

PRESS STATEMENT

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CIJ Launches Its Annual Report on Malaysia's Media Landscape -

The Price of Truth: Economic Rights of Journalists in Malaysia

The Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ) Malaysia launches its annual report on Malaysia's media landscape - *The Price of Truth: Economic Rights of Journalists in Malaysia*, in conjunction with the Media Solidarity Festival, co-organised by CIJ, Gerakan Media Medeka (Geramm) and the Malaysian Media Council to celebrate the World Press Freedom Day (WPFDD). This report serves as an opportunity to remind the public of the contribution and struggles of media workers who serve to inform the public and uphold the fourth estate of democracy.

This year's report focuses on the economic rights of journalists serving as a lens to view how the media landscape in Malaysia is undergoing various issues ranging from political, economic, social, technological and legal, spotlighting the precarious work conditions and decline of security for the members of the media. As we see how the economic impact directly shape the journalists' ability to report independently, ethically and safely, we also see how it reflects the growing threat on our overall media environment and the decline in public trust in the quality of journalism..

The deterioration of Malaysia's media ecosystem and press freedom is reflected in the recent drop in its score in the recent Press Freedom Index by Reporters without Borders (RSF): from 88th place to the 95th place globally. We also saw a drop in the economic indicator, from a score of 48.57 last year, to 40.28 this year.

As such, CIJ's report delves into this growing problem by highlighting key areas that most notably add to the economic decline for journalists.

Economic Constraints

Of the most salient issues plaguing journalists today that threaten their job security is the economic unsustainability within the media ecosystem. Global media, particularly legacy media, in the last decade have already been facing many barriers in coping with the shift from print to digital media. The media is now faced with the need to discover innovative ways to remain relevant amidst this digital age. This financial burden on media companies, as a result of this transition as well as the decline in advertising revenue, has further impacted the economic rights of journalists. Media workers experience consistent economic pressures and sustainability challenges in the form of low wages, severe job insecurity, intimidation and harassment both within newsrooms and out in the field, as well as unsustainably high-pressure working environments.

This is also not to mention various new media outlets, algorithmic biases, mis/disinformation and artificial intelligence (AI) now compete with legacy media. In recent years, artificial intelligence and technological advancements have even become a focal point in the way the media operates. Artificial intelligence now plays a significant role in the production and dissemination of news content. Locally, newsrooms often utilise generative and agentic AI for the production of content across various mediums (e.g. video, audio, pictures, and written content), as well as to streamline workflow and ease processes within the newsrooms. This further creates even more job insecurity for journalists.

The report highlights the vicious cycle impacting the economic rights and sustainable livelihood of media practitioners, including:

- 1) Media capture through the ownership structures centred in control by oligarchs and their political leaning;
- 2) Persistently low and stagnant wages, with some experienced journalists still earning as low as RM2000 monthly;
- 3) Reliance on contract, freelancers and stringers without adequate social protection and institutional support;
- 4) Weak career development pathways;
- 5) Economic cost of legal intimidation and harassment, including police investigations, SLAPP, and regulatory controls;
- 6) Disproportionate impact on women and gender non-binary media workers;
- 7) Lack of bargaining powers to compel revenue sharing and requiring powerful big techs such as META, Google and Bytedance, among others, to pay for the use and aggregation of news media content.

Legal & Political

CIJ continues to see similar issues within its legal environment that continuously undermine not only the economic rights of journalists, but also press freedom in Malaysia. On an individual level, journalists and editors alike often are compelled to self-censor due to political and legal pressures by State authorities, enforced through prevailing restrictive laws such as the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998, Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984, Official Secrets Act 1972, Sedition Act 1948, as well as Sections 500, 504, and 505 of the Penal Code.

Despite these challenges, **positive developments** such as the establishment of the Malaysian Media Council, as well as the long-anticipated Freedom of Information Bill, expected to be tabled soon, marks a welcome progression in enabling press freedom and a culture of openness, transparency and accountability. The launch of the RM30 million *Dana Inovasi Media* as a public funding initiative may be construed as a positive step towards enhancing media sustainability.

Sabah & Sarawak

This year, CIJ also pays particular attention to the intersectional issues faced by media workers in Sabah and Sarawak media, who bring a unique perspective to our Malaysian information ecosystem and yet have long remained under-represented in the larger local media ecosystem.

In these special features, we draw attention to the testimonies of journalists in Sabah and Sarawak to highlight their lived realities and provide further credibility to their plights. This further gives key insight into the political and economic environment that most affect journalists in East Malaysia, intersecting with various other issues.

Recommendations

CIJ continues to emphasise that meaningful reform must go beyond current pledges to reform legal frameworks, and must include sustainable and viable business models for media, effective protections for labour rights and adequate safeguards to guarantee editorial independence.

The report makes the following recommendations:

1. Recommendations to the State

- **Public funding initiatives** such as the *Dana Inovasi Media* and other funds using taxpayers' contributions should be institutionalised through independent and transparent governance structures to avoid political control.
Formalise revenue-sharing from global tech giants to domestic media as a priority sustainability initiative.
- The MADANI government should undertake comprehensive legal and policy reforms to strengthen the economic protection of media practitioners. This includes:
 - Immediately **halting the use of repressive laws** such as 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
 - **Adopt anti-SLAPP guidelines**
 - **Amend legislation addressing labour rights**, such as the Employment Act 1955, to provide clearer protection for non-traditional media workers
- **Ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)** and the **International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)**, as well as **strengthen implementation of obligations** under the **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women** and other international frameworks relating to labour rights and media freedom.

2. Recommendations to Media Organisations

- Media organisations should **adopt fair and equal labour and contractual practices** that prioritise the non-discrimination and long-term sustainability of journalists
- Media organisations should also **invest in occupational safety**, adequate sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) guarantees, and mental health support as well as provide adequate legal support,
- **Internal grievance mechanisms should be established or strengthened** to address workplace discrimination, harassment, and gender inequality.
- Media organisations should **develop sustainable business models, without undermining the labour rights of their employees**, and invest in training, digital upskilling and AI literacy and ethical use.

3. Recommendations to the Malaysian Media Council

- The Malaysian Media Council (MMC) should **support the development of ethical standards safeguarding the economic rights of media practitioners**.
- The MMC should **create awareness on its grievance mechanism**

- Collaborate with civil society organisations, lawyers networks to establish legal support and emergency assistance funds to support journalists facing SLAPPs, arbitrary dismissal, or retaliatory legal action.
- MMC should collaborate with NUJM, civil society organisations, and academic institutions to **conduct regular studies** on newsroom work conditions, media sustainability, wage trends, and digital labour practices.

Openness, Transparency & Accountability

Despite the deterioration of Malaysia's media freedom, we hope that the overall landscape can be taken as an opportunity to strengthen institutions that serve to buttress the fourth pillar of democracy, as an extension to democracy itself. We hope to take advantage of improving technological expertise and growing institutional bodies to improve the conditions for an important demographic as well as to ensure that the rights of all to be informed and have discourse is respected to its utmost.

About the Report

The Price of Truth: Economic Rights of Journalists in Malaysia draws on interviews with media practitioners across Malaysia, industry related public information and policy analysis to provide a preliminary assessment of the economic challenges facing our media ecosystem today.

The full report is available at:

<https://cijmalaysia.net/the-price-of-truth-economic-rights-of-journalists-in-malaysia/>.

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The Centre for Independent Journalism is a feminist non-profit organisation and media watchdog 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.