

## **Media Reports on Religious Extremism and Terrorism**

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### **Abstract**

Extremism is a worldwide and local problem that has never been resolved and is frequently covered by the media. The media's coverage of extremism has two facets: either as a catalyst for extremism or as a means of combating it. Extremism exists in numerous forms and points of view, including those of race, ideology, politics, and religion. The use of the word "extremist" in the name of religion, particularly Islam, has frequently been a prominent theme in the reporting of extremism news, leading to misperceptions about Islam. The misunderstandings have a negative impact on social harmony and portray Islam as a violent or offensive faith. The occurrence of Islamophobia was a consequence of misinformation about Islam, particularly following the September 11 attacks. The function of the media, the ethics of journalism, and the importance of news are superior sources of information for dispelling misconceptions about Islam. This article examines news coverage of extremism, religious extremism, global and local extremism, and Islamic viewpoints on news consumption. The perspectives of anti-extremism campaigners in Southeast Asia on the role of the media in matters pertaining to religious violent extremism are highlighted by subsequent remarks on the ethics of journalism and news values directed by the United Nations (UN) and other agency recommendations. It is anticipated that this article will give readers a correct perspective on the reporting of religious extremism news and a clear understanding of religious violent extremism, so that they will not simply acknowledge or believe arbitrary fake news.

**Keywords:** Media, Extremism, Gatekeeping, News Reporting, Malaysia, Terrorism, Journalism, News Value, Journalist Etiquette, Fake News

### **Introduction**

The electronic and print mass media have built a complicated network of extremism-related news coverage. The media is viewed either as a catalyst for extremism or as a platform for moderation. This circumstance suggests that the media is popularizing extreme groups or is

seeking to enhance the ratings of their news platforms by disseminating false information to confuse the community (Abubakar, 2020).

Journalists play a crucial role in judging whether or not a piece of information is news. The selection of news comprises the classification of news by journalists in order to identify news that is fascinating, significant, unique, and other news. For the selection of news to keep its integrity, this procedure should be carried out with care and without the involvement of third parties. This relates closely to their journalistic ethics (Amoroso et al., 2018; Rasyid & Siagian, 2017). Galtung and Ruge (1965) identified the worth of newspaper-focused news and broadcast news with 12 parameters to confirm the news's value. The criteria for such a conclusion are frequency, threshold, clarity, significance, alignment, unpredictability, persistence, organized content, allusions to powerful countries, references to powerful individuals, references to someone, and references to something terrible. The greater the element contained in a news story's value, the greater its worth. This study by Galtung and Ruge (1965) was published more than 50 years ago, and since then, the value of news has become an essential idea in journalism and communication studies to explain the role of information screeners in the media world (Meissner, 2015).

In all cases and regardless of the subject matter, news reporting occurs frequently across borders. Extremism coverage in the news is a widely debated subject, particularly religious extremism and violence involving religion (Wibisino et al., 2019). After September 11, 2001, both domestic and international media frequently reported on extremism or terrorism with a religious motive, and the Muslim population became a major concern in most nations until the emergence of the Islamophobic phenomenon (Istriyani & Yuliatun, 2016). Religious matters are delicate, and no member of any religion is eager to have his or her religion associated with extremism or terrorism. Therefore, the media must comprehend the ethics of journalism and the importance of the news they publish regarding extremism or terrorism, so that the final news does not contradict the facts. Inaccurate reporting of news regarding extremism or terrorism will offer extremists or terrorists an advantage or an excellent opportunity to attract attention. To prevent recurring misunderstandings, it is necessary to consider the relationship between journalistic ethics and the quality of news and journalistic reporting on the subject of religious extremism and terrorism.

### **News Reporting in Malaysia**

Media broadcasting in Malaysia irrespective of whether print or digital media offer news in several languages and platforms. The evolution of news reporting in Malaysia is tied to the landscape of traditional and alternative media. Mainstream media are traditional media, whereas alternative media provide alternative news sources, regardless of whether they are in print or online. The existence of alternative media can give society freedom and variety in its news coverage (Ahmad, 2021). However, the freedom of the media to report news should be restricted in order to prevent false reporting and community confusion. Media in Malaysia is governed by the Ministry of Home Affairs (KDN) and is subject to the Printing Machines and Publications Act 1984 (KDN, 2012). All media-related activities must be accompanied by an annual license, which may be withdrawn by KDN. The importance of the media in shaping the public's understanding and perception of an issue cannot be overstated. The primary focus of news reporting should be journalistic reference (Munnik, 2018). Journalists pick and evaluate references to aid the public in comprehending significant news or issues. Reporting the news has a significant impact on society, especially when the nation is confronted with a major problem such as terrorism or other major issues. The screening of references can also assist

the public in forming opinions about reported news or concerns. This demonstrates the skill with which journalists evaluate the significance, credibility, and validity of a news report (Chyi et al., 2016).

The emergence of social media, which is attracting more and more people of all ages, is expanding the platform's popularity and ensuring that it will not be left behind in the dissemination of news and issues. Furthermore, Malaysia ranks among the top five nations in the world and Southeast Asia for social media usage (Hassan et al., 2021). According to research performed by the European Union (EU), the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), and the Merdeka Center for Opinion Research (2021) on 1,203 respondents, Facebook is a significant source of information and news for the majority of them. Their survey also revealed three major problems with news reporting on social media: 93% of respondents said there was an inaccurate dissemination of information, 88% of respondents said there were news organizations that reported inaccurate information, and 84% of respondents said journalists did not thoroughly investigate the facts. However, the majority of respondents (74%) remain confident in the ethical standards of media journalism in Malaysia. Meanwhile, a survey of internet users in Malaysia conducted by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) (2020) revealed that social media is the most popular platform (86.5% of Malaysians) for sharing information online, and news sharing is the most popular type of online information sharing (66.9%), compared to sharing about entertainment, joke stories, etc. This demonstrates that social media is the primary source of news for Malaysians, rather than traditional media. However, irresponsible users have misused this social media platform by distributing false information (Jeffri et al., 2021).

In Malaysia, bogus news connected to religious extremism and terrorism has been disseminated (Abdul Hamid, 2019; Amly, 2019). The dissemination of false information on social media by three suspects following the fatal shooting of a woman by a man who was subsequently killed by police has shifted the narrative and garnered public sympathy for the man. According to Mior Farid Alathrash Wahid, Chief Assistant Director (D5) Prosecution/Law, Bukit Aman Criminal Investigation Department (JSJ), the police had received reports of false information spread via Facebook and WhatsApp claiming that the man who was fatally shot was responsible for the murder because the two women had insulted the Prophet Muhammad PBUH. However, according to the police inquiry, the individual suffers from mental illness since he is frequently exposed to and influenced by Middle Eastern violence movies (Amly, 2019). The following are social media users' expressions of compassion for the man suspected of fighting for the Prophet Muhammad (Abdul Hamid, 2019):

**The first comment:** *Innalillahiwainnailaihirojiun...Pada hari ini 24 Muharram 1441 hijrah, bersemadilah seorang SYUHADA iaitu Al-Syahid Sheikh Muhammad Khairil yg mati ditembak disebabkan beliau mengamuk terhadap 2 org kafir harbi yang menghina Junjungan Besar Nabi Muhammad SAW dihadapan beliau. Moga Allah kurniakan Syurga Firdaus pada Arwah.*

**The translation:** *Innalillahiwainnailaihirojiun...On this day 24<sup>th</sup> Muharram 1441 hijrah, a SYUHADA (martyr), Al-Syahid Sheikh Muhammad Khairil who was shot dead because he went on a rampage against 2 kafir harbi (non-Muslims who fight against Muslim rulers) who insulted the Prophet Muhammad PBUH in front of him. May Allah grant the Firdaus Heaven to him.*

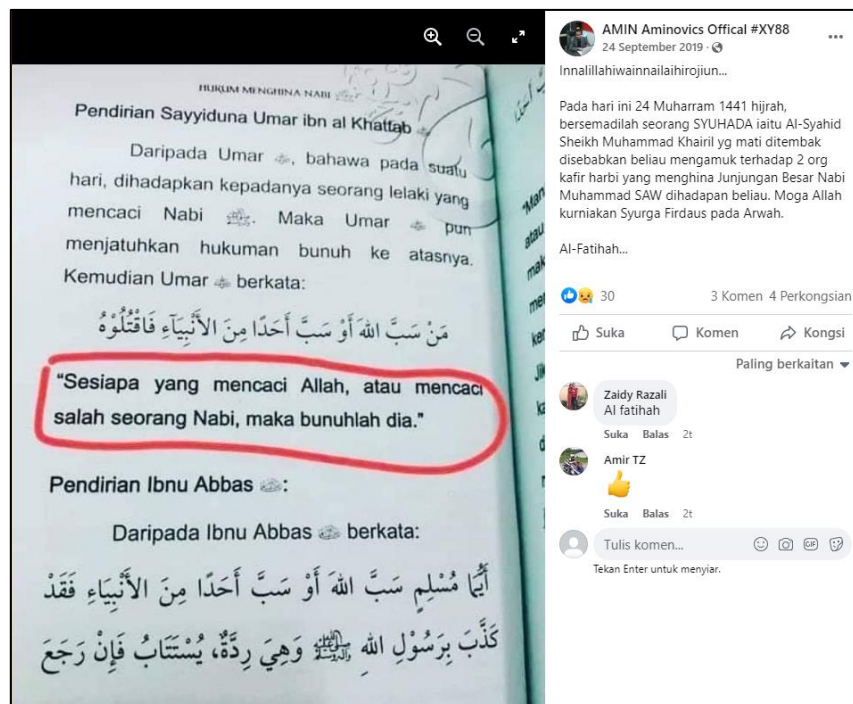


Figure 1. A post on Facebook showing public support or sympathy for the man affected by the violence video (AMIN Aminovics Official #XY88, 2019).

**The second comment:** *Kita ni kalau jenis pengecut jangan la dok hina org yg berani buktikan kecintaan sebenar kpd Allah dan Rasul. Setakat sembang ramai je boleh. Jom sama2 check sejauh keimanan kita. Ilmu tinggi tapi bab jihad penakut tak guna gakkan?*

**The translation:** If we are a coward, do not insult those who are dare to show the true love to Allah and His Messenger. If only by talking, everyone also can do. Let's check our faith. Have much knowledge but when it come to *jihad* everyone is frighten, it is useless right?

The police further said that, as a result of the incident, numerous sedition declarations were issued and swift action was taken against the disseminators. The uninvestigated dissemination of false information on social media has the potential to disturb national harmony and tarnish the reputation of the police. This is due to the fact that religious extremism and violence are a significant problem that, if not contained, may lead to the killing of innocent people and tarnish the reputation of national security services through the propagation of fake news and hate speech on social media.

Siti Noor Aishah, a former undergraduate student who was initially prosecuted in 2016 under the Crime Prevention Act (POCA) 2014 for carrying 12 books linked to the terrorist organizations Daesh, Al-Qaeda, and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), was arrested in 2017 (INITIATE MY, 2022; Abdul Patah, 2017). After being found guilty, she was later released before being remanded in detention under the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012 (SOSMA). Aishah's story has captured the public's attention, and there are those who are trying to gain sympathy and use the situation by blaming the police for holding Aishah for allegedly possessing a book she used for research at the university. The following is a news article

released by MalaysiaKini in an attempt to evoke sympathy without depending on the actual facts behind Aishah's detention (Abd Hadi, 2017):

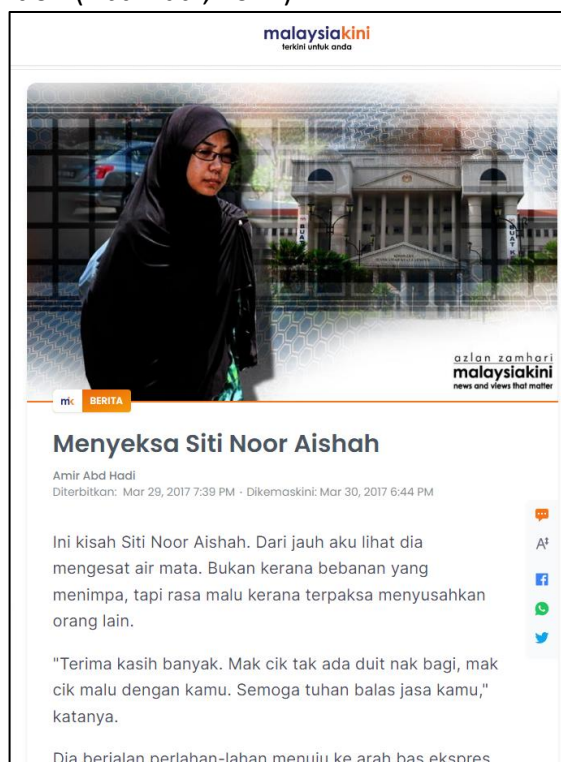


Figure 2. News reporting 'Menyeksa Siti Noor Aishah' by MalaysiaKini (Abd Hadi, 2017).

The chosen headline with the term "torture" characterizes Aishah's position as miserable; however, there is no indication from Aishah that she was physically or mentally abused. The preceding news narrative is one-sided and does not reflect the genuine truth. This information provides the idea that Aishah was arrested for compromising national security only because of the book she owned. However, the Deputy Public Prosecutor, Mohamad Mustaffa P. Kunalam, stated that a handwritten letter was discovered between one of Aishah's confiscated books named 'Merentas Jalan Jihad Fisabilillah' (Abu Bakar, 2017) with the following inscription:

"I really miss the State of Syam which God has blessed, because that's where Islam will win."

The state of Syam is now commonly used to refer to Syria. Aishah intended to travel to Syria under the guise of a humanitarian mission, but her father reported her to the police to prevent her from traveling there for whatever reason, out of concern that she was participating in terrorist activities there (Abu Bakar, 2017). According to a report by the New Straits Times (NST) (Shah, 2017), Aishah has actually pledged allegiance to IS jihadists using the Telegram application. It is evident that Aishah's incarceration was not merely for possessing a book of terrorism but also because she was inclined and had already promised to join the militants of IS terrorism, as evidenced by news reporting and unavoidable truths supported by the evidence of the public prosecutor. Accurate news reporting is able to inform the public of the gravity of cases impacting the peace of law in the country and the necessity of harsh legislation like POCA, SOSMA, and POTA to maintain national security.



**Journalism Ethics & News Value**

Since the 1990s, Malaysia has utilized the media to prevent and disseminate information about extremist and terrorist group operations. Malaysia's primary extremist organization in 1995 was known as the Malaysian Militant Group (KMM) (Abu Bakar et al., 2017). Although the United States classifies this group as terrorists, Malaysia classifies it as an extremist organization. In the early phases of restricting extremist activities in Malaysia, the government utilized its ability to regulate the media to disseminate four government policies aimed at countering radicals (Bina, 2007)

1. Against the objectives of the militant group.
2. The government preserves Muslim rights from militant groups and groups that fund them.
3. Refuse violence to solve the problem of Muslim.
4. Maintain unity between the rest of the Islamic world and Malaysia.

Malaysia is not falling behind other nations in the fight against extremist and terrorist activities due to the government's efforts in preventing and spreading all information about extremist activities, such as news coverage of their arrests. In this process, the job of the media is to enhance the principles of general social control and to bring social behavior, punishments, and regulations into the common discourse of society. Media analysis, which is generally derived from a liberal perspective, contributes to the promotion of democratic values in the nation. The traditional function of the media in Malaysia is to promote racial harmony and protect the nation's economic growth. The theory of Gramsci hegemony (1891–1937) was adopted in Malaysian media practice when the ruling class supplied intellectual, moral, and philosophical leadership to shape the public's core viewpoint. This hegemony's intellectual dominance is tied to political procedures and utterances. The level of news screening in Malaysia is high due to the country's stringent laws and efforts to prevent social division (Nelson, 2016). The regulation and filtering of news in Malaysia creates the impression that Malaysia is a safe country and emphasizes that the police would take swift action against individuals who threatened national security and safety.

The relationship between media practice and news significance is fairly close. The importance of the news's value in the planning of the news concept cannot be overstated. According to Kusumaningrat and Parnama (2005) and Schultz (2007), the value of the news is as follows:

1. Update: published in all newspapers and the more current an incident or case, the newer the news is reported.
2. Closeness: there is an element that brings the reader closer to the reported news. For example, emotional closeness.
3. Famous: Refers to figures, places, occasions, seasons and all the things that many people know.
4. Consequences: The consequences of a news event that affects the country, or globally.
5. Human interest: things or incidents that interest a person to know a news story.

Additionally, various other notions supplement news reporting, including (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017):

1. Quick: News that has never been reported and is timely to come.
2. Accurate facts: accurately reported news information follows aspects of journalism (real, opinions, statements and news sources).

3. Important: news that gives importance and needs to be known to the public.
4. Interesting: the reported news makes many people want to read.

The media's duty to disseminate news to the public is a responsibility that must be fulfilled without sacrificing ethics and genuine journalistic values. Similarly, journalistic coverage of religious extremism and terrorism should adhere to specific criteria to prevent the dissemination of fake news or coverage favorable to extremists and terrorists. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has developed a guide for media about the reporting of terrorism-related news (Marthoz, 2017). The goal of this manual is to look at the calculations and problems that come with balancing journalistic ethics, freedom of the press, and reporting on terrorism.

The UNESCO handbook provides information on references, ethics and principles, knowledge, laws, relations with authorities, depictions of terrorism, human rights, aspects of reporting victims of terrorism, reporting during live attacks, the interaction of journalists with terrorist groups, and journalist security. So many specifics must be highlighted, but the most important part is the journalistic ethics and ideals. The four ethical and moral principles are as follows:

1. The pursuit of truth

Journalists are required to verify a news story's accuracy. For instance, the reason for the occurrence of a terrorist act and the reporting of terrorist claims, while not requiring dissemination, must be recorded.

2. Independence

The terrorist activity highlighted by the media threatens the autonomy of the crisis. This relates closely to information screening and censorship. News reporting duties necessitate maintaining key distances between the media, the reaction of the general people, the acts of the authorities, and information from other news outlets, whether mainstream or alternative. The media runs the risk of being misconstrued by the general public for encouraging terrorism or delivering accurate facts about a crisis of violence. However, refraction in the battle against terrorism should not compromise the primary journalistic value of communicating the truth.

3. Responsibility to others

To prevent the negative effects of broadcasting material that degrades captured victims, the media must split their rights and responsibilities. The media or journalists will want to report everything that occurs to victims of violence; however, the victims should be given limited space. This is humanity, which cannot be compromised by journalistic ethics.

4. Transparency

Transparency ensures the longevity of a media organization's credibility. The media's publication of terrorist propaganda, such as endorsing the terrorist group, is an illustration of their commitment to transparency. However, the media must not only keep silent but also explain why they do so. In addition, media transparency is necessary with regards to broadcasted inaccuracies in news reporting. To demonstrate media transparency, prompt action is required to address inaccurate information and factual mistakes.

The ethics of journalism and the importance of the news are frequently taken for granted, and there are media channels that report on violent extremism and other issues originating from Islam (Yusof, Hassan, Hassan & Osman, 2013). In addition, they frequently

blame Islamic figures for all of these extreme and violent crimes. This information not only breeds uncertainty and misunderstanding within the Muslim community, but also throughout the non-Muslim population. Extreme ideas and actions are, in fact, severely prohibited in Islam. This prohibition can be seen in several Quranic verses and hadith such as, the prohibition stated in the Quran, Chapter an-Nisa '(4) verse 171, in translation:

O People of the Scripture, do not commit excess in your religion or say about Allah except the truth. The Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, was but a messenger of Allah and His word which He directed to Mary and a soul [created at a command] from Him. So believe in Allah and His messengers. And do not say, "Three"; desist - it is better for you. Indeed, Allah is but one God. Exalted is He above having a son. To Him belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth. And sufficient is Allah as Disposer of affairs.

Regarding this verse, al-Tabari (2007) stated that, the meaning of this verse is Allah Almighty had warned the Christians not to go beyond the limits in religion. Allah had forbidden them from talking about wrong things about Jesus and Allah Almighty, such as claiming that Jesus is the son of Allah. The same prohibition is also found in the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH among others as narrated by Muslims (1966) in his Sahih, in the book of *Sahih Muslim* at '*Ilmu bab Halaka Mutanatti'un*' (No. 2670), in translation:

Destroy the *mutanatti'un* people! Destroy the *mutanatti'un* people! Destroy the *mutanatti'un* people!" Imam al-Nawawi in interpreting this hadith stated that the meaning of *mutanatti'un* in the above hadith refers to the people who are complicated when discussing a problem until his interpretation and opinion go beyond the limits.

These organizations are also known as people that study something and then take an extreme stance on it. They are people who transcend in conversation and deed. In the same regard, Al-Qaradawi (1990) explained, these extremists are those who are far from justice (middle point). These people live isolated and isolated from aspects of their thinking and attitudes towards religion. Obviously, the prohibition of extreme beliefs is the prohibition of Allah Almighty through his verses and has been mentioned several times by the Prophet Muhammad PBUH. This demonstrates that Islam not only disapproves of the crime but also condemns its perpetrators. Extreme religious groups typically mislead themselves and persuade others to diverge from the teachings of the real religion and the universally accepted ideals of mankind by speaking without authority or knowledge about Allah Almighty and religious affairs until the very end.

Clearly, Islam instructs its ummah to be moderate, not extremist, and devoid of harshness and extremism. Deviation from this doctrine cannot escape three factors: rejecting, denying, or denying Islam itself out of ignorance, conjecture, or deliberate ignorance of the truth; or because it is intentional despite knowing the truth. This extreme viewpoint is motivated by zeal and lust to the extent of rejecting, denying, or denying the existence of Islam. They utilize untruth that is not founded on Arabic and Islamic principles because they are motivated by a lack of faith, ignorance, and their own desires.

From an Islamic perspective, the role of the gatekeeper is crystal clear; all the rules and regulations regulating the acceptance and rejection of material have been frequently



mentioned in Allah Almighty's pronouncements. Among them is the statement of Allah Almighty in Chapter al-Hujurah (49) verse 6 which means, in translation:

O you who have believed, if there comes to you a disobedient one with information, investigate, lest you harm a people out of ignorance and become, over what you have done, regretful.

This verse is about the commandment of Allah Almighty to Muslims who believe that they should take when receiving any information, especially information coming from the *fasiq* (sinner). Among the actions taken include (Al-Zuhaily, 2009):

- i. Have faith in Allah Almighty and everything related to it in absolute and pledge to strive gaining good deed.
- ii. Be careful, cautious, and always vigilant when receiving any information either for personal use or to convey to others.
- iii. Investigating all aspects of the source of information comes because various types of people are among the most worrying when the information came from a *fasiq*.
- iv. *Fasiq* means the acts of a person who do not follow the *sharia* law, and also, those who violate the command of Allah Almighty by committing sins such as tell liars, slanders, and being ignorant to the *sunnah* of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH (Peace Be Upon Him) (al-Qurtubi, 2006).
- v. Some Muslim scholars forbade the believers to receive any information from individuals who are unknown or unidentifiable because they are worried that the probability of individual identity has *fasiq* characteristics.

The commandment of Allah Almighty in conducting this communication is His rule on how to deal with people who have deviant behavior or are called *al-Suluk al-Munharif*. This group of people consistently perform practices that contradict the Quran and al-Sunnah. Therefore, this practice depends on the extent of knowledge, preparation, attitude and personality of the Muslim individual himself. In order to form the faith of this kind of information filter, they are not only obliged to have knowledge of these matters but must also be sensitive and prepared to comply with the rules. *Ujub*, ripples, swearing, slandering and slurring are among the implications arising from the abandonment of this practice. The impact is enormous and long, including the fate and future of the Muslim in this world and in the hereafter. There are some important things that are said to affect human attitudes and behavior in this regard. For Ibn Khaldun (2002) this deviant attitude can be avoided if a human being lives in a good environment. This is because a good environment is capable of publishing benefits on various aspects including stimulation, response, compliance, identification and modeling. However, to ensure that all human beings are always in a good environment at all times of his life at this time is almost impossible. Living in the rapid development of technology, the ability to access information at the fingertips, the limitations of information filtering only to the media of a dependent and licensed nature make humanity as a whole vulnerable to the dangers of untrue and misleading information.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the media have a hefty obligation and play a crucial role in the dissemination of accurate news regarding domestic and international religious extremism and terrorism. Violations in the screening of extremism-related news items not only place a burden on an

individual but also pose a threat to national and global unity. In addition to the media's duty, society as a whole must exercise self-restraint and self-control in order to avoid spreading bogus news regarding extremism. The public needs to learn from the media the importance of filtering information prior to its dissemination. Islam has also provided Muslims with instructions for receiving news so that any negative consequences can be mitigated. The UNESCO guide on media reporting on terrorism and related topics is an excellent resource for putting a situation in the correct terms. The cohesion of all races, races, and religions in Malaysia can be maintained by acting maturely and fairly.

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