the message? (b) Why? (c) How and why did they choose what to include and what to leave out of the message? and (d) How is it intended to influence me? Media-literate people also need to know how these media and messages can contribute to the process of empowerment.

Some issues being raised in the debate on the concept of media literacy (Sargant, 2000) include:

1. Does it matter if people are not media-literate? What is wrong with invincible ignorance?
2. Do people know what equipment is available, at what cost? What channels, program and services are available to people in their own homes/area? Via what equipment? At what cost?
3. How do people find out about content or choose what they want to watch, to listen to, or to find on the Internet, from the daily newspapers, the radio, or television? Would a classification system help?
4. Do people understand the techniques used to promote programs? Can they differentiate between the different types of communications: commercial, factual, fictional, entertainment-based, and political?
5. Do people understand how messages are constructed or manipulated? Is it necessary for people to know about production or engage in production themselves? It is, after all, argued in respect of basic literacy that people need to be able to read and write themselves.
6. What role can the media, particularly broadcasters, play in offering or understanding and helping improve media literacy?

There exists little research on Malaysian adults' media literacy levels, particularly in relation to television. Existing sources are more on audiovisual media and on computer-based media and the Internet. The initial need is to try to benchmark whether the adults are media literate, do they think they are media literate and how they rate their competency in using the media. There is no general term on media literacy that can be used among the adult population. It is therefore not possible to ask questions about it as a concept in theory or in practice. Although media literacy encompasses many areas, here we focus on its access. Media literacy in the context of this article is defined as the ability to use the computer, the Internet, telecommunications, and electronic media. In terms of media usage, studies have proved that women tend to use certain technologies more frequently than men, such as telephones, the Short Message Service (SMS), pagers, email, and chat (Joshi, 1998; Lohan, 2001).

The basic knowledge and skills of the computer can include knowing how it functions, how to input data and retrieve information, how to use the keyboard, how to navigate the screen, and suchlike (Adeyoyin, 2005). This is a core skill that should be available to anyone who wishes to live and work effectively in this modern and technology-driven world. Thus, with more opportunities for women to enter the field of work, and with the decreasing segregation in the work place, women would be more driven to comprehend communication technologies (Mariani, Armando, Hasyim, Mutmainnah and Ilyas, 1998).

### *Media Literacy in Malaysia*

In Malaysia, media becomes an important enabling tool toward acquiring the ability to create, distribute, and exploit knowledge and information, which is often regarded as the single most important factor underlying economic growth and improvements in the quality of life. The extent of media utilization is an important determinant of a country's competitiveness in the borderless world, brought about by globalization. In Malaysia, as in

many other developing countries, government plays an important role in shaping the nation's media development.

A survey by Rahmah (1998) among Malaysian women shows that the computer is used for word processing by administrators, professionals, entrepreneurs, students, and housewives. Only a small number of women involved in the study use computers for data storage/analysis and learning purposes. The study also indicates that the computer is very useful for its effectiveness, convenience, ability to store and update data and information, and ability to save time. Women involved in the study also agree that the use of media, particularly email, fax machines, and computers has increased work efficiency and productivity. In order to survive in the present job environment, they must take initiatives to learn new skills, particularly in relation to computers and other new technologies.

There are many projects introduced and implemented by various government agencies and private sectors to assist the rural areas in the use and applications of media technologies in Malaysia. Some of the large-scale projects are Medan Info Desa, Kedai.Kom and Pusat Internet Desa (Rural Internet Centers). The objectives of these centers are: (a) to assist the rural communities to participate in media and ICT awareness programs and use media and ICT to communicate; (b) to bridge the digital divide of the rural communities; (c) to increase the marketing of local products; (d) to upgrade the media and ICT literacy level of the surrounding community; and (e) to produce media and ICT entrepreneurs (Norizan, 2005). Even though many projects are being funded to improve the media literacy level of Malaysian society, the issue that seems unsolved is: How many of the rural people, especially women, take advantage of these technologies? Do they have computers to work with? Do they have the skills to perform simple operations on the computer? Can they access information on the Internet? Do they use cellular telephones and fixed line telephones in their daily lives? Do they watch television and listen to radio? Furthermore, are they interested in learning these media skills to improve their quality of life? These are all questions that need to be answered if the Malaysian government wants to impose media on society, especially on women. This media literacy information is also useful in determining the media channels to be used in disseminating programs appropriate for target audiences.

## Method

The sample population is all women from two districts, Jitra and Pendang, in one of the states in northern Peninsular Malaysia, called Kedah. The total number of respondents is 957, which consists of 489 women from Pendang and 468 women from Jitra. The data used in this study was based on a survey funded by Universiti Utara Malaysia, conducted between March and August 2005. The survey instrument for the research is a questionnaire generated from a pool of Computer Skills Checklists on the World Wide Web. The questionnaire was designed to inquire about: a) the level of ownership and usage of computers, the Internet, telecommunications, and electronic media; b) the location of use; and c) the skills acquired by women in media usage.

## Results

### *Demographic Aspects*

The demographic aspects including age, race, religion, academic qualifications, monthly household income, type of work, and marital status are shown in Table 1. The survey found that of the total number of women involved in this study, 32 percent were between 21 to 30 years old. More than 92 percent were Malay and Muslims, and almost 70 percent of the respondents qualified at the secondary education level or equivalent. Thirty-three percent of the respondents' monthly household income is between RM501 to RM1000, and 39 percent of them are homemakers, and the majority of the women are married.

### *Accessibility of Media*

#### *Computer*

*Accessibility of Computer.* Respondents were asked about their computer accessibility. As shown in Table 2, in terms of the level of accessibility of computers among women, only 54 percent have access to computers.

*Location Used to Access the Computer.* In terms of the location, result shows that the majority of the respondents access the tool at home (30 percent), followed by at work and Internet cafés (Table 3). The lowest score is at the post office or kiosk. This might be because not many post offices in Malaysia offer such facilities.

*Essential and Specific Computer Skills*. The findings on the specific computer skills by women show that most of them agree that they are highly competent in the so-called easy tasks, such as using the mouse/keyboard, copying files into folders, using the touch screen, using the 'copy, cut and paste' command, and changing the printer ink/toner (Table 4). The respondents also categorized themselves as advanced users in using word processing, spreadsheet, and graphical packaging, in addition to email application and surfing the Internet. However, many of the respondents had no skills in terms of more difficult tasks. For instance, 30 percent said that they have no skill in web site development, while more than 23 percent do not know how to install computer hardware.

#### *Internet*

*Internet Access*. While more than 50 percent own computers, only 29 percent of the women have access to the Internet. This is shown in Figure 1, and the percentage is still low compared to the total women involved in this study

*Location of Internet Use*. Of those who have access to the Internet, the majority of the respondents accessed it at work or at an Internet café, while only 13 percent accessed it at home. The percentage of them accessing the Internet from other places is significantly low (5 percent).

Table 1: Demographic results

| **Demographics** | Percentage (%) | **Demographics** | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Age (years)** | | **Monthly Household Income** | |
| 21 – 30 | 32.3 | RM100 - RM500 | 5.1 |
| 31 – 40 | 24.6 | RM501 - RM1000 | 33.1 |
| 41 – 50 | 31.9 | RM1001 – RM1500 | 20.1 |
| 51 – 60 | 10.2 | RM1501 - RM2000 | 19.5 |
| 61 – 70 | 0.5 | RM2001 - RM2500 | 8.0 |
| 71 – 80 | 0.1 | RM2501 - RM3000 | 4.4 |
| **Race** | | RM3001 - RM3500 | 2.4 |
| Malay | 92.4 | RM3501 - RM4000 | 1.3 |
| Chinese | 4.9 | RM4001 - RM4500 | 1.5 |
| Indian | 2.1 | RM4501 - RM5000 | 0.5 |
| Native (Bumiputera) | 0.3 | RM5001 – RM5500 | 0.4 |
| Others | 0.3 | **Type of Work** | |
| **Religion** | | Public sector | 17.6 |
| Muslim | 92.4 | Private sector | 23.1 |
| Buddhist | 3.4 | Owned a company | 11.5 |
| Hindu | 2.1 | Farmer | 2.3 |
| Christian | 2.1 | Retired | 1.3 |
| **Academic Qualifications** | | Housewife | 39.6 |
| Secondary school/below | 69.6 | Student | 4.4 |
| Polytechnics/vocational | 4.3 | **Marital Status** | |
| Diploma | 10.6 | Single | 21.7 |
| Bachelor | 8.6 | Married | 74.2 |
| Master | 6.7 | Widow | 3.7 |

Table 2: Ownership of Computer

| Computer | Percentage (%) | Unit | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Yes | 54.1 | 1 – 2 | 43.4 |
| | | 3 – 4 | 0.5 |
| | | No answer | 10.2 |
| No | 45.9 | | |
| Total | 100.0 | Total | 54.1 |

Table 3: Location used to access the computer

| Location | Percentage (%) | Location | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Home | 30.4 | Government agencies/office | 4.6 |
| At work | 23.7 | Public library | 3.7 |
| Internet café | 14.2 | Non-government organization | 1.0 |
| Educational organization (school, university) | 11.8 | Post office or kiosk | 0.4 |
| At a relative's place | 5.9 | | |

** Respondent may choose more than one location*

Table 4: Level of Computer Competencies

| **Type of Competencies** | **No skill** (%) | **Novice** (%) | **Moderate** (%) | **Advanced** (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mouse/keyboard | 0.4 | 2.2 | 9.3 | 30.8 |
| Word processing | 1.6 | 3.2 | 10.1 | 27.8 |
| Spreadsheet | 3.8 | 4.7 | 15.2 | 19.1 |
| Database development | 8.7 | 7.6 | 14.5 | 11.9 |
| Graphical package | 9.0 | 7.2 | 13.3 | 13.3 |
| Email applications | 10.8 | 6.7 | 10.4 | 14.8 |
| Surfing the Internet | 8.3 | 4.3 | 12.7 | 17.5 |
| Installing computer hardware | 23.8 | 7.7 | 7.0 | 4.2 |
| Web site development | 29.3 | 6.6 | 8.4 | 23.1 |
| Copying file into folder | 6.6 | 4.7 | 8.4 | 23.1 |
| Using the 'copy, cut and paste' command | 5.1 | 4.2 | 6.9 | 26.5 |
| Programming languages | 20.7 | 8.2 | 9.3 | 4.6 |
| Change the printer ink/toner | 12.9 | 6.0 | 10.2 | 13.7 |
| Installing software | 17.7 | 7.0 | 8.2 | 9.9 |
| Using the touch screen | 8.6 | 2.1 | 4.5 | 27.6 |
| Using the scanner | 18.6 | 6.7 | 9.8 | 7.6 |

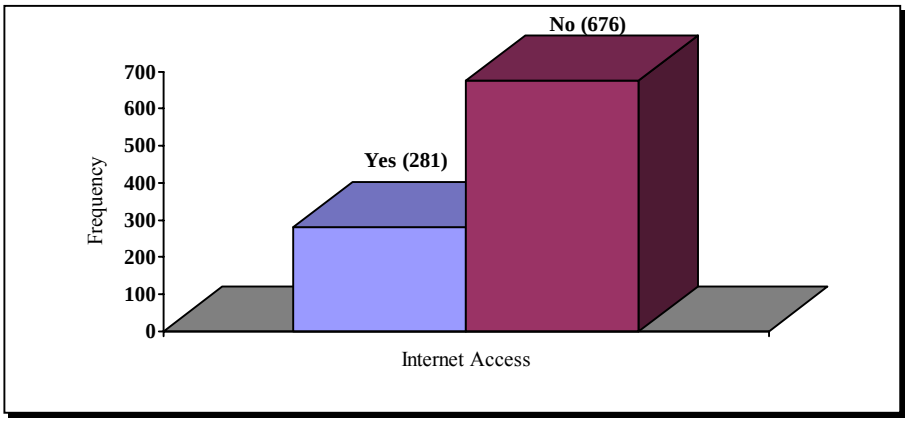


Figure 1 : Internet Access

Table 5 : Location of Internet Use

| Location | Percentage (%) | Location | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| At work | 14.8 | At a relative's place | 2.6 |
| Internet café | 14.1 | Government agencies/office | 2.5 |
| Home | 13.5 | Non-government organization | 0.9 |
| Educational organization (school, university) | 6.7 | Post office/kiosk | 0.5 |
| Public library | 3.2 | | |

* *Respondent may choose more than one place*

*Level of Internet Competencies*. This study also analyzes the level of Internet competencies among women as shown in Table 6. It can be said that the majority of the respondents are highly competent in less technical activities such as searching information on the Internet, listening to music, and chatting, whereas the number of respondents who indicate that they have no skills in more technical activities is high. For instance, 19 percent of the respondents said that they do not have skills in uploading web sites and this can be related to the low level of skills in developing web sites. They also lacked skills in using file transfer protocol and downloading software from the Internet.

Table 6: Level of Internet Skills

| **Activity** | **No skill** (%) | **Novice** (%) | **Moderate** (%) | **Advanced** (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Searching information | 0.7 | 1.8 | 8.4 | 18.5 |
| Listening to music | 3.7 | 3.6 | 7.4 | 14.7 |
| Chatting | 4.2 | 4.1 | 8.3 | 12.9 |
| Downloading software | 11.4 | 4.1 | 8.8 | 5.1 |
| Web site development | 18.6 | 4.4 | 4.4 | 2.0 |
| Uploading web site | 19.6 | 4.1 | 4.0 | 1.7 |
| Using File Transfer Protocol | 19.6 | 3.7 | 3.4 | 2.6 |

*Telecommunications*

*Ownership of Fixed Line Telephone.* The majority of the respondents have access to a fixed line telephone (81 percent), and only 19 percent do not have access.

*Ownership of Cellular Telephone*. The level of cellular telephone ownership among women involved in this study is considered high where 79 percent or 755 of the respondents owned cellular telephones.

*Electronic Media*

*Access to Radio*. This study also found that the accessibility to the radio is significantly higher among women. Ninety-six percent claimed that they listened to radio, and 77 percent owned between 1 and 2 radios.

*Access to Television*. Meanwhile, almost all respondents have access to television (99 percent), where more than 79 percent of the respondents have between 1 and 2 televisions, and 2 percent have 3 to 4 televisions.

## Discussion

In view of the findings of this study, it is obvious that there is a serious problem at hand. It shows that women, particularly in rural areas, are far removed from what is really needed in the present century, with media as the tool for empowerment and dissemination of knowledge. The findings show that only 54 percent of the women have access to a computer, whether at home, at work, or other places, and most of them can perform basic computer operations, such as using mouse/keyboard and word processing. However, the participants are inexperienced and lack competency in high-level and more technical computer applications such as web-site development, using programming language, or even installing computer hardware/software and using a scanner.

Meanwhile, only 29 percent of the respondents (281 women) have access to the Internet. This number is still low compared to the number of Internet users in Malaysia, which reached more than 11 million at the end of 2006 (Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission). More than 80 percent have access to a fixed line telephone, while 79 percent own cellular telephones. These numbers indicate that the telephone, whether fixed or cellular,

has become a common means of communication among women. Furthermore, almost all women who participated in this study have access to radio and television. This is due to the fact that the price of radio and television sets in Malaysia is cheap and affordable, and access to radio and television programs (operated by the government stations and media conglomerates, Media Prima Berhad) is provided for free.

However, by looking at the findings of this study, the goal of ensuring that all citizens, including marginalized people, get the same access and facilities is still far from successful. Only 54 percent of the women involved in this study have access to computers, and 29 percent have access to the Internet. If this scenario is not taken into account, the digital divide will be wider, and it will be difficult for the Malaysian government to ensure that the planned Knowledge Society will be achieved by year 2020. Furthermore, access to and the availability of media are not the only issues to be discussed, but the issue of media use and barriers impeding effective and efficient use by women must also be considered.

Therefore, the government needs to address some solutions to overcome the inequality of access among Malaysians, especially rural and marginalized women. Some of the solutions will be highlighted as follows:

*Encourage the Ownership and Usage of Media*

In order to ensure the improvement and full participation in media use among women, there is a need to upgrade their media competency to at least minimum level, to enable women to know how to access information. They should be encouraged to own media technologies such as computers, telephones, and Internet Access, and also get involved in the usage of media. The government, with the help of private sectors, should conduct various studies to determine the minimum competency standard for the community. A simple but comprehensive media literacy training module should be prepared to meet the needs of the rural communities, and training can be conducted by the e-community centers or others to generate income and encourage the participation of other institutions or private firms.

*Increase English Language Literacy*

Much of the knowledge presented in the global pool is in English – a language that is not understood by the poorest, rural women, or tribal communities (Pattanaik, 2005). This is also true in the case of media, where most of the Internet browsers, search engines and e-learning platforms are prepared in English. As such, there is a need to offer English language courses for the community. There is also a need to offer local languages or dialect-needs for translation services. Portals developed in the local and vernacular languages should reach maximum coverage and audiences.

*Development of Local Content*

The policy maker needs to focus on the development of local content and to identify needed modules and programs for various communities; i.e. specific modules on sewing and cooking. This is necessary in order to inculcate the habit of lifelong learning among women. Content developers are also required to produce suitable and appropriate materials for all.

This will enable more people to learn what they actually need and are interested in, not what is required. There is also a need to provide the content in local languages, i.e. Malay, Chinese, and Indian so that it will encourage people to utilize media.

*Sharing of Facilities*

The community, especially rural people, should be assisted by being able to use the existing or new media and ICT equipment provided at schools or nearby colleges. In the 9th Malaysian plan, all schools in Malaysia will be upgraded to Smart Schools where instructions will be delivered and assisted with computer technology and labs (Norizan, 2005). The opening hours of these computer labs can be extended, and the use of facilities could be provided for free or minimal charges. Adoption programs can be introduced whereby each community center will be sponsored by a successful corporate company, and the cost of sponsorship should be tax-deductible or tax-exempt.

Future research should look into how and why media technologies remain a major constraint on the uptake of improvement of women's quality of lives, and what approaches and strategies can be implemented to redress this situation. Research on supporting the creation and the exchange of local and locally relevant content by rural women themselves, or customized to their need and media literacy abilities and their interest should also be conducted. These are all important aspects that need to be emphasized to ensure that women in Malaysia are empowered and achieve a better quality of life.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this article is to determine whether women are media-literate, particularly in the accessibility and usage of computers, the Internet, the telephone, the radio, and the television. The article also tries to identify whether women do think that they are media literate and how they rate their competency in using media. The findings show that the level of accessibility of media, specifically fixed line telephone, cellular telephone, radio, and television are significantly higher than the computer and the Internet. The majority of the respondents claimed that they have good knowledge in terms of basic computer and Internet skills, but many of them have no skills in advanced features of the computer and the Internet. Therefore, there is a vital need to impose media literacy among women in Malaysia, since the level is still considered moderate. It is hoped that women will be more empowered by media technology and its content and therefore their quality of life will be enhanced.

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