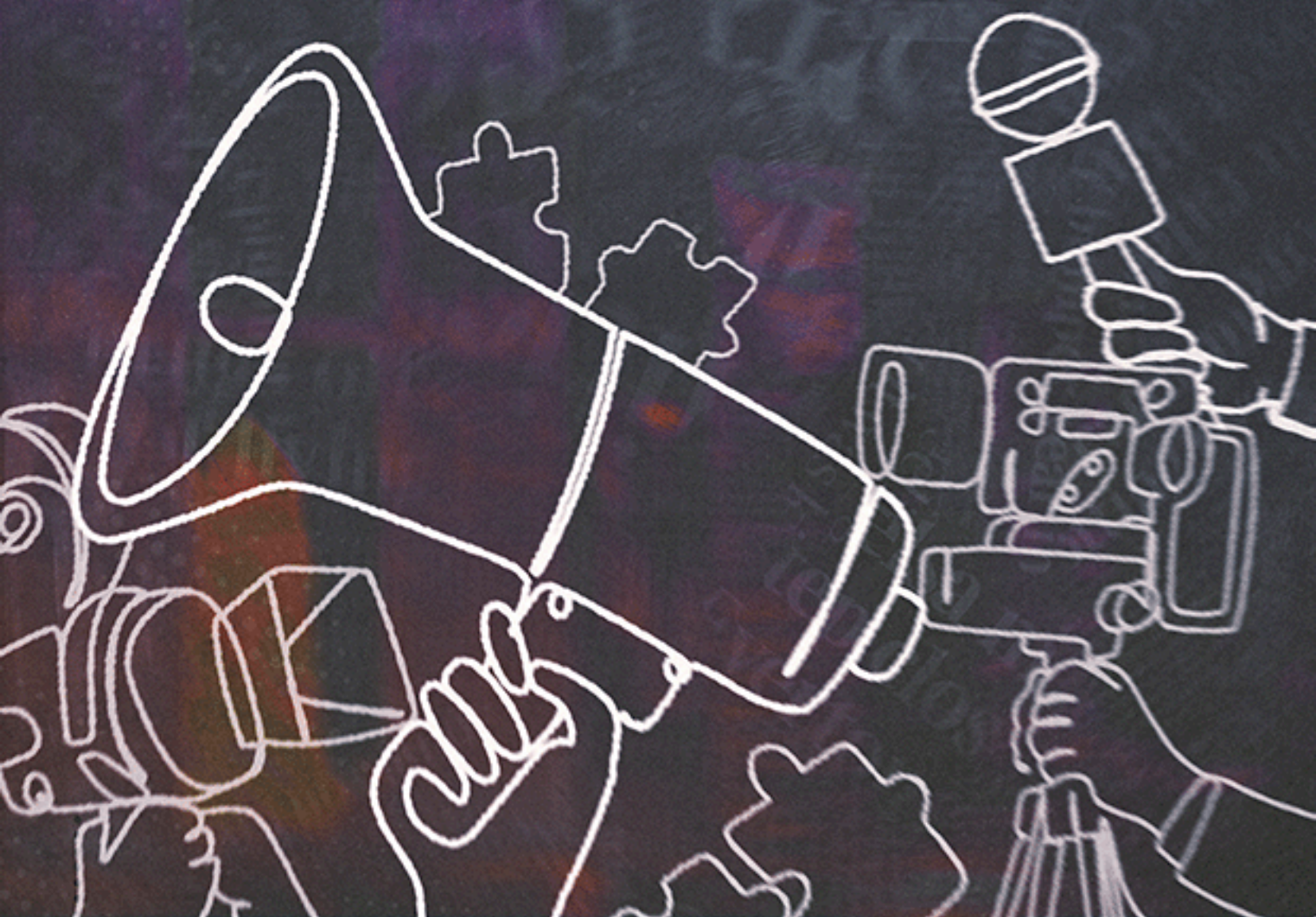


MALAYSIAN MEDIA LANDSCAPE

A SNAPSHOT OF 2024



IN CONJUNCTION WITH WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY, MAY 3 2025

The Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ) is a feminist, freedom of expression watchdog and non-profit organisation that aspires for a society that is democratic, just and free, where all peoples will enjoy free media and the freedom to express, seek and impart information.

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MEDIA LANDSCAPE REPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Malaysia's media landscape in 2024 remains heavily constrained by political control, economic instability, and an oppressive legal framework. While surface-level reforms have been introduced, substantive change remains elusive. Media freedom continues to be stifled by legislative overreach, selective enforcement, economic pressures, exacerbating self-censorship and eroding public trust. Unethical and sensationalist reporting further undermines responsible journalism, particularly in sensitive areas such as gender, race, religion, and migrant issues.

Malaysia's media freedom is under siege from political, economic, and legal pressures. Superficial reforms cannot mask the deep-seated structural issues plaguing the media sector. To foster a resilient and independent media ecosystem, urgent action is required to dismantle repressive laws, ensure genuine self-regulation, and promote ethical journalism. The path forward demands political will, stakeholder collaboration, and unwavering commitment to democratic principles.

Recommendations:

12. Repeal repressive legislation (Sedition Act 1948, Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) 1984, Official Secrets Act 1972, Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 provisions).
12. Strengthen the independence and capacity of the Malaysian Media Council.
12. Develop sustainable, non-partisan media funding mechanisms.
12. Enforce ethical journalism guidelines and invest in capacity building.
12. Promote media literacy to combat disinformation and bias.
12. Ensure gender diversity and inclusivity in newsroom leadership.
12. Establish safeguards against the misuse of AI in journalism.

The time for piecemeal adjustments has passed. A holistic overhaul is imperative to restore media freedom and uphold democratic accountability in Malaysia.

I. CONTEXT SETTING

1. Consolidation of political priorities

After slightly more than two years in power, the Madani government, led by Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, recorded a modest increase in popularity, as reflected in a December 2024 survey by independent pollster Merdeka Centre. The survey placed the Prime Minister's approval rating at 54%, up from 50% in 2023. This uptick was somewhat unexpected, given widespread perceptions that Anwar has fallen short of delivering the ambitious reforms promised in his pre-election manifesto. Former allies, such as the civil society coalition, BERSIH, openly expressed their disappointment, awarding him an "F" grade for the [slow pace of reforms](#), particularly in tackling corruption and economic challenges. Contentious decisions, including the reduction of charges against former Prime Minister Najib Razak and the dropping of charges against Deputy Prime Minister Zahid Hamidi, have further fuelled perceptions of backpedalling on anti-corruption pledges.

However, public dissent against the Prime Minister has been relatively muted compared to previous administrations, largely because Malaysians find themselves with limited viable alternatives. The main opposition coalition, Perikatan Nasional (PN), while positioning itself as a defender of Malay rights, is seen to expand its support base with its ethnocentric rhetoric, which alienates non-Malay and non-Muslim communities, particularly in East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak). These states, which play a crucial role in Malaysia's political power dynamics, remain wary of the hardline Islamist narratives prevalent in Peninsular politics. To secure East Malaysian support, Anwar Ibrahim conceded to demands for greater state autonomy, a strategic move pivotal to his government's formation.

Historically, Malaysia's mainstream media have been tightly controlled by political interests, particularly under UMNO and its Barisan Nasional (BN) component parties' long-standing dominance. The emergence of online platforms like Malaysiakini and Free Malaysia Today diversified public discourse, and the brief Pakatan Harapan (PH) administration (2018–2020) made initial strides toward media freedom and reduced the control that political parties exercised over traditional media sources. PH-led state governments in Selangor and Penang enacted Freedom of Information (FOI) laws, and federal-level efforts towards a Right to Information (RTI) Act are ongoing. Nonetheless, significant legislative hurdles remain, including the need to reform or repeal restrictive laws such as the Official Secrets Act (OSA) 1972, the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) 1984, the Sedition Act 1948 and relevant Penal Code sections. Although the government promotes an open data platform, these initiatives are insufficient to counterbalance the overarching climate of opacity and control. Press freedom in Malaysia remains heavily constrained by these arsenal of repressive laws as they suppress critical journalism, creating an environment where aspirations for an independent, multi-stakeholder media regulatory body remain elusive. Consequently, self-censorship remains pervasive within the media.

The Madani administration has taken steps that ostensibly aim to reform the information landscape but have raised serious concerns about press freedom. The Madani government tabled the Malaysian Media Council Bill in December 2024 to progressively implement a self-regulatory framework centred on promoting media independence and enhancing ethical reporting. The enactment of the Online Safety Act (ONSA) 2024 and significant amendments to the Communications and Multimedia Act (CMA) 1998 were framed as efforts to foster online safety. However, in practice, these laws consolidate governmental authority over media and digital spaces. The [CMA amendments](#) grant the minister-in-charge discretionary powers that risk undermining genuine freedom in digital spaces and instead offer multiple avenues for restricting online freedom of expression. It tightened governmental grip over digital spaces, curtailing dissent and stifling critical discourse. The expedited passage of these laws, with minimal stakeholder consultation, underscores a worrying trend towards increased state control and internet censorship.

The Covid-19 pandemic and the political turbulence following PH's ouster exacerbated the use of restrictive laws against the media. This repressive trajectory has persisted under Anwar Ibrahim's leadership. Journalists, activists, and whistleblowers continue to face harassment, legal intimidation, and censorship. There were also several prominent arrests of artists, grassroots organisers, and members of the public based on race and religion.

The overall track record of the Madani unity government reveals a clear aversion to substantive [reform](#)¹. Most glaringly, we are seeing the government's [tightened control](#)² of the online sphere, and by extension, dissent against its policies as well as on topics deemed sensitive by the country's standards.

2. The Entrenchment of 3R (Race, Religion, Royalty) Narratives

The exploitation of race, religion, and royalty (3R) issues continues to dominate Malaysia's public sphere. In 2024, authorities frequently invoked Section 233 of the CMA, the Sedition Act, and Section 298 of the Penal Code to suppress voices addressing these sensitive topics. The increasing use of blasphemy-related provisions exemplifies how vaguely worded laws can be manipulated to curtail freedom of expression. [ARTICLE 19](#)³ has repeatedly highlighted how such laws are vague and enable authorities to unilaterally and disproportionately define the limits of religious discourse, undermining democratic debate and minority rights. It creates friction between maintaining religious harmony and upholding freedom of expression.

A notable example was the March 2024 "Allah socks" controversy, where a convenience store chain faced public backlash over socks bearing the word "Allah." The issue stemmed from the perception that using the word "Allah" (God in Arabic) on a non-Islamic product was disrespectful and offensive to Muslims. Despite the company's swift apology and clarification,

¹ Ganesan, Praba. '2024 winners and losers in Malaysian politics,'

<https://www.malaymail.com/news/opinion/2024/12/26/2024-winners-and-losers-in-malaysian-politics/161104>

² Zahiid, Syed Jaymal. 'Dewan Rakyat narrowly passes controversial Communications and Multimedia Act amendments after Opposition bloc vote,' Malay Mail, 9 December 2024. <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2024/12/09/parliament-narrowly-passes-controversial-communications-and-multimedia-act-amendments-after-opposition-bloc-vote/159377>

³ <https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/2021.01.20-Malaysia-blasphemy-briefing-paper-final.pdf>

the incident escalated into a nationwide scandal, fuelled by political opportunism and demands of a boycott of the store chain nationwide. Both the store KK Mart and one of its suppliers Xin Jian Chang Sdn Bhd were [fined RM60,000](#) each, while individuals posting online comments deemed “insensitive” were promptly arrested and charged under Section 233 of the CMA. Similarly, in another incident, attempts to diversify student enrolment in a historically Malay-centric university to address a shortage of [cardiothoracic surgery postgraduate programme](#)⁴ faced aggressive pushback from Malay nationalist groups, further highlighting how racial and religious sensitivities are manipulated to stoke division and sow discord amongst the people.

Broader Implications: Power Preservation Over Democratic Engagement

These [legal and political developments](#)⁵ reflect a deeper, systemic issue: a governance culture prioritizing power retention over meaningful public engagement. The state’s reliance on punitive measures, secrecy, and censorship under the guise of national security is increasingly untenable in a hyper-connected society where information spreads rapidly. Rather than fostering trust, these strategies erode public confidence in institutions and deepen societal distrust and polarization.

More alarmingly, state inaction and tacit endorsement of vigilantism, religious extremism, and mob rule signal a dangerous normalization of extrajudicial enforcement of the 3Rs. This climate of fear and intolerance poses a grave threat to Malaysia’s democratic trajectory, undermining the rule of law, freedom of expression, and the foundational principles of a pluralistic society.

The cumulative impact of these trends is a deteriorating media environment where journalists are increasingly vulnerable to state harassment for fulfilling their professional duties. Reporting on matters of public interest – such as government-linked controversies, corruption, or sensitive 3R issues often invites police scrutiny and legal repercussions. Although Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has acknowledged the need to improve Malaysia’s international standing on media freedom⁶, his government continues to prioritize maintaining control over fostering an open and accountable information ecosystem. This situation creates a hostile environment for the media as it further entrenches a culture of secrecy and censorship. The government often defended its actions by labelling critical reporting as false or misleading. Notwithstanding, this response reflects a broader failure of the government to take appropriate actions or address legitimate concerns. Instead, they resort to draconian methods of intimidation and censorship, deliberately designed to stifle public scrutiny and silence critical journalism, undermining both press freedom, rule of law and accountability.

⁴ Shahabudin,Shahrul. ‘UiTM students protesting non-Bumi admission stuck in the past, says academic,’ <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2024/05/19/uitm-students-protesting-non-bumi-admission-stuck-in-the-past-says-academic/>

⁵ <https://cijmalaysia.net/a-report-on-the-state-of-freedom-of-expression-in-malaysia-2024/>

⁶ <https://international.astroawani.com/malaysia-news/pm-media-freedom-recognition-needs-improvement-3rs-limit-action-497280>

3. Media Plurality in Malaysia

Unlike many countries that enforce anti-competition thresholds to regulate ownership within and across media sectors⁷ (TV, radio, newspapers), Malaysia lacks comprehensive competition regulations⁸ to prevent monopolies or excessive media ownership concentration. Consequently, Malaysia experiences a high concentration of media ownership both within and across various sectors — including print, broadcast, and digital media.

For instance, Media Chinese International Limited (MCIL), the leading Chinese media group in Malaysia, with four major daily newspapers and a suite of magazine titles under its wing, dominates the Chinese-language newspaper industry with an 82.2% share of total average daily print and digital replica circulation. Similarly, Media Prima, one of Malaysia's largest media conglomerates, owns four major television channels (TV3, 8TV, ntv7, TV9). Its publishing arm, The New Straits Times Press Berhad, controls three national news brands (New Straits Times, Berita Harian, and Harian Metro) alongside four prominent radio stations (Hot FM, Buletin FM, Fly FM, 8FM). Media Prima's advertising and digital subsidiaries, Media Prima Omnia and REV Media Group, reportedly reach 98% of Malaysian households (approximately 24 million) daily and about 75% of Malaysia's internet population (over 15 million) monthly.

Political ownership further compounds media concentration concerns. Political parties or their proxies maintain direct or indirect control over media outlets. Further, the State also uses its financial instruments to invest in the media. A well-known example is The Star Media Group, owned by the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA)⁹, which as of 2024 holds 42.46%¹⁰ of the company's shares through AMSEC Nominees (Tempatan) Sdn. Bhd. Other significant shareholders include government-linked entities such as Amanah Saham Bumiputera (15.44%), Permodalan Nasional Berhad, the Employees Provident Fund (5.98%), and Lembaga Tabung Haji (5.42%).

In addition, government-owned media agencies like Bernama and Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM) fall under the purview of the Ministry of Communications. The Minister has direct authority to appoint Bernama's Chief Executive Officer (CEO). RTM itself operates six television channels (TV1, TV2, TV Okey, Berita RTM, Sukan RTM, and TV6) and 34 radio stations nationwide.

This high concentration of media ownership—whether commercial or political—poses significant challenges to journalistic independence. Political control and commercial interests risk undermining media objectivity, editorial independence, and the diversity of viewpoints, as media organisations may feel compelled to align their content with the interests of their proprietors.

⁷ In France, there are rules that prohibit the same person, group of persons, or entities from owning, controlling or editing daily publications with total distributions that exceed 30% in the national territory of publications of the same kind and cross ownership restrictions which prohibit owners from holding on to specific concentration of across TV, radio and media.

⁸ Sections 138 and 139 of the [Communications and Multimedia Act \(CMA\) 1998](#) and the Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission (MCMC)'s Guideline on Dominant Position in a Communications Market for more.

⁹ <http://edgemaalaysia.com/node/684571>

¹⁰ Ibid

4. Economic Overview

Malaysia's economic landscape has a significant impact on the growth and independence of media outlets as well as the safety of media workers.

In 2024, Malaysia recorded an annual economic growth rate of 5.1%, marking an increase from the growth rate of 3.6% in 2023.¹¹ This growth was driven by strong domestic demand, sustained household spending, and robust investment activity.¹² The Malaysian ringgit appreciated 2.7% against the US dollar, making it one of the few Asian currencies to strengthen in 2024.¹³

Malaysia's entertainment and media (E&M) industry is projected to rise at 3.2% compounded annual growth rate (CAGR) from 2023 to 2028. Within this, music, radio, and podcasts are expected to see a 2.2% CAGR over the same period¹⁴. In 2024, digital media owners generated RM 6.8 billion in advertising revenues, displaying a growth of 12.7% year-on-year, with social media advertising revenues leading the surge at 17.1% reaching RM3.7 billion in 2024.¹⁵

However, traditional or legacy media face significant economic challenges. Traditional media owners reported RM2.2 billion in advertising revenues, showing a decline by 4.1%.¹⁶

Despite these challenges, Media Prima Bhd, Malaysia's largest integrated media group, reported a normalised profit after tax (PAT) of RM30.5 million in 2024, maintaining a dominant share of over 50% of television viewership and 37% of radio listenership, led by TV3 and Hot FM as top broadcasters in their respective categories.¹⁷ The [New Straits Times Press](#) posted RM120.7 million in segment revenue and a segment PAT of RM22.9 million in 2024.

In contrast, [Astro Malaysia Holdings Bhd](#)¹⁸ reported a significant rise in net profit to RM129.15 million as of 31 January 2025, up from RM36.88 million the previous year. However, this increase came despite a challenging environment, with total revenue from continuing operations falling 8% to RM3.08 billion, and operating profit declining by nearly 29%. Astro

¹¹ Bank Negara Malaysia (2024). Economic and Financial Developments in Malaysia in the Fourth Quarter of 2024. https://www.bnm.gov.my/-/qb24q4_en_pr#:~:text=On%20a%20quarter%2Don%2Dquarter,and%20a%20rebound%20in%20exports.

¹² Danial Azhar, 'Malaysia's economy ends 2024 on high note amid strong investment, domestic spending' (Reuters) <https://www.reuters.com/markets/asia/malysias-economy-ends-2024-high-note-amid-strong-investment-domestic-spending-2025-02-14/>

¹³ Bank Negara Malaysia (2024). Economic and Financial Developments in Malaysia in the Fourth Quarter of 2024. https://www.bnm.gov.my/-/qb24q4_en_pr#:~:text=On%20a%20quarter%2Don%2Dquarter,and%20a%20rebound%20in%20exports

¹⁴ PWC, 'Global Entertainment & Media Outlook 2024-2028' <https://www.pwc.com/my/en/publications/2024/entertainment-media-outlook-malaysia.html>

¹⁵ Vishnu Devarajan, 'Malaysian Social Media Advertising Powers Ahead Offsetting Linear Advertising Declines' (Marketing Magazine) <https://marketingmagazine.com.my/malaysian-social-media-advertising-powers-ahead-offsetting-linear-advertising-declines/#:~:text=In%202024%2C%20Malaysia's%20total%20advertising,%25%2C%20reaching%20MYR%20500%20million>

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ Media Prima, 'Media Prima Stays Resilient; Delivers Decent FY24 Performance Amid Economic Headwinds' <https://www.mediaprima.com.my/news.html?media-prima-stays-resilient-delivers-decent-fy24-performance-amid-economic-headwinds>

¹⁸ <https://www.nst.com.my/amp/business/corporate/2025/03/1193121/astros-net-profit-more-triples-rm12915mil-fy25>

attributed its net profit increase to lower amortisation of intangible assets and reduced finance costs, despite a weaker third quarter.

Media Chinese International Limited (MCIL) Group, in its unaudited third-quarter results for the period ending 31 December 2024, reported an operating loss despite a 3.9% increase in turnover to US\$37.79 million. The growth¹⁹ was mainly driven by its travel segment and the appreciation of the Malaysian ringgit against the US dollar. Notably, turnover from its Malaysian segment improved by 9.4%, bolstered by *Sin Chew Daily*'s high-profile events like the 'Malaysia Business Legend 2024' and 'MCIL Trend Forum 2024'.

However, the financial strain on media groups is increasingly impacting their workforce, particularly journalists and newsroom staff. Job losses due to restructuring, often implemented without due consideration for employee welfare, have become a growing concern. The absence of a safety net for media workers highlights the need for greater oversight from both media management and policymakers, considering the sector's vital role in providing information to the public.

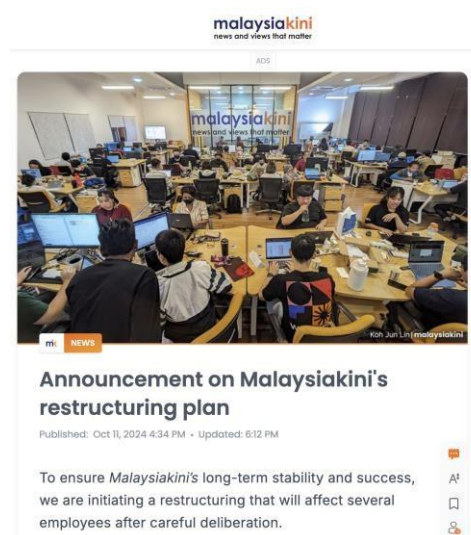


Figure 1 @ Malaysiakini

The Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ) has observed a troubling trend: the economic struggles of media groups are largely a consequence of the shift from traditional to digital and new media consumption. Job security remains precarious. For instance, Malaysiakini's restructuring in October 2024²⁰ led to significant layoffs. Similarly, in May 2024, Kenanga Investment Bank reported that MCIL planned to reduce its workforce by at least 44%, from

¹⁹ Media Chinese International Limited, Financial Results for the third quarter 2024 <https://www.mediachinesegroup.com/en/annual-reports/>

²⁰ MalayMail, 'Malaysiakini restructures, leading to staff layoffs amid industry challenges' <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2024/10/11/malaysiakini-restructures-leading-to-staff-layoffs-amid-industry-challenges/153307>

1,800 to 1,000 employees over five years²¹. CEO Francis Tiong announced plans to shut down printing facilities and integrate artificial intelligence (AI) to streamline operations, citing manpower as the company's largest cost driver²².



Figure 2 @ Malaysiakini

Yet, the over-reliance on AI as a substitute to the media workforce poses critical ethical and quality concerns. While generative AI advancements are notable, the proliferation of ‘[AI-generated slop](#)’—mass-produced, low-quality, incoherent, and potentially misleading content—threatens journalistic standards, particularly in the absence of experienced human oversight. CIJ stresses that the economic pressures facing media groups are symptomatic of a broader market shift rather than isolated financial mismanagement. While AI can serve as a valuable tool, it should not replace human journalists. Protecting labour rights and ensuring job security must remain non-negotiable priorities.

Addressing these challenges requires systemic change and a coordinated, multi-stakeholder approach. Sustainable solutions must be developed to support media organisations in adapting to the evolving economic landscape without sacrificing the human workforce that upholds the integrity and quality of journalism.

²¹ Free Malaysia Today, ‘Media Chinese to lay off 800 staff, says Kenanga’ <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2024/05/30/media-chinese-to-lay-off-30-of-staff-amid-ai-integration-says-research-firm/>

²² ibid

II. MALAYSIA UNDER INTERNATIONAL SCRUTINY

During this period, Malaysia continued to serve as a member of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) for the 2022-2024 term.

Significantly, in 2024, Malaysia was reviewed under the 4th cycle of the Universal Periodic Review (45th session) and at the 88th session of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

Under the 2024 Universal Periodic Review (UPR)²³, Malaysia received several key recommendations regarding media freedom, including repealing or amending repressive laws such as the Sedition Act 1948, Communications and Multimedia Act (CMA) 1997, and the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) 1984 that restrict freedom of expression and media independence.

At the CEDAW Review Malaysia received critical observations regarding gender representation and safety in media. The CEDAW Committee noted its concerns on: (i) instances of discrimination against women journalists; (ii) the need for capacity-building for media professionals on the use of gender-responsive language; (iii) the persistence of gender stereotypes and negative/sexist portrayals of women in the media, both offline and online; and (iv) the potential of artificial intelligence-driven new technologies to reproduce, amplify and automate gender-based stereotypes that commodify and harass women.

The CEDAW Committee, in its Concluding Observations²⁴, recommended that Malaysia (i) adopt the Malaysian Media Council Bill and ensure that it promotes women's rights in the media and protects women journalists from attacks and gender-based discrimination online; and (ii) provide capacity-building to the media to enable them to address stereotypes concerning the roles and responsibilities of women and men in the family and in society, including through gender-responsive language, and promoting positive portrayals of women as active drivers of development in the media.

It is noted that Malaysia scored 53 out of 100 on the Global Freedom Status²⁵ and a significantly higher score of 60 out of 100 in the Freedom on the Net 2024²⁶ report. According to the report, internet freedom declined in Malaysia during the coverage period (1 June 2023 – 31 May 2024), as the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) ordered internet service providers (ISPs) to block the websites of several media outlets perceived to be critical of the government. During the coverage period of the Freedom on the Net Report the MCMC blocked news outlets and blogs perceived to be critical of the government, including MalaysiaNow, UtusanTV, TV Pertiwi, and Asia Sentinel²⁷.

²³ <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/56/11>

²⁴ CEDAW Concluding Observations on the Sixth Periodic Report of Malaysia, Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, adopted on 6 June 2024. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/cedaw>

²⁵ Freedom in the World 2024 by Freedom House assigns a freedom score and status to 210 countries and territories. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/malaysia/freedom-world/2024>

²⁶ Freedom on the Net 2024 by Freedom House. *Malaysia scored 61 out of 100 in 2023.* <https://freedomhouse.org/country/malaysia/freedom-net/2024>

²⁷ *ibid*

On February 11, 2025, Transparency International (TI) announced that Malaysia scored 50 points (50%) and ranked 57th out of 180 countries in the 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI)²⁸. This ranking and score remained unchanged from 2023.

Notably, Malaysia has shown moderate improvement in this year's Reporters Without Borders (RSF) World Press Freedom Index - rising to the 88th rank from last year's dismal ranking of 107. RSF highlighted growing concerns over the consolidation of media ownership, warning that it limits editorial diversity and increases risks of self-censorship and external interference. It also pointed to a global deterioration in journalists' safety, with "worsening conditions in the field" and the normalisation of violence against reporters.²⁹ Thus, while this progress is a welcome sign, it must not mask the systemic constraints that continue to inhibit media freedom in Malaysia, particularly in the face of rising digital authoritarianism and the increasing use of AI in news production.

Malaysia's global standing and engagement in international human rights mechanisms during this period reflects both progress and persistent challenges regarding media freedom in Malaysia. While Malaysia's improved standing in global press freedom rankings and continued participation in the United Nations mechanisms are positive developments, systemic constraints remain deeply entrenched. Repressive laws, state-led censorship, media ownership concentration, and gender-based discrimination in media persist as key concerns. The critical observations from the UPR and CEDAW reviews underscore the urgent need for legal reforms, stronger institutional protections, and proactive measures to foster a free, independent, and gender-sensitive media landscape, particularly amid rising digital authoritarianism and AI-driven threats.

²⁸2024 Corruption Perception Index by Transparency International scores 180 countries around the world. The Corruption Perceptions Index is the leading global indicator of public sector corruption. <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/malaysia>

²⁹ <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2025/05/02/malaysia-up-19-spots-in-global-press-freedom-ranking-to-88th-yet-concerns-linger-over-media-ownership/175302>

III. ETHICAL USE OF GENERATIVE AI IN NEWSROOMS: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

The integration of **generative artificial intelligence (Gen AI)** into Malaysian newsrooms is reshaping the media landscape with both promise and peril. While AI offers clear benefits in automation, efficiency, and content scalability, it also raises critical concerns regarding employment, editorial quality, and the future of ethical journalism.

1. Exploring Opportunities

- Use of Gen AI in newsrooms allows for operational efficiency as it could speed up tasks such as transcription, translation, data analysis, and drafting routine content and headlines. It could also support the enhancement of productivity as it supports journalists in managing workload, allowing focus on higher-value analytical reporting and streamlining operations amid declining traditional revenues. As shared by many media, when guided ethically, AI is an innovative tool which can foster new storytelling formats and improve audience engagement.
- Supports retention and growth through audience engagement and personalisation of news feeds by suggesting related content, and tailoring push notifications. User behaviour analysis and algorithm-driven recommendation engines ensure readers see more relevant content, boosting engagement and increasing audience retention – often the key element for advertising and subscriptions.
- AI tools are also adopted by media companies to support targeted advertising to specific user segments, thus increasing ad revenues and click-through rates (CTR). Additionally, AI-driven predictive analytics supports membership optimisation and personalises subscription offers, paywalls, and freemium content strategies based on user behaviours.
- Media companies further invest in AI tools to optimise search engine visibility (SEO) to maximise organic reach and referral traffic, thus sustaining ad-based revenues.

2. Risks of Generative AI in Newsrooms

- As seen above, faced with financial instability and declining revenues from traditional print and broadcast formats, media outlets are increasingly turning to AI for cost-cutting and operational streamlining. Companies like Media Chinese International Ltd (MCIL), Astro Awani³⁰, Free Malaysia Today (FMT)³¹ and The Star³² have reportedly explored AI-assisted reporting to streamline workflows and expand reach.

³⁰ <https://www.astroawani.com/berita-malaysia/astro-awani-lancar-jiwa-garis-panduan-ai-terhadap-dalam-inovasi-kewartawanan-469818>

³¹ Ibid

³² <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2025/04/23/news-organisations-in-asia-pacific-embrace-ai-innovations>

However, this trend creates job displacement and has had a profound impact on media professionals, many of whom are employed on precarious contracts with weak labour protections, hence exacerbating workers' vulnerabilities.

- Beyond job losses, the growing reliance on AI threatens to devalue the human element in journalism. Replacing journalists, editors, and production staff with automated tools risks diluting editorial quality, critical analysis, and the depth of reporting — elements that are vital to maintaining public trust and informed discourse. AI tools lack contextual understanding, leading to shallow or inaccurate reporting. Inadvertently, data-driven editorial strategies would also pose a threat to journalistic quality and ethics. Without sufficient editorial oversight and contextual understanding, such content risks undermining public trust in the media and could further pollute the information ecosystem.
- The rise of low-quality, incoherent, or misleading content has resulted in AI-generated slop that undermines media credibility.
- AI systems, often developed by the global north tech companies, and trained on biased or incomplete datasets may perpetuate existing gender, racial and class inequalities, skewing the representation of marginalized communities and reinforcing systemic blind spots in mainstream reporting.
- Algorithms, unless carefully audited and contextualized, may default to sanitizing content or reinforcing dominant political narratives, especially when designed or deployed by large, politically linked conglomerates. In a restrictive legal environment (e.g., Communications and Multimedia Act, Sedition Act), AI-driven processes could entrench cautious, sanitized content, especially when deployed by politically linked media conglomerates. The increased censorship and self-censorship are likely to result in a trust deficit in legacy media.
- Pivoting towards algorithmic engagement and platform-based monetisation to enhance revenue and create viable business models may also undermine media pluralism. Smaller, independent outlets may lack the resources to adopt AI, risking marginalization in a platform-dominated information ecosystem and weakening Malaysia's democratic information infrastructure.

3. Strategies Adopted by Legacy Media

In the last few years, we have seen the world change with the rise of the artificial intelligence (AI) tools ChatGPT, Gemini, Microsoft Copilot and DeepSeek. These tools have since redefined how ideas are developed and how media interacts with technology within their professional setting.

Given the opportunities and benefits highlighted above, various media outlets in Malaysia are leveraging AI and algorithms to sustain their business models.

Case study 1

Astro Awani: AI-Enhanced Newsroom with Human-Centric Philosophy

Astro Awani's strategy on AI focused on (i) improving productivity and speed in news production; (ii) maintaining staff morale by positioning AI as a support tool; and (iii) enhancing multi-language content delivery, tapping into wider audiences and advertisers.

The media organisation launched "*JIWA: A Guideline for AI Utilisation in Astro AWANI*"³³, becoming the first media organization in Malaysia to provide guidelines for the use of AI technology in its newsroom. The guidelines emphasise the following principles:

Justifiable: *Ensure that AI-driven journalistic decisions are reasonable, transparent, and responsible.*

Inclusive: *Foster inclusivity by considering various perspectives and avoiding bias in AI algorithms and reporting.*

Wise: *Use wisdom in the use of AI tools/devices, making informed choices that enhance the integrity and quality of journalism.*

Authentic: *Support authenticity in reporting through thorough fact-checking, ensuring that AI-generated content aligns with journalistic standards.*

Astro Awani has been recognized for its AI journalism initiative, winning the Best AI Use in the Newsroom category³⁴ at the 2024 Digital Media Asia Awards.

Case study 2

The Star Media Group: Algorithm-Driven Personalization & Digital Monetization

The Star Media Group has embraced AI to address its declining print circulation and the need to shift towards digital revenue streams. The group has also utilized AI-powered behavioural analytics and SEA optimisation to create robust automation processes for hyper-personalized marketing campaigns at scale³⁵. It deployed algorithms for content recommendation on its website and app, to provide personalized³⁶ content recommendations to users, as a lever to ensure that *The Star Online* users receive content recommendations on their preferred channel and time, thereby boosting customer engagement and retention.

The Star Media Group recently announced that it has selected Antsomi CDP 365 to power its first-party customer data strategy, enabling more relevant ad targeting based on audience data.

³³<https://www.astroawani.com/berita-malaysia/astro-awani-lancar-jiwa-garis-panduan-ai-terhadap-dalam-inovasi-kewartawanan-469818?amp=1>

³⁴https://international.astroawani.com/malaysia-news/astro-awani-crowned-best-ai-adaptation-news-reporting-asia-467788?utm_source=chatgpt.com

³⁵https://marketingmagazine.com.my/star-media-uses-ai-in-personalized-brand-campaign-initiative/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

³⁶https://theedgemaalaysia.com/article/star-media-embraces-ai-personalised-brand-campaign-push?utm_source=chatgpt.com

The group has stated that the adoption of the customer data platform will adhere to privacy³⁷ regulations through appropriate data anonymisation.

Thus, the group is able to improve user engagement and subscription conversions, as well as boost ad revenues with targeted audience data. The Star further announced that the newspaper is developing an AI-enhanced therapist³⁸ inspired by 39 years of advice from its weekly Dear Thelma column. Leveraging this extensive archive, the AI will be trained to reflect Thelma's voice and perspective in addressing readers' personal dilemmas. It highlighted that the AI aims to handle more reader submissions and boost engagement, particularly among younger, tech-savvy audiences. A guiding principle for the project is ensuring that any AI-generated content is clearly labeled and moderated by a qualified person before publication³⁹.

Case study 3

Media Prima Bhd: AI-Driven Digital Transformation

As Media Prima experienced a decline in traditional TV and print advertising revenues, it adopted AI-driven content recommendation systems across its digital assets (e.g., Harian Metro, BH Online). The group has also diversified revenue streams through digital advertising, e-commerce partnerships, and sponsored content.

Media Prima partnered with Codemill to transform its media asset management, transitioning to a hybrid-cloud platform⁴⁰ to centralize and streamline media workflows. It has also implemented Ad Insertion Service⁴¹ to power its over-the-top (OTT) revenue, enhancing its streaming service, Tonton. This is intended to create exceptional viewing experiences through smoother transitions between content and advertisements, while enabling enhanced ad delivery reliability and greater support for dynamic ad personalization across devices.

4. Moving Forward: A Call for Balanced Integration

While AI can be a valuable tool, its integration into newsrooms must be strategic, ethical, and human-centered. Media outlets must resist the temptation of using AI solely as a cost-cutting substitute for human labor. Instead, AI should complement — not replace — the critical thinking, contextual understanding, and ethical judgment that professional journalists provide. Over-reliance on algorithms also demands ethical safeguards to prevent misinformation,

However, as Astro Awani's Editor-in-Chief Ashwad Ismail⁴² demonstrated, AI can be embraced responsibly and ethically. Awani established a multi-platform news innovation team,

³⁷ https://finance.yahoo.com/news/star-media-group-selects-antsomi-010500957.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com&guccounter=1

³⁸ <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2025/04/23/news-organisations-in-asia-pacific-embrace-ai-innovations>

³⁹ <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2025/04/23/news-organisations-in-asia-pacific-embrace-ai-innovations>

⁴⁰ https://www.ipsb.com.my/media-prima-berhad-ipsb-technology-transforms-media-asset-management-for-mpb-with-codemill-via-cantemo-and-accurate-video/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁴¹ https://tvnewscheck.com/tech/article/broadpeaks-dynamic-ad-insertion-service-powers-core-ott-revenue-for-media-prima/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁴² Interview with Ashwad Ismail, Editor in Chief, Astro Awani, 21 April 2025

initially comprising two editors and two senior reporters, to foster an AI-positive culture and to dispel the myths and fears around use of AI, while ensuring job security. Their philosophy is clear:

1. AI must enhance the quality of journalists, and
2. AI must enhance the quality of journalistic products.

Through ongoing conversations, hands-on experimentation, and adherence to international best practices, Awani emphasizes collaboration between human expertise and AI tools. Ashwad Ismail acknowledges that while tools like DeepSeek and ChatGPT are useful, the human process of internalising knowledge remains irreplaceable⁴³. Whenever AI outputs risk deviating from accuracy or depth (“hallucinating”), Awani’s team revisits their guiding principles to maintain editorial integrity.

Thus, to safeguard the future of ethical journalism in Malaysia, there is an urgent need for:

- Strong labour protections for media workers.
- Transparent AI governance frameworks.
- Continuous upskilling and training for journalists.
- Multi-stakeholder collaboration involving media, policymakers, civil society, and technology providers.

A balanced, responsible adoption of AI will ensure that technological advancement enhances, rather than undermines, the integrity and diversity of the Malaysian’s media landscape.

⁴³ Ibid

IV. LEGAL ENVIRONMENT: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

In 2024, Malaysia's legal environment presented a complex mix of opportunities and setbacks for media freedom. While the establishment of the Malaysian Media Council (MMC) and progress towards a Right to Information (RTI) law marked positive strides towards media self-regulation and greater transparency, these were overshadowed by regressive legal reforms that reinforced state control over media and expression.

1. Code of Ethics for Journalists

The Malaysian Information Department (JaPen) under the Minister of Communications launched the **Code of Ethics for Journalists** on 20 February 2024. The Code, which is expected to serve as a guideline for media agencies to carry out their duties in promoting professionalism and public trust, is based on the Malaysian Journalism Code of Ethics published by the Malaysian Press Institute (MPI) in 1989.

The Code outlines eight fundamental ethics that underscore the responsibilities and standards expected of journalists, including (i) being the voice of the plural society as well as agents facilitating dialogue; (ii) being transparent and with integrity; (iii) fairness in conveying information; (iv) validity and accuracy of information, (v) independence from personal interests; (vi) protecting the privacy and confidentiality of sources; (vii) journalists are also required to have an understanding of the laws and policies relevant to their profession; and (viii) to give priority to continuously improving their journalistic skills.

JaPen also stated that the Code will be used as a reference in its management of the Media Certification Card (KPM) for media practitioners. The card serves as an official identification document for media practitioners from media agencies recognised by the government to cover official events.

CIJ has expressed serious concerns⁴⁴ over the Malaysian Code of Ethics for Journalists, criticizing both its drafting process and its content. The Code was initiated and adopted unilaterally by the government, with no meaningful consultation with relevant stakeholders, including civil society organisations, thus raising fears it could become another tool for media control and censorship, especially given the lack of clarity on enforcement procedures and appeal mechanisms for media passes. This top-down approach contradicts the government's promise of an independent, multistakeholder Malaysian Media Council (MMC), potentially undermining its authority. Content-wise, the Code also fails to align with international human rights standards, relying instead on national frameworks like the Rukun Negara. Provisions encouraging self-censorship, reinforcing adherence to restrictive laws and failing to address modern challenges, such as ethical AI use in journalism, further entrench a repressive media environment.

⁴⁴ CIJ's Response to the Malaysian Code of Ethics for Journalists, Media Statement, 21 February 2024. <https://cijmalaysia.net/cijs-response-to-the-malaysian-code-of-ethics-for-journalists/>

2. Malaysian Media Council

The idea of a Malaysian press council was first mooted in 1973 part of a national communications strategy. However, the press resisted, fearing it would become another tool to [restrict the freedom of the press](#)⁴⁵. With no consensus, the proposals stalled. Over the years, various groups revisited the idea, holding seminars and discussions, but without follow-up action.

In January 2020, a pro-tem committee of media practitioners, owners, and civil society (including CIJ) was set up by the Minister of Communications and Multimedia to draft the Malaysian Media Council (MMC) Bill. The draft and report by the Protem Committee was submitted in August 2020, followed by ongoing consultations.

The Bill was finally tabled for its first reading in Parliament on 12 December 2024. It was subsequently passed by the Dewan Rakyat (Lower House) on 26 February 2025 and by the Dewan Negara (Upper House) on 13 March 2025.

Under the new law, the MMC will set journalistic standards, establish a code of conduct, and promote ethical, independent journalism through self-regulation. Its creation is a significant step toward strengthening media professionalism and supporting journalists. However, ensuring its effective operation remains a key challenge. Minister Fahmi Fadzil has announced that the council's founding board is expected to be formed by June 2025⁴⁶

Positive Aspects

Key elements of the law would essentially strengthen the media institution. These include:

- a. **Multi-stakeholder mechanism (Section 7)** – The Act mandates a multi-stakeholder structure for the MMC, comprising representatives from three categories: (I) media owners and publishers, (II) media personnel and organisations, and (III) civil society, academia, and other stakeholders promoting media freedom. The inclusion of Category III is especially important for providing checks and balances and ensuring decisions reflect the public interest.
- b. **Inclusivity and gender equality (Section 8(1)(f))** – the Act ensures diversity within the MMC Board by mandating the appointment of six additional members to reflect gender balance, regional representation, and media diversity across languages and formats. This inclusivity fosters fairer, more democratic decision-making and a robust, diverse and pluralistic discourse.

⁴⁵ Hasim, Mohd Safar & Merican, Ahmad Murad. 'The Formation of A Media Council: The Experience Malaysia,' [V18_1.pdf](#)

⁴⁶ Bernama. 'Malaysian Media Council founding board likely to be formed by June, says Fahmi,' Malaysian <https://bernama.com/en/news.php?id=2404018>

- c. **Independence of the chairperson (Section 9(1) and (2))** – The Chairperson’s appointment is decided collectively by the Board (Section 9(1)), with strict criteria to ensure independence: they must not be politically active, affiliated with any political party, or part of the public service (Section 9(2)). This safeguards the MMC’s integrity as a self-regulatory body free from political or commercial influence.
- d. **Establishing a grievance mechanism (Part IV, Sections 15 and 16)** – the Council is empowered to establish a grievance mechanism for handling complaints against the media. This serves as a vital intermediary between the media, government, and public, enhancing accountability and trust in both the Council and the broader media industry.
- e. **Setting up an Independent Malaysia Media Council Fund (MMC Fund) (Section 17)** – The MMC Fund provides financial support for the Council’s operations and media development research (Section 18(1)(c)). Managed independently by the MMC, the fund receives allocations from Parliament and through self-generated revenues (fees, projects, schemes). This model ensures financial sustainability and accountability to the public while maintaining the Council’s autonomy from political and business pressures.

Our Concerns

Despite its positive elements, several critical provisions in the MMC Act risk undermining the Council’s ability to function as an independent, public interest body. Key concerns include:

a. Government Representation on the MMC Board

The appointment of two government representatives with full voting and decision-making powers contradicts the principle of self-regulation and threatens the MMC’s independence. Even with only two seats, their presence risks disproportionate influence over Board decisions, opening the door to government interference. This compromises the MMC’s core mandate to promote media independence (Section 5(1)(b)) and safeguard the public interest, ultimately weakening democratic institutions.

b. Ministerial Approval for Foreign Grants

The MMC Fund’s autonomy is further jeopardized by the requirement to seek ministerial approval before accepting foreign grants (Section 17(5)). This provision invites political interference and undermines financial independence. A more appropriate safeguard would be a simple notification mechanism, such as disclosing foreign funding in annual audited reports.

c. Absence of Commitments to Broader Media Law Reforms

For the MMC to truly advance media freedom, it must be complemented by the repeal of repressive laws that continue to stifle free expression and press independence. These include:

- Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) 1984
- Sedition Act 1948
- Official Secrets Act 1972

- Sections 211 & 233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act (CMA) 1998
- Section 114A of the Evidence Act 1950
- Penal Code Sections 203A, 499, and 500 (criminal defamation)

Additionally, urgent amendments are needed to the Whistleblower Protection Act 2010 to ensure effective protection for individuals exposing wrongdoing. Without these parallel reforms, the MMC risks becoming another ineffective body, unable to fulfil its mission. CIJ therefore calls on the government to present a clear roadmap and timeline for comprehensive media law reform to guarantee genuine media freedom in Malaysia.

3. Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) 1984

Alongside ongoing discussions on media sustainability, recent policy directions indicate the government's intention to expand regulatory oversight over the media sector through legislative amendments. Specifically, in May 2024, it was publicly reported that the government proposed to amend the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) 1984 to encompass digital media.⁴⁷ This move was justified by the perceived challenges in regulating traditional print publications as media content increasingly migrates to digital platforms.

Subsequently, in November 2024, it was further reported that the Ministry of Home Affairs was actively advancing amendments to the PPPA.⁴⁸ These developments have raised significant concerns among media stakeholders, given the PPPA's longstanding history of suppressing press freedom through broad ministerial powers and opaque regulatory mechanisms.

Historical Context of the PPPA

The PPPA is widely regarded as a repressive legislative instrument, granting the Minister of Home Affairs sweeping discretionary powers to issue, revoke, or suspend printing and publishing permits without judicial oversight.⁴⁹ These provisions have historically subjected media organisations to continuous political pressure, thereby undermining editorial independence and freedom of expression.

Rather than pursuing the repeal or meaningful reform of the Act—particularly following the establishment of the Malaysian Media Council (MMC) as an independent self-regulatory body—the government now appears intent on reinforcing the PPPA. The reported amendments include the following key proposals:

- Extension of regulatory authority to cover digital media content, including online news portals;

⁴⁷ “Govt to Amend PPPA to Include Digital Media,” The Star, May 2024

⁴⁸ Home Ministry Moves Forward on PPPA Amendments,” Malaysiakini, November 2024. <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/727770>

⁴⁹ Human Rights Watch, Laws Against Speech: The Use of Malaysia's Legal Framework to Suppress Free Expression, 2021. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/05/19/malaysia-free-speech-under-increasing-threat>

- Reinstatement of periodic permit renewals, with licensing validity limited to three-year terms⁵⁰;
- Restrictions on reporting related to race, religion, and royalty (3R) issues⁵¹;
- Introduction of harsher penalties for non-compliance with licensing terms or content restrictions.

Key Concerns

a. Escalation of Governmental Control and Censorship

The proposed amendments would entrench state control over the media landscape by granting authorities increased leverage over both traditional and digital media outlets. The imposition of mandatory licensing and periodic renewals, particularly for digital publishers, could be used as a tool to silence dissenting views or critical reporting. When read in conjunction with the already problematic provisions of the Communications and Multimedia Act (CMA) 1998⁵², these reforms represent a significant threat to press freedom in Malaysia.

b. Disproportionate Impact on Independent and Alternative Media

Independent and smaller media outlets, especially those operating primarily online, may find it difficult to comply with new licensing and regulatory requirements. These outlets typically lack the financial and administrative resources to navigate complex bureaucratic processes, and may⁵³ be particularly vulnerable to arbitrary enforcement or unclear standards. Overregulation of digital media could also deter innovation and impede the development of a diverse and competitive media environment, which is essential for democratic discourse.

c. Undermining the Role of the Malaysian Media Council (MMC)

Media practitioners and civil society organisations have consistently advocated for the establishment of an independent, self-regulatory body to oversee media ethics and accountability. The recent establishment of the MMC was a significant milestone in advancing this objective. However, the proposed amendments to the PPPA threaten to undercut this progress by reinforcing a parallel, state-controlled mechanism of regulation. This dual structure may create jurisdictional ambiguities, undermine the independence of the MMC, and render it redundant before it becomes operational⁵⁴.

The proposed amendments to the PPPA, particularly the expansion of its jurisdiction to digital media, represents a regressive approach to media regulation in Malaysia. Rather than fostering an open and accountable media ecosystem, these changes risk entrenching censorship, silencing independent voices, and stifling innovation within the digital media sector.

CIJ strongly urges the government to reconsider these legislative amendments and prioritise legal reforms that promote press freedom, transparency, and accountability. The repeal of the

⁵⁰ Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ), *Media Freedom in Malaysia: Legislative Updates and Concerns*, 2024.

⁵¹ Government Proposes 3R Coverage Ban in Media Licensing Law,” *Free Malaysia Today*, November 2024.

⁵² Suaram, *Malaysia Human Rights Report 2022*, Section on Freedom of Expression.

⁵³ Reporters Without Borders (RSF), *Press Freedom Index: Malaysia Country Report*, 2024.

⁵⁴ CIJ, *Statement on Media Council and PPPA Developments*, December 2024

PPPA and related legislation is particularly crucial in order for the MMC to function as the primary mechanism for ethical oversight and self-regulation. Indeed, Malaysia's media landscape stands at a critical juncture. The choices made now will determine whether the country progresses toward a more democratic and pluralistic media environment, or regresses into tighter state control and diminished public trust in the press.

4. Communications and Multimedia Act (CMA) 1998 (CMA)

The Communications and Multimedia Act (CMA) 1998 was to be reviewed and repressive sections repealed as promised in the PH manifesto. However, this did not materialise. Instead, amendments were made that address content-related offenses, including those related to indecent, obscene, false, menacing, or offensive content, with changes to Sections 211 and 233 of the CMA. The bill was passed by Parliament on 19 December 2024, and came into force on 11 February 2025, with some sections delayed. The amendments aimed to strengthen the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission's (MCMC) regulatory powers and enforcement capabilities.

Amongst others, the amendments enhanced the investigative powers of any 'authorised officer'—not limited to the police—under Section 248, allowing searches and seizures without a warrant, despite the absence of adequate safeguards against abuse. This amendment contravenes due process requirements of necessity and proportionality under international law. Additionally, the amendments grant the MCMC and its officers' immunity from prosecution under Section 51A of the MCMC Act. that the enhanced powers granted to the MCMC could be misused.

The CMA amendments mark a pivotal shift in Malaysia's approach to regulating its digital and multimedia sectors by focusing on enhancing regulatory supervision, widening enforcement powers, and introducing stricter penalties. This development is likely to influence the media's approach to reporting and transparency, potentially resulting in greater self-censorship. It also highlights critical concerns about the accountability of social media platforms, especially in relation to the standards and procedures governing their content moderation practices. In this technology-driven landscape, further examination is needed on the role of social media as a tool for shaping this landscape.

- **Control-related offences**

Sections 211 and 233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act (CMA) criminalise content-related offences using vague and overly broad language that falls short of the standards set by Article 10(1)(a) of the Federal Constitution and international norms governing restrictions on freedom of expression. The accompanying 'Explanations' further exacerbate this ambiguity by lacking a clear threshold, particularly concerning 'hate speech' and 'false content'. These explanations also contradict the interpretations provided in the Content Code 2022 developed by the Content Forum. Of particular concern is the inclusion of 'hate speech' under the amended provisions, where the definition of terms such as 'grossly offensive' fails to align with international standards.

- **Control of online platforms**

- (i) *Licensing*

Section 230B imposes strict liability on service providers for user-generated content risk, incentivising the removal of content and undermining freedom of expression online. It empowers the MCMC to take pre-emptive measures to prevent, detect, or counter any network security risk.

Section 46A allows the Minister to dispense with the registration formalities under a class license. This removes the service provider's right to opt in to a procedure.

“ii) The suspension of content application service providers (Section 211A) — undermines the right to access the Internet and freedom of expression and information.”

The introduction of a new licensing regime and the imposition of strict liability on service providers for user-generated content risk incentivising the over removal of content, undermining freedom of expression online. Such measures contradict the [Manila Principles on Intermediary Liability](#)⁵⁵ and the spirit of Section 3(3) of the CMA as well as Article 10 of the Federal Constitution.

- **Power to Intercept Communication (Surveillance) - Section 252**

A very low threshold is required for the Public Prosecutor to order surveillance measures if they think communications are likely to contain any information. The specifics of the nature of communication were not defined nor narrowed down. These activities were not provided by law, have no legitimate aim and lack judicial authorisation and external oversight.

- **Preservation of communication data and disclosure of stored communications data**

Section 247 expands the scope of the investigative powers of the MCMC to request for records, including data that licensees must retain under the new record keeping rules.

The newly added sections 252A and 252B, compels service providers to disclose and preserve user data, undermining data protection and privacy rights. This is further compounded by the fact that the government is excluded from the scope of the Personal Data Protection Act 2010, thus removing the obligations to guarantee data protection.

- **High and disproportionate penalties**

The amendments further disproportionately increase punitive measures in offences and related penalties. The fines increased by 900% compared to the previous Act. No rationale is provided to support these amendments increasing sanctions, nor is there a clear justification for the quantum adopted in determining the threshold of fines and imprisonment.

⁵⁵

Impact on media

Technology has fostered digital democracy, shifting public discourse to online spaces. However, this shift has also enabled the spread of hate speech, political manipulation, and harmful content on social media, highlighting the State's responsibility to respond effectively. It also raises serious concerns about platform accountability and the adequacy of content moderation standards.

While the Madani government has moved to regulate online spaces – citing the rise in hate speech, disinformation, cybercrimes, and online abuse—social media also plays a vital role in social interaction, economic activity, and innovation. Regulatory efforts must therefore balance safety with the protection of digital freedoms, supported by clear guidelines and accountability measures.

5. Other laws

In 2024, Malaysia saw significant legal developments, including amendments to the Penal Code, Personal Data Protection Act, Cyber Security Act, and the introduction of the Online Safety Act, with a focus on cybercrime, data protection, and online safety.

a) Cyber Security Act 2024 (Act 854)

The Cyber Security Act 2024, effective from 26 August 2024, establishes broad government powers over cybersecurity governance, including the formation of the National Cyber Security Committee and regulation of critical infrastructure and service providers. However, the Act lacks clear definitions of key terms like “cyber security threat,” leading to risks of misinterpretation and misuse for political agendas. The composition of the Committee is limited to government officials, with no inclusion of independent experts or civil society, raising concerns over unchecked authority. The Chief Executive, appointed by the Committee, wields extensive unilateral powers over private data access, directives, and surveillance, without adequate safeguards or accountability mechanisms. The Act does not provide for independent oversight, redress mechanisms, or transparent checks and balances, effectively granting impunity to government actions and bypassing due process.

This concentration of power threatens fundamental rights, including media freedom and privacy, while undermining public interest, transparency, and the democratic governance of cybersecurity.

b) Online Safety Act (ONSA) 2024

Passed by the Dewan Negara on December 16, 2024, this act aims to improve online safety, particularly with the rapid advancement of technology and the ease of information dissemination. Nonetheless, the approach and framework pose significant risks to freedom of expression. These include:

Lack of an Independent Oversight Body - The MCMC, as the regulatory body tasked with enforcing the ONSA, is not independent in law or practice. The CMA and the MCMC Act

empowers the Minister of Communication to issue directives, raising serious concerns about political interference. The Act further expands the powers of the MCMC and the Minister, allowing surveillance, unfettered access to data and monitoring without adequate safeguards, including judicial oversight

Broad and Vague Definition of Harmful Content - The ONSA includes an overly broad and ambiguous list of “harmful content,” which risks the removal of legal and legitimate expression as service providers are mandated to proactively screen for such content. Given the powers of the MCMC, it could potentially lead to government manipulation and censorship under the guise of moderation. Further, these provisions could also infringe upon users’ privacy and freedom of expression, violating international human rights principles of necessity and proportionality in restrictions to freedom of expression.

Failure to Adopt a Comprehensive System-Based Approach - The act focuses extensively on content moderation rather than adopting a systems-based approach that addresses root issues like platform design, algorithmic transparency, and user education. This content-centric focus risks increasing surveillance and privacy violations without effectively tackling broader challenges related to online safety.

c) Licensing Framework for Social Media

The Ministry of Communications introduced the new Regulatory Framework for Internet Messaging Service Providers and Social Media Providers (licensing regime) through the amendments to the (i) Communications and Multimedia (Licensing) (Exemption) Order 2000 (“EO 2000”) and (ii) the Communications and Multimedia (Licensing) Regulations 2000 (“LR 2000”).

As of 1 August 2024, online service providers, with more than 8 million users, require class licenses and are subjected to the provisions under the Communications and Multimedia Act and the Code of Conduct (Best Practice) for Internet Messaging Service Providers and Social Media Service Providers (Code of Conduct), which came into effect on 1 January 2025.

The MCMC, with its overbroad authority, would now have powers over these services and may require access to user data or even restrict or suspend access to their services in the event they are found to be non-compliant. While the framework seeks to increase accountability of social media platforms, similar to the Online Safety Act, it imposes an obligation of general proactive monitoring or filtering of content by these services in the guise of a duty of care. Coupled with the punitive sanctions under the CMA, it is likely to incentivise the social media platforms to engage in over moderation of content or disclose data of its users, thus impacting freedom of expression and privacy.

d) Penal Code (Amendment) Act 2024

Amendments to Malaysia’s Penal Code to address cyberbullying as a criminal offence were passed in Parliament on 10 December 2024. This includes penalising actions that cause cyber offences, hacking, identity theft and digital fraud, harm, distress, or alarm to individuals

through online harassment, doxxing, or threats. While the amendments aim to deter harmful behaviour, the provisions are broad and encompass an overly wide range of content and speech, which fail to meet the test of legality, necessity, and proportionality. It opens itself to arbitrary interpretation and potential abuse. It further conflates offenses committed by adults together with those committed by children, with the same spectrum of penalties, without consideration for remedial or restorative justice.

e) Right to Information Legislation

In 2024, Malaysia made notable progress toward adopting a federal Right to Information (RTI) law. On 16 December 2024, the Prime Minister announced⁵⁶ that the government had, in principle, agreed to draft the Freedom of Information Bill, with the intent to table it by 2025 – marking a significant step toward enhancing transparency and public access to information.

Civil society advocates, including CIJ, ARTICLE 19 (Malaysia), C4 and Sinar Project have outlined key principles for the proposed RTI law, including: (i) ensuring information is "open by default" within clearly stated exemption grounds; (ii) establishing an independent oversight body, and (iii) repealing or amending existing laws that conflict with the right to information, including the repeal of the Official Secrets Act 1972 and Section 203A of the Penal Code.

The legislation should align with international human rights standards to promote transparency, accountability, and public participation in governance. While the government's commitment to drafting the bill is a positive development, stakeholders urge prompt action to translate this commitment into effective legislation that upholds the public's right to information.

On 28 February 2025, the Cabinet approved the establishment of the Protem Committee⁵⁷ on the Freedom of Information (FOI)/Right to Information (RTI) Bill.

The progress toward adopting a Right to Information (RTI) law in Malaysia in 2024 marks a potentially transformative development for media freedom. Access to information is fundamental for journalists to report accurately, hold authorities accountable, and ensure transparency in governance. The proposed RTI law could significantly reduce information opacity that has long hindered investigative journalism. By aligning with international human rights standards, the law would strengthen journalists' ability to inform the public and challenge censorship and secrecy. However, its true impact on media freedom hinges on the swift enactment of a robust and enforceable framework. The establishment of the Protem Committee on February 28, 2025, is a welcome step, but continued vigilance is required to ensure the law genuinely enhances transparency and protects the public's right to know.

f) Sedition Act 1948

The Malaysian government announced on 14 November 2024 that they plan to retain the Sedition Act 1948⁵⁸ in order to maintain public order and national security, especially in

⁵⁶ https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2024/12/17/freedom-of-information-bill-to-be-tabled-in-2025-says-anwar?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁵⁷ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/741043>

⁵⁸ https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2024/11/14/sedition-act-stays-for-now-but-national-security-bill-in-the-works-says-deputy-home-minister/156844?utm_source

addressing seditious tendencies around race, religion and royalty (3R). Deputy Home Minister Shamsul Anuar Nasarah⁵⁹ stated that any amendments or replacements to the Act in the future will consider the changing digital challenges and ensure that the constitutional monarchy and interfaith harmony are maintained.

The decision to retain the Sedition Act 1948 has significant implications for media freedom. Despite longstanding calls for its repeal, the government's justification signals a continued reliance on repressive legal tools that restrict free expression. This retention reinforces a climate of self-censorship among journalists and media outlets, who risk legal repercussions for reporting on sensitive topics. Furthermore, the government's emphasis on adapting the Act to "digital challenges" raises concerns that it may broaden its scope to target online dissent and critical reporting. The vague assurances of future amendments, without a clear timeline or commitment to aligning with international human rights standards, prolongs the chilling effect on media freedom and public discourse.

Conclusion

Despite the potential of reforms like the RTI bill, the overall legal trajectory in 2024 reflected a tightening grip on media freedom, with increased regulatory overreach, weakened accountability, and a sustained culture of self-censorship in Malaysia's media landscape. The unilateral adoption of the Journalist Code of Ethics without inclusive stakeholder engagement, the retention of the Sedition Act 1948, and proposed amendments to the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) and the Communications and Multimedia Act (CMA) signalled an ongoing reliance on restrictive legislation to suppress dissent and critical reporting. New laws like the Cyber Security Act and Online Safety Act further expanded government surveillance and censorship powers, eroding privacy and freedom of expression.

⁵⁹ Ibid

V. MEDIA UNDER SIEGE

1. Media sustainability and impact on job security

Media sustainability was not consistent last year as numerous media outlets such as Free Malaysia Today (FMT), Petra News, Malaysiakini, mainstream Malay news portals, MCIL and Tamil media faced various challenges in sustainability due to funding constraints. Staff were terminated from employment, leaving many of them in positions of vulnerability without salaries and benefits.

- Media Chinese International Ltd may lay off at least 44% of its staff within two years after it integrates [artificial intelligence](#)⁶⁰ (AI) into its operation, according to Kenanga Investment Bank (Kenanga IB).
- Approximately fifteen⁶¹ employees of Petra News Sdn Bhd, the publisher of news portals *The Malaysian Insight*, *The Vibes*, and *Getaran*, are demanding the immediate payment of their Employees Provident Fund (EPF), Monthly Tax Deductions (PCB), and Social Security Organisation (Perkeso) contributions for 2024.

Job security

In 2024, uncertainties in Malaysia's media landscape continued to threaten the job security of media professionals, including those from The Malaysian Insight (TMI) and The Vibes. A key issue remains the lack of stable and transparent funding models. In an interview with Teh Athira Yusof, Secretary-General of the National Union of Journalists Malaysia (NUJM)⁶², she emphasised the need for sustainable solutions. She suggested that advocating for paid media content partnerships, such as those implemented in Australia with Google, could help ensure the longevity of the media industry. However, she stressed that such initiatives would only be effective if the media fraternity stood united: "We cannot rely on the next paymaster or political master to fund the media."

Journalist Ravin Palanisamy⁶³ was among 30 TMI staff affected by job insecurity due to these funding challenges. While the previous management had promised to fulfil salary and statutory obligations, the transition to a new owner—Datuk Vinod Sekhar of Petra Group,⁶⁴ who also owns The Vibes—resulted in delayed or incomplete payments, including arrears, EPF, and SOCSO contributions. Despite assurances, only one month's salary was eventually paid, prompting Ravin and others to file a complaint with the Labour Department. However, the group encountered insufficient support from the authorities and had to repeatedly follow up on

⁶⁰<https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2024/05/30/media-chinese-to-lay-off-30-of-staff-amid-ai-integration>

⁶¹ Malay Mail. 'Petra News staff demand unpaid wages, statutory contributions for 2024,' <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2025/02/15/petra-news-staff-demand-unpaid-wages-statutory-contributions-for-2024/166805>

⁶² Interview with The Athira Yusof, Secretary-general National Union of Journalist (NUJM)

⁶³ Interview with journalist, November 2024

⁶⁴ Loheswar, R. Report: News outfit 'The Malaysian Insight' halts operation 'indefinitely' amid unpaid wages, [Report: News outfit 'The Malaysian Insight' halts operation 'indefinitely' amid unpaid wages | Malay Mail](#)

their case. To date, many of the payment issues remain unresolved, with affected journalists seeking alternative employment to support themselves.

Ravin has since called for the government and the Malaysian Media Council (MMC) to implement stronger mechanisms to protect media workers, noting the psychological and financial toll such experiences cause. He also advocates for stricter regulations governing the establishment of media outlets, particularly those reliant on external funding, as journalists—especially contract staff—often bear the brunt of financial mismanagement.

The crisis highlights a broader industry reality: traditional revenue models are no longer sufficient. The media sector must urgently reimagine its business strategies to ensure long-term viability. Without reform, more independent media outlets may be forced to shut down, jeopardising media freedom in Malaysia. While ownership bears primary responsibility, the government can play a supportive role through temporary measures such as tax incentives, short-term loans, or public advertising. Nonetheless, such support must be carefully structured to preserve media independence and prevent undue government influence or censorship⁶⁵.

2. Gender Barriers

Malaysia ranked 114th out of 146 countries in the World Economic Forum's (WEF) Gender Gap Index, falling 12 places from the previous year.⁶⁶ In 2023, women's labour force participation rate stood at 56.2%, significantly lower than men's 82.3%. While Malaysia has made strides to promote [gender equality](#)⁶⁷ in the workplace – such as amending the Employment Act 1955 [Act 265] to strengthen protections for women – the implementation of these measures, including within the media sector, remains inconsistent and requires stricter monitoring and enforcement.

Key amendments include increased maternity leave, protection against termination for pregnant employees, the right to request flexible working arrangements, anti-discrimination provisions, and mandatory notices on sexual harassment. However, without proper enforcement, these legal advancements have limited impact on improving real workplace conditions.

In July 2024, the sexual harassment of a female journalist covering the Sungai Bakap by-election starkly illustrated the ongoing risks women media practitioners face. CIJ condemned the incident⁶⁸, highlighting how gender-based harassment continues to create unsafe working environments, deterring women journalists from performing their duties without fear. Such incidents underscore the urgent need for stronger preventive measures, especially during public events.

⁶⁵ CIJ-Malaysian-Media-Landscape-Brief-2021.pdf

⁶⁶ <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2024/06/21/malaysia-falls-12-places-in-global-gender-gap-report->

⁶⁷ 'Report: News outfit 'The Malaysian Insight' halts operation 'indefinitely' amid unpaid wages,'

[MINISTRY OF WOMEN, FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT](#)

⁶⁸ CIJ Condemns Sexual Harassment against Journalist in Sungai Bakap By-election, Media Statement, 5 July 2024. <https://cijmalaysia.net/cij-condemns-sexual-harassment-against-journalist-in-sungai-bakap-by-election/>

Persistent Gender Challenges in Malaysia's Media Industry

1. Sexual Harassment & Gender-Based Violence

Women journalists in Malaysia continue to face sexual harassment and gender-based violence, both online and offline. These hostile conditions not only endanger their physical and psychological well-being but also undermine their ability to report freely and confidently.

2. Culture of Fear & Self-Censorship

The absence of robust protective measures and inconsistent law enforcement fosters a culture of fear. Many women journalists practice self-censorship, avoiding sensitive topics or frontline reporting to protect themselves. Societal tendencies to trivialize gender-based harassment further discourage victims from seeking justice.

3. Institutional & Structural Barriers

Media organizations and political institutions often lack gender-sensitive policies and effective mechanisms to prevent and address harassment. The National Union of Journalists Malaysia (NUJM) has highlighted the under-representation of women in top editorial positions. NUJM⁶⁹ Secretary-General Teh Athira Yusof cited a 2020 report by NUJM and the International Federation of Journalists Asia-Pacific Region, which described how the lack of women in leadership perpetuates a toxic and self-perpetuating newsroom culture, leaving few mentors to support future female leaders.

Former NUJM president Farah echoes concerns about slow career progression for women. She noted that some media organizations impose quotas limiting the number of female bureau chiefs. Many women become stuck in mid-level roles such as Assistant News Editor or News Editor. Moreover, only unmarried women without children or those living away from their spouses and families are often considered “ideal” employees or an asset to the company, as they are perceived to be more available for overtime, are not tied down by childcare or household responsibilities, can work overtime, and rarely take sick leave or emergency leave.⁷⁰

The underrepresentation of women in decision-making roles limits their influence over newsroom culture and the implementation of safety protocols.

4. Undermining Professional Credibility

Women journalists are frequently subjected to gendered stereotypes questioning their competence, credibility, and objectivity—particularly in male-dominated beats such as politics and crime. These biases hamper their career progression and reinforce systemic gender inequality.

⁶⁹ Interview with NUJM, March 2025

⁷⁰ Interview with former NUJM president, March 2025

While more women are stepping into leadership roles, decision-making at the board level remains male-dominated. According to a former Deputy Executive Editor at The Star Publications Berhad, women who assert themselves are often labelled as ‘difficult’ or ‘combative’. Balancing demanding work hours with family responsibilities⁷¹ also remains a persistent challenge, leading some, like the former editor herself, to leave traditional media for freelancing after long (26 years) careers.

5. Limited Support Networks

Support systems for women journalists, including peer networks, legal aid, and counselling services, remain fragmented and insufficient. This isolation exacerbates the challenges women face when dealing with harassment and discrimination.

Importantly, gender issues extend beyond internal newsroom dynamics. Journalist S. Vinothaa⁷² shared with CIJ that while her organization offers channels to raise workplace grievances, harassment often occurs in the field. During “jolok” assignments—where journalists crowd in confined spaces to cover ministers or officials—female reporters are frequently subjected to inappropriate touching. Alarming, many young, inexperienced female journalists who are jostled and pushed around may not even realize they have been molested. Vinothaa also pointed out that male journalists can face similar physical harassment, such as being pinched by bodyguards or other security personnel at the location.

The Way Forward

Ensuring a safe and equitable work environment for journalists requires comprehensive measures, both within media organizations and in the field. Only through concerted and sustained efforts can Malaysia’s media landscape become a safer, more inclusive space for women journalists to thrive professionally without fear.

3. Use of laws to restrict media

The use of repressive laws against journalists when doing their work continue to be a hindrance to the media from giving their best on the job. Legislations such as the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) 1984, the Official Secrets Act (OSA) 1972, the Sedition Act 1948 and Section 233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act (CMA) 1998 continue to be utilised arbitrarily to limit critical media reporting. The laws are used against journalists to carry out their duties and halt them from reporting to the public at large on the news. Journalists continue to be arrested, questioned by authorities despite doing their job professionally.

Similar to the previous year, an alarming number of cases on harassment of journalists and media organisations by authorities were recorded in 2024, including being summoned by the

⁷¹ Interview with journalist, March 2025

⁷² Interview with Malaysiakini journalist

police for investigations over their work. Reporters have been called up by authorities as either targets of investigations or witnesses in ongoing investigations.

a. Investigations, Arrests and Convictions

In 2024 several journalists were subjected to police investigations on reporting on matters of public interest, such as government-linked projects, alleged government corruption, and matters related to the police. This situation created a hostile environment for the media under its culture of secrecy and censorship. Oppressive laws are not only wielded against human rights activists and politicians but are also used to target the media. The government often defends its actions by labelling critical reporting as false or misleading. Notwithstanding, this response reflects a broader failure of the government to take appropriate actions or address legitimate concerns. Instead, they resort to draconian methods of intimidation and censorship, deliberately designed to stifle public scrutiny and silence critical journalism, undermining both press freedom, rule of law and accountability.

- **On 7 February**, Sarawak Report editor, [Claire Rewcastle-Brown](#)⁷³, known for her investigative reporting on the 1MDB scandal, was convicted of criminal defamation in a trial held in absentia, violating principles of natural justice and her constitutional right to a fair hearing. Despite correcting her error and issuing an apology, she was still convicted under Section 500 of the Penal Code. She was sentenced to two years' jail in absentia by the Magistrate's Court for allegedly defaming the Sultanah of Terengganu, Sultanah Nur Zahirah.



Figure 3 @ MalayMail

- **In March 2024**, police opened an investigation into local news anchor Muhammed Ahmad Hamdan for a letter he published in the *New Straits Times* – which described

⁷³ Zolkiply Zatul Iffah, Clare Rewcastle-Brown jailed two years for defaming Terengganu Sultanah [Clare Rewcastle-Brown jailed two years for defaming Terengganu Sultanah | New Straits Times](#)

an encounter he had had with “rude, arrogant, and unprofessional” police officers outside of his home⁷⁴ - under Section 233 of the CMA and Section 504 of the penal code⁷⁵.

Subang police to question news anchor after allegedly criticising investigation method



Subang Jaya district police chief ACP Wan Azlan Wan Mamat said the police will be questioning a local news anchor for allegedly making defamatory remarks against the force, following his criticism of the police investigation methods during a check in a residential neighbourhood in Subang Jaya. — Picture via X/Bernama

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By Yiswaree Palansamy
Sunday, 17 Mar 2024 7:25 PM MYT

Figure 4 @ MalayMail

- **In April 2024**, the MCMC filed a police report against prominent writer Murray Hunter over an article he published, in which he referred to the Royal Malaysian Police as a “completely politicized institution under the present government” and described the MCMC as “acting far beyond its statutory powers in self-interest.”⁷⁶ The same month, the MCMC filed a police report against three online critics⁷⁷— Chegubard, Salim Iskandar, and Wan Muhammad Azri – and seized their phones under Section 233 of the CMA for posts they shared on TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube that similarly accused the MCMC of making politicized regulatory decisions. According to MCMC, Hunter’s statements were not only factually unsubstantiated but also “seemed to be defamatory,” prompting it to take legal action to protect its institutional integrity. The commission maintained that it acted within its legal mandate to preserve public confidence and to prevent the dissemination of content that could mislead or defame regulatory authorities. **On 30 April**, Minister of Communications Fahmi Fadzil publicly defended the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) for lodging a police report against blogger and political commentator Murray Hunter, stating that while freedom of speech is a constitutional right, it must be balanced with

⁷⁴ Cops must prioritise courtesy,” New Straits Times, 15 March 2024, <https://www.nst.com.my/opinion/letters/2024/03/1026352/cops-must-prioritise-courtesy>

⁷⁵ Subang police to question news anchor after allegedly criticising investigation method, Malay Mail, 17 March 2024, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2024/03/17/subang-police-to-que...>

⁷⁶ MCMC lodges police report against blogger for alleged defamatory remarks, Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 29 April 2024, <https://mcmc.gov.my/en/media/press-clippings/mcmc-lodges-police-report-...>

⁷⁷ MCMC seizes phones from Chegubard, Papagomo and Salim Iskandar [Updated], New Straits Times, 18 April 2024, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/crime-courts/2024/04/1039677/mcmc-seizes-ph...>

responsibility. He emphasized that the rule of law allows those who feel wronged by potentially libelous statements to seek redress through appropriate legal channels.

- **On 6 May 2024** Ram Anand, a journalist with Bloomberg, was summoned by Malaysian federal police for questioning at Bukit Aman, the national police headquarters⁷⁸. The summons followed the publication of a Bloomberg article titled “Malaysia Mulls Casino at Forest City,” which reported on alleged discussions within the Malaysian government regarding the potential development of a casino in Johor’s Forest City, a controversial mega-project zone near the Singapore border. The article prompted strong denials from multiple parties, including Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and corporations named in the report, such as Genting Malaysia and Berjaya Group. Business tycoon Vincent Tan, who was named in the article, lodged a defamation complaint, asserting that the report contained inaccurate and damaging claims. Following the complaint, Malaysian authorities initiated an investigation under several overlapping laws:
 - Section 4(1) of the Sedition Act 1948: This provision criminalizes acts with “seditious tendencies,” including actions that may incite hatred or contempt against the government or the monarchy.
 - Section 500 of the Penal Code: This section pertains to criminal defamation, penalizing individuals who make or publish defamatory statements with intent to harm another’s reputation.
 - Section 233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998: This clause addresses the improper use of network facilities, criminalizing the transmission of content deemed “obscene, indecent, false, menacing or offensive” with intent to annoy, abuse, threaten, or harass⁷⁹.

These provisions collectively carry significant punitive potential, including imprisonment and hefty fines. Ram Anand’s statement was recorded by police as part of the ongoing probe into the article⁸⁰.

- **On 9 August**, three journalists from Malaysiakini⁸², Nantha Kumar, Hariz Mohd, and Shahrin Aizat Noorshahrizam, were questioned by police for over an hour regarding an article about an alleged police reshuffle within Bukit Aman. The article cited a police source who claimed that senior officers, including Deputy Inspector-General of Police

⁷⁸ Anand Ram, Chanjaroen Chanyaporn, Kosawange Niluksi, ‘Malaysia in Talks with Tycoons on Casino to Revive \$100 Billion Forest City,

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-04-24/malaysia-weighs-opening-casino-in-forest-city-in-potential-boon-for-king-ibrahim?embedded-checkout=true>

⁷⁹ “Malaysia: Reform or repeal laws that restrict freedom of expression,” ARTICLE 19, June 10, 2020. <https://www.article19.org/resources/malaysia-reform-or-repeal-laws-that-restrict-freedom-of-expression/>

⁸⁰ “Fahmi: Putrajaya not behind probe against Bloomberg over Forest City Casino claim”, Malay Mail 30 April 2025 <https://malaysia.news.yahoo.com/fahmi-putrajaya-not-behind-probe-080035435.html>

⁸¹ “Malaysia: Government stifles expression, increases online controls,” CIVICUS Monitor, February 2025. <https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/malaysia-government-stifles-expression-increases-online-controls-and-facilitates-transnational-repression/>

⁸² <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2024/08/09/malaysiakini-reporters-asked-to-reveal-sources-of-article/>

Ayob Khan Mydin Pitchay, would be transferred to lead other agencies. However, the Inspector-General of Police, Razarudin Husain, later denied these claims. The journalists were interrogated under Section 233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act and Section 505(b) of the Penal Code.

- **On 17 November**, the MCMC requested Malaysiakini to remove a video and article related to the alleged Sabah corruption scandal, claiming it could interfere with police investigations and endanger the whistleblower's safety. The video features Tempasuk assemblyperson Arsad Bistari discussing a blocked RM70 million project, which he later claimed was taken out of context and "maliciously edited." The whistleblower, who has received death threats, claims to have more evidence implicating state ministers and is seeking immunity and protection under the Whistleblower Protection Act. The direct intervention by the MCMC is deeply problematic as it undermines freedom of the press and access to information on a matter of public interest. The overreach by the MCMC, whose role is to regulate communications and multimedia in a fair and transparent manner and not to suppress legitimate reporting on public interest issues, is now constantly being used as a tool for censorship.

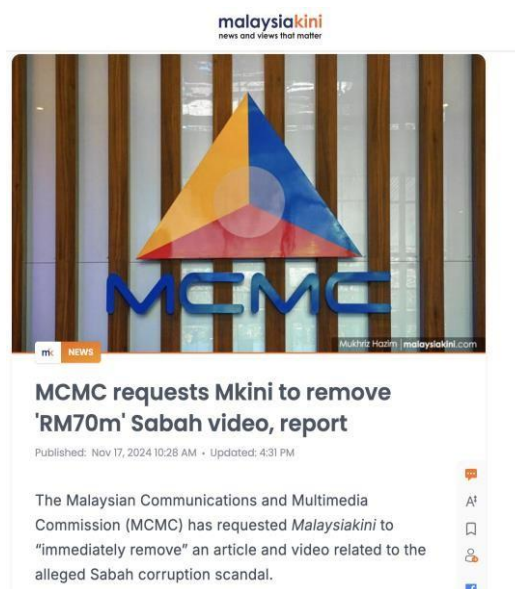


Figure 5 @ Malaysiakini

These cases highlight the lack of procedural safeguards in Malaysia's current media regulatory framework. While affected parties have a right to dispute alleged inaccuracies in the media, international legal standards—including those set by the United Nations Human Rights Committee—stress that defamation should be addressed through proportionate, civil mechanisms that do not criminalize journalistic activity.

Further, the incidents highlight civil society's concerns regarding the state of media freedom and the use of legal instruments against critics and independent commentators. MCMC's action

can be seen as part of a growing pattern in which regulatory tools are deployed in ways that may chill dissent or restrict critical discourse, particularly online. Simultaneously, it highlights the increasing scrutiny of Malaysia's digital regulatory framework, where laws intended to combat misinformation and defamation are often perceived as ambiguous and open to selective enforcement. The lack of clear boundaries between constructive criticism, political commentary, and defamation risks undermining the democratic function of media and citizen journalism.

b. Defamation suits and threats

- **On 13 May 2024**, journalist Ian Gerard McIntyre of The Vibes publicly defended a news article he authored that has become the subject of a defamation lawsuit⁸³. The article, published in 2023, was based on a conversation with well-known civil society leader and consumer rights advocate K. Koris Atan. It addressed issues related to public governance and alleged shortcomings in community engagement by former Penang Deputy Chief Minister II, Dr. P. Ramasamy. Following its publication, Ramasamy filed a defamation suit against Koris Atan, The Vibes, and McIntyre, alleging that the article portrayed him as neglectful, irresponsible, and unresponsive to the needs of the community—claims he argues have caused serious damage to his personal and political reputation.

In response, McIntyre defended the journalistic integrity of his work, emphasizing that the article was based on an interview with a credible source and reflected issues of public concern. He stressed that the report was written in accordance with journalistic standards and did not intend to defame but to inform the public about matters affecting governance and social equity. The lawsuit has drawn attention from media rights groups, who warn that it may set a troubling precedent where journalists and media organisations are penalised for facilitating legitimate public discourse.

- **On 6 May 2024**, several Tamil⁸⁴ media online journalists were reportedly on the receiving end of a slanderous online campaign led by a local newspaper owner and local politicians; the journalists were also allegedly threatened by the newspaper owner.

The Malaysian Indian Journalists Association (MIJA) president Gunalan Maniam expressed deep concern over rising intimidation within the Tamil media community. The Tamil-language newspaper owner is accused of verbally and psychologically harassing several Tamil media reporters and online news portals, in what MIJA believes may be an attempt to suppress independent or critical reporting.

⁸³ Nambiar, Pradeep. 'We ran articles based on conversations before, journalist testifies,'

[We ran articles based on conversations before, journalist testifies | FMT](#)

⁸⁴ Malaysia: Tamil journalists reportedly threatened," IFJ, 28 May 2024, <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/article/malaysia-tamil-jou...>

These threats come amid reports that, through the month of May 2024, three Tamil-language digital media portals received legal summonses from a political party leader⁸⁵. The nature of the legal notices has not been fully disclosed, but they are believed to be in connection with content critical of the politician's conduct or policies. Such legal action has raised alarm within media circles, where the use of defamation lawsuits is increasingly seen as a strategy to silence dissent and discourage investigative journalism.

In addition to these developments, two Tamil-language reporters—P. Puvaneswaran and M. Pavalam—have filed police reports against the newspaper owner, citing intimidation and harassment during their reporting. These actions reflect growing anxiety among journalists working in minority-language media outlets, who often face heightened vulnerability due to limited institutional support, smaller newsroom resources, and a more precarious operating environment.

- **On 15 June**, two Political Secretaries to the Premier of Sarawak—Joshua Ting Fu Ying and Maurice Joannes Giri—filed a police report in Sibuan against writer and commentator Nehru Sathiamoorthy. The complaint stemmed from an article authored by Nehru, which they allege contained defamatory remarks against Sarawak Premier Datuk Patinggi Tan Sri Abang Johari Tun Openg⁸⁶. In their statement to the authorities, the secretaries claimed that the article had the potential to incite public disrespect and diminish trust in the state's leadership, and they called for a thorough investigation into the matter⁸⁷.

Although the specific content of the article has not been made public, the legal action highlights a growing trend in Malaysia where police reports and defamation suits are increasingly used as responses to political commentary, especially in the digital realm. This tactic, while technically lawful, raises critical concerns regarding press freedom, public accountability, and democratic resilience.

Recent incidents reveal a troubling pattern of pressure on journalists in Malaysia, through both legal actions and extra-legal intimidation—particularly targeting those reporting on sensitive political and community matters. These developments point to an urgent need for stronger protections for media professionals, meaningful legal reforms to prevent abuse, and a reaffirmed government commitment to media freedom and pluralism in the public interest.

The use of police investigations or legal threats in response to political criticism risks silencing journalists, writers, and ordinary citizens. Ambiguous defamation and communications laws further enable selective enforcement, fostering a climate of fear and self-censorship.

⁸⁵ Sabapathy, Kumaran, 'Wartawan media Tamil didakwa jadi sasaran serangan ahli politik

<https://malaysiagazette.com/2024/05/22/wartawan-media-tamil-didakwa-jadi-sasaran-serangan-ahli-politik/>

⁸⁶ Abdullah, Nurhauni Lee. Dua lagi laporan polis dibuat terhadap penulis artikel perlekeh Premier Sarawak,' <https://suarasarawak.my/dua-lagi-laporan-polis-dibuat-terhadap-penulis-artikel-perlekeh-premier-sarawak/>

⁸⁷ "Premier Pol-secs Urges Police to Probe Writer for Slander," Sarawak Tribune, June 2024. <https://www.sarawaktribune.com/premier-pol-secs-urges-police-to-probe-writer-for-slander/>

To address these challenges, comprehensive legal reforms are essential to ensure that defamation laws and media regulations balance the protection of individual reputation with the right to free expression. Establishing alternative, non-punitive avenues for resolving disputes—beyond criminal defamation—is critical. The forthcoming Malaysian Media Council (MMC) could serve as a key platform in this effort.

c. Suspension of services

On 26 May, local broadcaster Awesome TV criticised digital terrestrial provider MYTV Broadcasting Sdn Bhd for suspending its channel, calling the action “unethical and unlawful⁸⁸.” The suspension is linked to an ongoing dispute over access fee payments, which is currently under judicial review at the Court of Appeal. CEO Adam Ilyas stated that the case is still pending and that MYTV’s move undermines due process and fair competition.¹

The incident highlights growing regulatory challenges in Malaysia’s digital broadcasting environment, particularly around platform access and commercial accountability.

In the broader context of Malaysia’s evolving media landscape, the above use of law tactics reflect ongoing challenges in balancing state authority, institutional accountability, and the public’s right to free expression. As social media and alternative platforms become central to political discourse, the role of regulatory bodies like the MCMC is coming under intensified examination, both in terms of legal legitimacy and perceived political impartiality.

⁸⁸ Reporters FMT. ‘Awesome TV slams suspension by MYTV amid legal review,’
<https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2024/05/26/awesome-tv-slams-suspension-by-mytv-amid-legal-review>

VI. ETHICAL REPORTING

1. Gender: Perpetuating Misogyny

Unethical gender-related reporting often side-lines women in their reports, quoting men exclusively, even though there are many female experts that can be quoted alongside their male counterparts. Women are also often depicted in media reports as mere “family figures”, when they are also entrepreneurs, CEOs and accomplished working professionals. Gender reporting often does not consider gender sensitivities. News stories are often written for shock value that focus on women’s behaviour, dressing, and other surface characteristics that detract from the stories at hand. Instead, they divert the readers’ attention to women’s behaviour thus trivialising the situation.

For example, stories surrounding marital infidelity where the woman who spots her husband’s infidelity with another woman are often highlighted, with the women made to feel insecure and worthless while the man is left unscathed.⁸⁹



Figure 6 @ Kosmo

Further evidence of women being morally policed can be seen in the numerous articles, particularly by Bahasa Melayu news and tabloids outlets that portray women’s dressing in a negative light and the women concerned “slut-shamed” because of what they choose to wear.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ KOSMO. 'Penyondol' senyum setelah diserang isteri kekasih di bazar Aidilfitri,' https://www.kosmo.com.my/2024/04/09/penyondol-senyum-setelah-diserang-isteri-kekasih-di-bazar-aidilfitri/#google_vignette.

⁹⁰ Ruhainies Dikecam Pakai Gaun Terdedah Dada & Bahu, Netizen Komen – 'Seksi Melampau! Baru Balik Umrah Kan?' <https://ohbulan.com/video-ruhainies-dikecam-pakai-gaun-terdedah-dada-bahu-netizen-komen-seksi-melampau-baru-balik-umrah-kan/>

⁹¹ Other news articles written focusing on third party advertisements for state-level tourism campaigns such as the Visit Kelantan Year (TMK) that featured women who did not cover their “aurat” (modesty). Instead of addressing the unauthorised use of the state government logos, the media outlet placed the emphasis on women’s modesty.⁹²

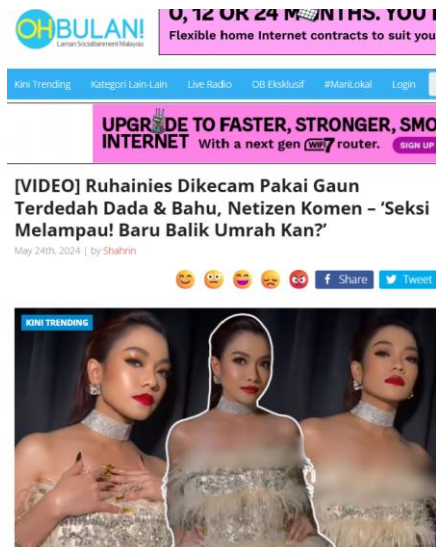


Figure 7 @ OhBulan!



Figure 8 @ OhBulan!

2. Suicide Reporting

Suicide rates in Malaysia have continued to remain high with the country seeing a total of 4,440 suicides in the past five years. Media reporting on deaths that were suspected suicides has continues to lack compassion while simultaneously being sensationalised. Reporting on deaths with no cause indicated or with suspicious circumstances are dramatized in the news and triggers the reader’s curiosity.⁹³

On [9 May 2024](#) a man who fell off the Sultan Yahya Petra bridge in Kota Bharu, Kelantan was suspected of having mental health issues. The news reported did not contain verification from authorities on his mental health diagnosis. The only source of information on his mental health was the mother of the deceased who said that he experienced behavioural changes ever since coming home to Johor a couple of years prior. He had returned home to care for his mother as his father had passed away.⁹⁴

⁹¹ [Netizen Terbeliak Tengok Amelia Henderson Pakai Gaun Seksi Terdedah Perut & Dada – ‘Amat Dahsyat’](https://ohbulan.com/video-netizen-terbeliak-tengok-amelia-henderson-pakai-gaun-seksi-terdedah-perut-dada-amat-dahsyat/)
<https://ohbulan.com/video-netizen-terbeliak-tengok-amelia-henderson-pakai-gaun-seksi-terdedah-perut-dada-amat-dahsyat/>

⁹² Wahid, Adila Sharinni. Wanita tak tutup aurat promosi program jejas imej Kelantan,’
https://www.sinarharian.com.my/article/674274/edisi/kelantan/wanita-tak-tutup-aurat-promosi-program-jejas-imej-kelantan#google_vignette

⁹³ Vethasalam, Ragananthini. Gimino Gerard. Rahim Rahimy. Lee Benjamin. ‘Suicide cases in country remain high, says Zahid,’ <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2024/07/09/suicide-cases-in-country-remain-high-says-zahid>

⁹⁴ Ismail, Rohana. Lelaki jatuh Jambatan Sultan Yahya Petra disyaki alami kemurungan
<https://www.kosmo.com.my/2024/05/09/lelaki-jatuh-jambatan-sultan-yahya-petra-disyaki-alami-kemurungan/>

On [28 July 2024](#), a woman attempted to dive into the Kelantan River off the Tendang bridge as she allegedly no longer had the will to live as reported by Berita Harian. The news story on this attempted suicide did not rely on verified information by the authorities. Instead, it relied on accounts from passersby. The insensitivity in the reporting based on anecdotal information reflects poorly on the quality of journalism⁹⁵.

On [23 December 2024](#), a 41 year-old man with a history of mental illness took his life by jumping off the Third Klang River bridge. The victim stopped his car near the bridge and climbed over the railing. Authorities arrived at scene once the incident was reported. The family of the deceased had acknowledged that he was suffering from mental illness.⁹⁶ This story was reported as a matter-of-fact from a news angle but lacked sensitivity to the victim's mental health condition.



Figure 9 @ Kosmo



Figure 10 @ Kosmo

⁹⁵ Razali, Hidayatiayu. 'Wanita cuba terjun Jambatan Tendong'.

<https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/kes/2024/07/1277486/wanita-cuba-terjun-jambatan-tendong>

⁹⁶ Mohamad, Shah Iskandar. 'Lelaki alami masalah psikiatri maut terjun jambatan Klang.'

<https://www.kosmo.com.my/2024/12/23/lelaki-alami-masalah-psikiatri-maut-terjun-jambatan-klang>

Wanita cuba terjun Jambatan Tendong

Oleh Hidayatidayu Razali - Julai 28, 2024 @ 6:26pm
bhnews@bh.com.my



Seorang wanita berusia 40-an cuba terjun ke Sungai Kelantan di Jambatan Tendong, Kota Bharu, diselamatkan oleh orang awam. - Foto pembaca

Figure 11 @ Berita Harian

Overall, reporting in Malaysia in 2024 vis-à-vis suicide was anecdotal, contained limited verified information from the authorities, while simultaneously lacking sufficient background information. These traits lead to suicide-related stories to being sensationalised and opening the doors for speculation from the public. Reporting from a health perspective needs to be prioritised to ensure sensitivity to the victims and their families, while also refraining from sensationalising suicides.

3. Reporting on Refugees and Migrants: Perpetuating Xenophobia

Unethical news reporting on migrants (including refugees) continued to dominate 2024. Migrants are portrayed as an unwelcome growing community of people in a short period of time. They are seen as opportunists who take away business opportunities from the locals.⁹⁷ Additionally, migrants are often portrayed as responsible for criminal activities, especially when the victims are Malaysians. One news article described the Klang Valley as a haven for migrants, giving the impression that migrants have become an intricate part of the society that in turn causes unease to the locals.⁹⁸

Another news article described Kulim in Kedah as being colonised by migrants, describing migrants from Myanmar, Bangladesh and Indonesia who have come to work and set up homes there. It propagated the narrative that the locals feel threatened because while these newcomers have jobs in industries such as construction, they have also ventured into opening sundry shops, restaurants, and engaging in small scale agriculture and farming, thus potentially competing with the locals.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Noh, Mohd Farid & Abdul Rahim Nor Fazlina. 'Rohingya makin ramai, koloni terus bertambah,' <https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/nasional/2024/01/1202839/rohingya-makin-ramai-koloni-terus-bertambah>

⁹⁸ Mohd Fadzil, Mohd Haris Fadli, Bahaudin, Nurul Hidayah, Hassan, Muhammad Saufi & Nawawi Muhaamad Hafis. 'Lembah Klang 'syurga' pendatang,' <https://www.hmetro.com.my/utama/2023/02/938948/lembah-klang-syurga-pendatang>

⁹⁹ Ikhsan M Hifzuddin. 'Kulim di Kedah pula dikenal pasti 'dijajah' ribuan warga asing,' <https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/nasional/2024/01/1203165/kulim-di-kedah-pula-dikenal-pasti-dijajah-ribuan-warga-asing>



Figure 12 @ Berita Harian

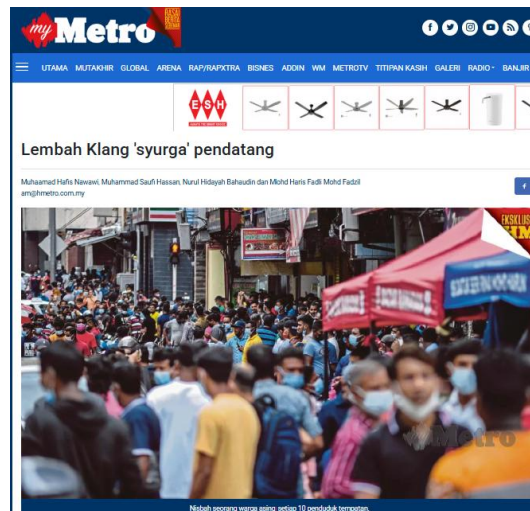


Figure 13 @ Harian Metro



Figure 14 @ Berita Harian

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

a. Impose a Moratorium on Repressive Media Laws

The government should immediately halt the use of repressive laws that have long curtailed press freedom in Malaysia. These include the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) 1984, Official Secrets Act (OSA) 1972, Sedition Act 1948, and Section 233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act (CMA) 1998. A moratorium must be coupled with a comprehensive and time-bound review aimed at either amending or repealing these laws to align them with international human rights standards. Moving decisively in this direction would mark a significant departure from political rhetoric and demonstrate genuine political will toward media reform and the protection of constitutional freedoms.

b. Operationalise the Malaysian Media Council (MMC)

Following the passing of the Malaysian Media Council (MMC) Act, the Malaysian Media Council should be allowed to operate as a functional, transparent, and independent self-regulatory body. It must serve as a key institution in promoting ethical journalism, issuing clear editorial guidelines, encouraging inclusive and socially responsible reporting, and limiting undue political or commercial influence on media content. It would also offer a credible platform for mediation and accountability without resorting to punitive state action. Laws that impede the effective operation of the MMC must be repealed.

c. Strengthen Labour Protections for Media Workers

The precarious state of media labour conditions demands urgent reform. The government should initiate an independent task force to assess the financial and structural challenges facing the industry. This task force must engage with stakeholders such as the National Union of Journalists Malaysia (NUJM), civil society organisations (CSOs), and media practitioners. In addition, policies that encourage the formation and recognition of media unions—across state-owned, private, and independent outlets—should be promoted to safeguard media workers' rights, enhance job security, and improve working conditions across the sector.

CONCLUSION

Malaysia's media sector is evolving in an increasingly competitive and fast-paced digital environment. To thrive, it must innovate—adapting to new technologies and audience behaviours—while resolving long-standing issues such as political interference, outdated laws, labour exploitation, and sexual harassment. A holistic reform agenda is essential: one that not only supports technological advancement and content diversity but also protects media workers, upholds freedom of expression, and restores public trust. With clear guidelines, independent regulation, and proactive policy support, the media can grow into a resilient, trustworthy pillar of Malaysian democracy.

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