

## Country Report

# Journalists in Malaysia

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## Backgrounds of Journalists

The typical journalist in Malaysia is a female, in her early thirties and holds a university degree in a field of journalism or communication. Of the 368 interviewed journalists, 184 were women, making for a proportion of 52.6 percent of the overall sample. On average, Malaysian journalists were 35.46 years old ( $s=10.84$ ); half of the journalists were younger than 32 years. Journalists tend to be well educated: 82.8 percent of the respondents held a degree from a graduate program and 74.2 percent held a Bachelor's degree. However, there were no journalists with a doctoral degree among the respondents, while 3.6 percent had undertaken some university studies but did not complete their studies. Of those respondents who held a university degree, a slight majority (34.0%) had not specialized in communication or journalism. Across the whole sample of Malaysian journalists, 32.8 percent had specialized in journalism, 21.3 percent had studied in another communication field, and 11.9 percent had specialized in both journalism and another communication field.

## Journalists in the Newsroom

The majority of journalists interviewed in Malaysia held a full-time position (92.1%), whereas 4.1 percent of the respondents indicated that they had part-time employments, and 0.8 percent worked as freelance journalist. Of those with full or part-time employment, 80.1 percent said they held permanent positions, and 19.9 percent worked on a temporary contract.

Malaysian journalists are relatively young in experience. On average, they had worked as journalists for 9.57 years ( $s=9.32$ ), and about half of them had more than 6 years of professional experience. About a third of the journalists worked on a specific desk (32.2%), such as politics, local news, or sports. The remaining 67.8 percent of the respondents indicated that they worked on various topics and subjects. On the whole, Malaysian journalists worked for 1.39 newsrooms ( $s=1.51$ ); 16.9 percent of them had additional jobs outside the area of journalism. A slight majority of the interviewed journalists were members of a professional association (51.9 %).

The majority of Malaysian journalists in the sample worked for print media: 52.2 percent contributed to daily newspapers, none of them work for weekly newspapers, and 7.3 percent to magazines. Another 23.4 percent of the journalists worked for private or public service television, and 6.8 for private or public radio. Few journalists in the sample reported they worked for news agencies (4.6%), and for online newsrooms of traditional media (5.7%).

## Journalistic Roles

Journalists in Malaysia view educating the audience, reports things as they are, promote tolerance, tell stories about the world, and cultural diversity and be a detached observer as their main roles (see Table 1). On the other hand, they did not indicate highly as their roles such as setting of political agenda, conveying a positive image of political leadership and motivate people to participate in political activity.

In between those two “group” of roles, they would provide analysis of current affairs, provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience. They also support national development and provide information people need to make political decisions.

Table 1: Roles of journalists

|   | N   | Percentage saying “extremely” and “very important” | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|---|-----|--|------|--------------------|
| Educate the audience  | 358 | 81.8   | 4.20 | .83                |
| Report things as they are                                   | 363 | 79.3   | 4.13 | .83                |
| Promote tolerance and cultural diversity                    | 355 | 78.9   | 4.16 | .86                |
| Tell stories about the world                                | 356 | 75.3   | 3.99 | .79                |
| Be a detached observer                                      | 355 | 71.5   | 3.89 | .89                |
| Let people express their views                              | 362 | 71.8   | 3.95 | .88                |
| Provide analysis of current affairs                         | 362 | 69.9   | 3.93 | .83                |
| Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience | 361 | 67.6   | 3.88 | .93                |
| Support national development                                | 358 | 66.8   | 3.84 | .97                |
| Provide information people need to make political decisions | 361 | 64.8   | 3.75 | .97                |
| Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life    | 361 | 63.7   | 3.74 | .88                |
| Advocate for social change                                  | 363 | 61.7   | 3.67 | 0.95               |
| Influence public opinion                                    | 362 | 57.5   | 3.57 | 1.00               |
| Monitor and scrutinize political leaders                    | 354 | 50.3   | 3.55 | .93                |
| Support government policy                                   | 358 | 51.7   | 3.47 | 1.07               |
| Provide entertainment and relaxation                        | 360 | 50.3   | 3.47 | 1.00               |
| Monitor and scrutinize business                             | 351 | 48.7   | 3.46 | .91                |
| Be an adversary of the government                           | 353 | 45.6   | 3.27 | 1.14               |
| Convey a positive image of political leadership             | 350 | 44.3   | 3.25 | 1.15               |
| Motivate people to participate in political activity        | 358 | 38.8   | 3.17 | 1.08               |
| Set the political agenda                                    | 346 | 33.2   | 2.99 | 1.04               |

Question: Please tell me how important each of these things is in your work. 5 means you find them extremely important, 4 means very important, 3 means somewhat important, 2 means little importance, and 1 means unimportant.

## Professional Ethics

Malaysian journalists appear to subscribe to code of professional ethics, regardless of situation and context (Table 2). 89.0 percent agreed that journalists should always adhere to codes of professional ethics, regardless of situation and context. However, 67.9 percent feel what is ethical in journalism depends on specific situation. To a lesser extent, they feel what is ethical in journalism is a matter of personal judgement. About half of them feel it is acceptable to set aside moral standards if extraordinary circumstances require it.

In terms of justification of controversial reporting methods by journalists, the survey demonstrates that only a small number of Malaysian journalists believed unethical decisions may be justified. For example, only 10.9 percent of the Malaysian journalists feel “always justified” on occasion to using hidden microphones or cameras or even paying people for confidential information (7.2%) (Table 3). At the same time, they were not prone to exerting pressure on unwilling informants to get a story. They were also not prone to altering photographs, using re-creations or dramatizations of news by actors, using confidential business or governmental documents without authorization. Similarly, they were not prone to accepting money from sources, making use of personal documents such as letters and pictures without permission, or claiming to be somebody else. They were also not prone to publishing stories with unverified content, or to gain employed in a firm or organization to gain inside information.

*Table 2: Ethical orientations of journalists*

|   | N   | Percentage saying “strongly” and “somewhat agree” | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|---|-----|---|------|--------------------|
| Journalists should always adhere to codes of professional ethics, regardless of situation and context | 364 | 89.0  | 4.40 | .74                |
| What is ethical in journalism depends on the specific situation                                       | 358 | 67.9  | 3.72 | 1.04               |
| What is ethical in journalism is a matter of personal judgment  | 358 | 47.8  | 3.24 | 1.16               |
| It is acceptable to set aside moral standards if extraordinary circumstances require it               | 360 | 41.9  | 3.06 | 1.23               |

Question: The following statements describe different approaches to journalism. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree. 5 means you strongly agree, 4 means somewhat agree, 3 means undecided, 2 means somewhat disagree, and 1 means strongly disagree.

*Table 3: Justification of controversial reporting methods by journalists*

|  | N   | Percentage saying “always justified” | Percentage saying “justified on occasion” |
|--|-----|--------------------------------------|---|
| Using hidden microphones or cameras  | 339 | 10.9                                 | 46.3                                      |
| Paying people for confidential information                                       | 321 | 7.2                                  | 42.7                                      |
| Exerting pressure on unwilling informants to get a story                         | 336 | 6.5                                  | 35.7                                      |
| Using re-creations or dramatizations of news by actors                           | 334 | 5.7                                  | 43.7                                      |
| Altering photographs   | 322 | 5.6                                  | 21.1                                      |
| Altering or fabricating quotes from sources                                      | 321 | 5.3                                  | 22.4                                      |
| Using confidential business or government documents without authorization        | 340 | 5.3                                  | 28.5                                      |
| Accepting money from sources   | 326 | 4.9                                  | 20.2                                      |
| Making use of personal documents such as letters and pictures without permission | 335 | 4.5                                  | 26.6                                      |
| Claiming to be somebody else   | 335 | 4.2                                  | 33.7                                      |
| Publishing stories with unverified content                                       | 336 | 4.2                                  | 19.0                                      |
| Getting employed in a firm or organization to gain inside information            | 338 | 3.6                                  | 39.3                                      |

Question: Given an important story, which of the following, if any, do you think may be justified on occasion and which would you not approve of under any circumstances?

## Professional Autonomy and Influences

Information access, journalism ethics, and media laws and regulations are influential in the selection of news by Malaysian journalists. Information access (74.3%) and journalism ethics (72.4%) are high in the mind of the journalists. Slightly lower in influencing them is media laws and regulations at 71.8 percent.

Time limits, competing news organizations do not influence them highly in their news selection. Their personal values and beliefs have a moderate influence in their news selection.

Friends, acquaintances and family, pressure groups, their peers on the staff and business people have little influence in their news selection.

In terms of autonomy of selecting stories 37.3 percent of journalists believe they have a great deal of freedom while 11.5 percent feel the complete freedom. In terms of decision making, some 26.9 percent of them always participate in editorial decision and 21.3 percent very often.

Table 4: Perceived influences

|  | N   | Percentage saying<br>"extremely" and<br>"very influential" | Mean | Standard<br>Deviation |
|--|-----|--|------|-----------------------|
| Information access                       | 366 | 74.6   | 3.95 | .81                   |
| Media laws and regulation                | 367 | 72.2   | 3.91 | .81                   |
| Journalism ethics                        | 364 | 71.7   | 3.97 | .95                   |
| Editorial policy                         | 358 | 66.8   | 3.84 | .89                   |
| Censorship                               | 364 | 65.4   | 3.73 | .90                   |
| Availability of news-gathering resources | 357 | 62.7   | 3.76 | .88                   |
| Time limits                              | 360 | 61.4   | 3.78 | .90                   |
| Editorial supervisors and higher editors | 360 | 60.3   | 3.64 | .87                   |
| Competing news organizations             | 367 | 59.4   | 3.65 | .91                   |
| Religious considerations                 | 340 | 58.8   | 3.72 | 1.09                  |
| Feedback from the audience               | 367 | 57.8   | 3.70 | .89                   |
| Relationships with news sources          | 359 | 57.4   | 3.64 | .90                   |
| Your personal values and beliefs         | 359 | 55.7   | 3.58 | 1.09                  |
| Managers of the news organization        | 358 | 55.3   | 3.54 | .93                   |
| Owners of the news organization          | 355 | 54.6   | 3.58 | 1.02                  |
| Government officials                     | 363 | 54.3   | 3.54 | .98                   |
| Audience research and data               | 350 | 54.0   | 3.60 | .91                   |
| Military, police and state security      | 339 | 46.6   | 3.39 | 1.07                  |
| Public relations                         | 365 | 45.2   | 3.32 | .98                   |
| Profit expectations                      | 345 | 43.8   | 3.30 | 1.02                  |
| Politicians                              | 361 | 42.7   | 3.34 | 1.00                  |
| Colleagues in other media                | 368 | 41.6   | 3.23 | 1.04                  |
| Advertising considerations               | 353 | 40.8   | 3.25 | .98                   |
| Friends, acquaintances and family        | 364 | 36.5   | 3.10 | 1.19                  |
| Pressure groups                          | 362 | 36.2   | 3.20 | .94                   |
| Your peers on the staff                  | 352 | 34.9   | 3.16 | .93                   |
| Business people                          | 363 | 33.3   | 3.10 | 1.02                  |

Question: Here is a list of potential sources of influence. Please tell me how much influence each of the following has on your work. 5 means it is extremely influential, 4 means very influential, 3 means somewhat influential, 2 means little influential, and 1 means not influential.

## Journalism in Transition

Majority of respondents (88.3%) said there was an increase in the use of search engine and technical skills (70.3%). This is understandable as majority of the respondents are young journalists with most of them possessing university degrees. They also felt there was a higher relevance of journalism to society (75.0%). Similarly, interactions of journalists with their audiences also increased (65.0%). One or two decade ago, entry requirement to become a journalist was just a school certificate. However, with the introduction of degree programs related to journalism and communication entry requirement has been raised to a degree. Therefore, respondents said there was an increase in having a degree in journalism or a related field (61.8%), or having a university degree (61.6%). There was also an increase in journalists' freedom to make editorial decisions (60.3%). Time available for researching stories has also increased (49.5%).

The questions about changes in journalism were only presented to journalists who had five years or more of professional experience.

*Table 5: Changes in journalism*

|  | N   | Percentage saying has "increased" | Percentage saying has "decreased" |
|--|-----|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| The use of search engines                        | 120 | 88.3                              | 2.5                               |
| The relevance of journalism for society          | 120 | 75.0                              | 6.7                               |
| Technical skills                                 | 121 | 70.2                              | 4.1                               |
| Interactions of journalists with their audiences | 120 | 65.0                              | 9.2                               |
| Average working hours of journalists             | 121 | 63.6                              | 5.8                               |
| The credibility of journalism                    | 121 | 62.0                              | 10.7                              |
| Having a degree in journalism or a related field | 118 | 61.9                              | 6.8                               |
| Having a university degree                       | 120 | 61.7                              | 5.8                               |
| Journalists' freedom to make editorial decisions | 121 | 60.3                              | 7.4                               |
| Time available for researching stories           | 121 | 49.6                              | 14.9                              |

Question: Please tell me whether you think there has been an increase or a decrease in the importance of following aspects of work in [country]. 5 means they have increased a lot, 4 means they have somewhat increased, 3 means there has been no change, 2 means they have somewhat decreased, and 1 means they have decreased a lot.

*Table 6: Changes in influences on journalism*

|   | N   | Percentage saying has "strengthened" | Percentage saying has "weakened" |
|---|-----|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Social media, such as Facebook          | 119 | 84.9                                 | 1.7                              |
| Competition                             | 119 | 80.7                                 | .8                               |
| User-generated contents, such as blogs  | 118 | 80.5                                 | 2.5                              |
| Audience feedback                       | 119 | 77.3                                 | 3.4                              |
| Advertising considerations              | 114 | 71.9                                 | 3.5                              |
| Audience research                       | 116 | 71.6                                 | 2.6                              |
| Audience involvement in news production | 117 | 69.2                                 | 4.3                              |
| Journalism education                    | 119 | 68.9                                 | 8.4                              |
| Pressure toward sensational news        | 117 | 66.7                                 | 3.4                              |
| Profit making pressures                 | 115 | 65.2                                 | 4.3                              |
| Public relations                        | 118 | 63.6                                 | 1.7                              |
| Ethical standards                       | 119 | 62.2                                 | 15.1                             |
| Western ways of practicing journalism   | 109 | 57.8                                 | 8.3                              |

Question: Please tell me to what extent these influences have become stronger or weaker during the past five years in [country]. 5 means they have strengthened a lot, 4 means they have somewhat strengthened, 3 means they did not change, 2 means they have somewhat weakened, and 1 means they have weakened a lot.

## Journalistic Trust

It is interesting to note that the judiciary/the courts ranked highly (49.1%) compared to other institutions. At the lower end, political parties ranked very low (18.9%), politicians in general (20.1%), trade unions (31.6%), and the government of Malaysia (38.3%). However, compared to politicians, the parliament ranked moderately (45.8%).

Table 7: Journalistic trust in institutions

|                          | N   | Percentage saying "complete" and "a great deal of trust" | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|--------------------------|-----|--|------|--------------------|
| The judiciary/the courts | 291 | 49.1   | 3.47 | .94                |
| Religious leaders        | 290 | 48.6   | 3.50 | .97                |
| The military             | 290 | 48.3   | 3.41 | .96                |
| The parliament           | 290 | 45.9   | 3.42 | .96                |
| The police               | 291 | 40.5   | 3.24 | .99                |
| The news media           | 292 | 40.1   | 3.36 | .79                |
| The government           | 290 | 38.3   | 3.24 | .95                |
| Trade unions             | 288 | 31.6   | 3.17 | .82                |
| Politicians in general   | 289 | 20.1   | 2.82 | .92                |
| Political parties        | 291 | 18.9   | 2.88 | .85                |

Question: Please tell me on a scale of 5 to 1 how much you personally trust each of the following institutions. 5 means you have complete trust, 4 means you have a great deal of trust, 3 means you have some trust, 2 means you have little trust, and 1 means you have no trust at all.

## Methodological Information

|                                  |   |
|----------------------------------|---|
| <i>Size of the population:</i>   | 6,000 working journalists (estimated)   |
| <i>Sampling method:</i>          | simple random sampling and purposive quota sampling for newsrooms and purposively chosen sampling based on quota for journalists within newsrooms |
| <i>Sample size:</i>              | 368 working journalists   |
| <i>Interview methods:</i>        | face-to-face  |
| <i>Response rate:</i>            | 95%   |
| <i>Period of field research:</i> | 02/2014-03/2014   |