

THE MALAYSIAN MEDIA LANDSCAPE IN 2025

THE PRICE OF TRUTH: ECONOMIC RIGHTS OF JOURNALISTS IN MALAYSIA

THE CENTRE FOR INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM (CIJ) MALAYSIA

commemorates and celebrates World Press Freedom Day (WPF) 2026 this 3 May. The Malaysian media has come a long way serving as the country's fourth estate, experiencing the same growing pains alongside Malaysia's democracy.

The passing of the Media Council Act in 2025 and the long-anticipated Freedom of Information Bill expected to be tabled soon marks a welcome progression in enabling press freedom. We therefore hope to see the continued strengthening of independent media and a self-regulated media ecosystem.

When we talk about journalism in Malaysia, the conversation often centres around what is happening in Kuala Lumpur. But working as a journalist in Sabah comes with a very different set of realities that are not always seen or fully understood from across the South China Sea.

In Sabah, distance is more than just geography. It affects access, resources and sometimes even the level of attention a story receives. For many journalists here, especially those reporting outside Kota Kinabalu, the job involves long travel, limited connectivity and covering communities that are not always easy to reach. And when things go wrong, help is not always nearby.

Safety is something we think about, even if we don't always say it out loud. Reporting on issues like illegal logging, undocumented

communities, or enforcement activities can be sensitive. Most of the time, there are no clear guidelines on what protection journalists have in these situations.

Self-censorship, labour law disparities, stalled unionisation efforts, and a resilient sense of community define their daily realities. Increasingly, artificial intelligence (AI) tools are emerging as practical aids in this constrained ecosystem. These viewpoints, drawn from the lived experiences of Sarawakian media practitioners, are supported by national and regional data on press freedom, employment conditions, and technological adoption.

Self-censorship remains a pervasive survival strategy among Sarawakian journalists, driven by fears for personal safety and livelihood. In a country where media ownership often intertwines with political interests, practitioners frequently avoid stories touching on sensitive local issues – such as land rights disputes involving indigenous communities, environmental concerns tied to logging or palm oil, or political patronage networks – out of concern for repercussions.



Journalists in Sarawak and across Malaysia often withhold bylines or soften coverage to protect their careers. This tallies with Al Jazeera Institute analysis from early 2026 describing journalists preferring "silence over risking their livelihoods," with some requesting anonymity even when critiquing working conditions, citing reputation risks in a small industry.

In Sarawak's context, where major media outlets have historical ties to state or federal powers, even drafting a story on controversial development projects can feel like career suicide. This self-censorship should not be seen as timidity but a rational response to documented hostility, including online harassment and economic retaliation, as flagged in CIJ's 2025 snapshot of the Malaysian media. Compounding these risks are distinct labour laws in

Sarawak, which historically hindered media practitioners from advocating for workplace improvements. Unlike Peninsular Malaysia's Employment Act 1955, Sarawak operated under its own Sarawak Labour Ordinance (SLO), which until amendments effective in May 2025 provided fewer protections on overtime, rest days, and workplace safety for certain categories of workers.

These disparities created uneven bargaining power, making it riskier for journalists across Sarawak to challenge low pay or poor conditions without unified legal recourse. Even post-amendment, the legacy of regional fragmentation persists, as the Trade Unions Act 1959 historically required unions to be registered separately for Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah, and Sarawak, fragmenting collective strength.

Meanwhile, attempts to unionise Sarawakian and Malaysian media practitioners underscore these structural barriers. In the 1990s and early 2000s, efforts to unionise by local practitioners faced resistance from media agencies wary of collective demands during economic downturns. These failures have perpetuated a cycle where speaking up against injustices – whether editorial interference or exploitative hours – jeopardises not just one's job but the entire fragile ecosystem.

In this challenging context, AI has become a vital ally for Sarawakian journalists, enhancing efficiency without replacing human oversight, summarising public documents or suggesting



A REPORT ON THE MALAYSIAN MEDIA LANDSCAPE IN 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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Table of Contents

01	ECONOMIC RIGHTS OF JOURNALISTS IN MALAYSIA	Page 07
	1.1 The Scope of Economic Rights for Journalists	Page 07
	1.2 The Prevailing Environment for Malaysian Media	Page 07
	1.3 Public Funding	Page 11
02	LEGAL AND REGULATORY SHIFTS	Page 13
03	THE ECONOMIC REALITIES OF JOURNALISTS	Page 14
	3.1 Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining	Page 14
	3.2 Wages	Page 16
	3.3 Working Conditions	Page 19
	3.4 Promotions and Career Development	Page 20
	3.5 Gender Dynamics	Page 20
04	THREATS TO PRESS FREEDOM	Page 26
	4.1 Digitalisation and AI	Page 26
	4.2 Safety and Security	Page 30
05	FEATURE – SABAH MEDIA	Page 36
06	FEATURE – SARAWAK MEDIA	Page 39
07	RECOMMENDATIONS	Page 42

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Malaysian media environment has seen many challenges and developments over the past few decades. In 2025, the Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ) observed that while similar trends and challenges prevail within the Malaysian media landscape and overall information ecosystem, there have been several notable changes to this environment, which have resulted in a direct impact to the state of media freedom in this country.

Recently, Malaysia ranked 95th in the 2025 Press Freedom Index by Reporters without Borders (RSF), a drop since its last position at 88th place the year before.¹ RSF noted a decline in several indicators: politics (from 44.66 to 43.00), economics (48.67 to 40.28), legal (46.26 to 43.71), and social (62.72 to 51.25). There was an improvement in the security indicator from 78.16 to 85.42 on the basis that, typically, Malaysian journalists are not targets of physical attacks and are instead mostly subjected to strategic litigation against public participation (SLAPP) or smear campaigns.² These indicators reflect an existing environment where media freedom is frequently compromised by various dominating narratives and threats.

On an individual level, journalists and editors alike practice self-censorship due to political and legal pressures brought about 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**.

One prevailing threat is the continuous crackdown on media freedom, resulting in a culture of censorship, both imposed by the authorities and practiced by media organisations themselves in the form of self-censorship, as propagated by Malaysia's existing legal environment. Archaic and oppressive laws remain weaponised by the Malaysian government and other powerful actors. The entrenchment of 3R (*race, religion, royalty*) narratives and the concept of supremacy continue to dominate public discourse, State action, and curbs the media's capacity to report in an unbiased, fair manner.

Furthermore, economic unsustainability has affected 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. New media, algorithmic biases, mis/disinformation and artificial intelligence now compete with legacy media, thus threatening its existence in its current form. As such, the media now struggles with economic viability and is faced with the need to discover innovative ways to remain relevant amidst this digital age. The financial burden on media companies has further impacted the economic rights of journalists. This has resulted in a working environment where journalists are paid low wages while being expected to undertake more work, with little to no adequate protection and a lack of rights-based workplace policies enforced in newsrooms.

1. <https://rsf.org/en/country/malaysia>

2. Ibid

These political, legal, social, and economic pressures result in a decline in the quality of journalistic work. Freedom of expression and press freedom are therefore jeopardised, and the trust deficit in the media in Malaysia continues to widen and threatens its independence.

This report, therefore, seeks to delve into the impact of the media landscape in 2025 (with some updated cases from the early months of 2026) on the **economic rights of journalists**. The Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ) recognises the crucial role every individual media practitioner plays in delivering information that is factual, impartial, and supportive of the democratic nature of our society, thus ensuring that the people's right to information is guaranteed and upheld. CIJ also notes that these aforementioned factors also disproportionately affect journalists who are a part of or who represent communities at risk in Malaysia, such as women journalists and investigative journalists reporting on minority communities.

Despite the current challenges, Malaysia, through sustained political will, has the potential to create an environment that promotes the right to information and media freedom. The establishment of the Media Council pursuant to the Media Council Act 2025³ and the upcoming tabling of the Freedom of Information (FOI) Bill⁴ stand to pave the way for a self-regulated media that can perform its duties as the fourth pillar of democracy. The public now has access to a grievance mechanism established by the Media Council, which acts as an interface between the public and the media through the adoption of the multi-stakeholder model. Further, if the government proceeds with the tabling of the FOI Bill by this year, as pledged by the Prime Minister, and establishes a robust and progressive information regime that enables the public, and relatedly the media, to access information held by public authorities in Malaysia without being unduly restricted by the Official Secrets Act 1972 or other repressive legislation, we foresee a culture of openness, transparency and accountability. It is therefore imperative that the Malaysian government secures media freedom in the coming years by establishing independent processes to enable proactive disclosure of public information (through the FOI Bill), and ensuring that the media is able to self-regulate without imposition by various censorship laws.

Finally, this report also highlights the importance of including the perspectives of Sabah and Sarawak media in the conversation on media freedom, in recognition of the need for more unified and inclusive conversations between media across all the states in Malaysia. Thus, the report includes excerpts from the Federation of Sarawak Journalists Association and the Sabah Journalists Association, respectively.

3. <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2025/11/07/12-elected-as-malaysia-media-council-board-members-at-inaugural-agm>

4. <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2026/01/1351323/freedom-information-bill-strengthen-transparency-madani-govt>

ECONOMIC RIGHTS OF JOURNALISTS IN MALAYSIA

1.1 The Scope of Economic Rights for Journalists

The intersection between a robust media environment and the key to media freedom is the protection of the economic rights of journalists who make up our fourth pillar of democracy. These rights are promoted and protected through the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, domestic labour laws and international human rights standards.

The following provisions provide the baseline for ensuring the protection of the economic rights of journalists under international laws such as the Universal Declaration on Human Rights 1948 (UDHR), International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 1966 (ICESCR), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women 1979 (CEDAW) and International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions:

- Just and favourable conditions of work
- Equal remuneration for work of equal value, including overtime pay
- Regulated working hours
- Protection from unjust dismissal
- Social security, including retirement benefits and injury protection
- Workplace safety and security
- Protection of sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR), including maternity benefits and parental rights
- Intellectual property rights

These provisions are central to ensuring security of employment and labour rights, particularly in a profession where editorial independence may be undermined by precarious employment.

1.2 The Prevailing Environment for Malaysian Media

1.2.1 Economic Viability and Sustainability

Malaysia's overall economic landscape showed promising growth in 2025, with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth from 5.1% to 5.2%.⁵ However, economic unsustainability remains a pressing issue affecting media organisations not only in Malaysia but throughout the Southeast Asian region. The media industry continued to face challenges due to the growing popularity of

5. https://www.google.com/search?q=economic+growth+rate+malaysia+2025&oq=economic+growth+rate+malaysia+2025&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBggAEEUYODiBCDY4MDhqMG03qAlAsAIA&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8

social media and other online platforms, as well as advertisers tightening expenditures amid a weakening economy.

A study conducted by Kenanga Investment Bank showed that traditional media companies in Malaysia have only made basic progress in profiting from digital advertising, where monetisation is limited to basic display formats such as video placements and banner advertisements on their respective websites. While strategic moves from companies such as ASTRO's investment in a digital marketing venture, KULT, have shown a promising extension of the media's reach beyond traditional broadcasting, traditional media operators still leave a relatively small impact on digital advertising. Traditional media still struggles to branch out to more sophisticated digital advertising solutions.⁶ Kenanga also recently predicted that the Malaysian media industry will continue to face a decline in advertising expenditure (adex) by 9.5% in 2026. Last year, adex decreased by 22% to RM4.74 billion in 2025.⁷

Nonetheless, Media Prima Bhd, the media group owning the New Straits Times and television channels such as TV3, amassed a total revenue of RM222.5 million and a profit after tax (PAT) of RM13.8 million⁸ in the fourth quarter of the 2025 financial year, thus earning more than double its previous earnings. This growth was largely driven by a 21% spike in non-advertising revenue, which include film distribution and content production revenue.⁹ However, its revenue declined by 4.6% to RM403.49 million compared to the initial half of 2025, where the declines were shown in broadcasting (9% drop), publishing (8%), and digital media (7%).¹⁰ On the other hand, Astro Malaysia Holdings Bhd saw a drop in its net profit in 2025, from RM129.15 million to RM62.13 million over the span of a year. Revenue declined from RM3.08 billion to RM2.79 billion due to a drop in subscription and advertising revenue, as well as rental income and the sales of programming rights.¹¹

Media Chinese International Limited (MCIL) Group,¹² dual listed on the Stock Exchange of Hong Kong and the Bursa Malaysia Security Berhad, faced an increased net loss by the end of September 2025, amounting to RM15.99 million compared to the net loss of only RM4.55 million in the previous year.¹³ Notably, MCIL has experienced 11 quarters' worth of a loss streak since 2023. In the final quarter of 2025, its publishing and print segment showed a decline by 11.6% in turnover due to increasing economic pressure, the rapid digital shift and shifting consumer behaviour.¹⁴

The effects of this larger environment therefore trickle down to individual levels and feed a perpetual cycle where journalists' labour rights are inadvertently deprioritised. Journalism then suffers from a drop in the quality of news production.

6. Kenanga, 'Media Eclipsed by Digital Media's Domination' p 1 <<https://www.kenanga.com.my/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/MEDIA-260106-1QCY26-Strategy-SU-Kenanga.pdf>>

7. <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/highlight/2026/01/28/media-industry-to-face-a-milder-contraction-in-2026>

8. <https://www.mediaprima.com.my/news.html?media-prima-reports-4qfy25-results-and-full-year-performance>

9. Ibid

10. <https://theedgemalaysia.com/node/794036>

11. <https://www.nst.com.my/business/corporate/2026/03/1403624/astro-fy25-net-profit-falls-rm6313mil-revenue-down-rm279bil>

12. Media Chinese International Limited is a leading Chinese-language media group following the merger of Ming Pao Enterprise Corporation Limited, Sin Chew Media Corporation Berhad and Nanyang Press Holdings Berhad. It is publicly listed in Hong Kong and Malaysia. - <https://www.mediachinesegroup.com/en/>

13. <https://theedgemalaysia.com/node/783078>

14. Media Chinese International Limited, Financial Results for the fourth quarter of 2025 <https://www.mediachinesegroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/EN-MCI-2025-26-Q3_Press-Release.pdf>

1.2.2 Media capture (ownership, corporate pressure and partisanship)

The Malaysian media is no longer solely controlled by the state but is highly concentrated within corporate oligarchs and intertwined with political power, thus threatening media diversity and pluralism. This ownership structure, within a fragile business sustainability environment, shapes not only what content is produced but also which narratives prevail and survive financially in the media ecosystem in Malaysia.

Major legacy media groups such as The Star Media Group and Media Prima Berhad have historically been linked either directly or indirectly to ruling political parties, government-linked companies (GLCs), or politically aligned business elites. The risk is that these media will function more as a political communication tool¹⁵, and less as independent watchdogs. CIJ has observed the larger impact on democratic debates, as this goes beyond self-censorship but impacts selective framing, especially on the coverage of political allies or the hostile framing of opponents, as well as avoidance of 'redline' issues such as 3R, corruption involving political elites or state-linked businesses.

Malaysia's fragmented media market, linked to diverse languages across Peninsular and East Malaysia, limits the market profits of independent outlets. Further, shrinking market circulation and low advertisement revenue due to migration to digital media and the dominance of social media have contributed to the economic fragility of the media ecosystem in Malaysia.

Further, Malaysia's licensing and regulatory structures, underpinned by the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984 and the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998, make media companies more economically vulnerable to government control as licenses can theoretically be suspended or revoked, or journalists be charged under broad and vague provisions such as Section 233 of the CMA. This would inadvertently deepen the media capture as media owners are likely to adopt cautious editorial policies or be more politically compliant as they rely on politically connected shareholders.

Independent media continue to face economic sustainability challenges, leading to reliance on political patronage, dependent on government-controlled funding and state advertisement, and ultimately on tycoon owners and philanthropic grants.

As we have seen over the last decade, as media outlets (eg: Utusan Malaysia¹⁶), struggle financially, large conglomerates absorb the entities and, consequently, consolidate the audiences, advertising markets and distribution networks.

Thus, Malaysia continues to see click-driven economics where digital survival pressures encourage sensationalism, outrage content, identity politics, and lower cost-reliant journalism over higher standards of investigative reporting, which is often seen as expensive, time-consuming and legally risky in Malaysia.

Media capture through ownership and partisanship now faces an added layer of economic

15. Melanie Radue, Comparing impacts on media freedom in Southeast Asia: Connotative context factors in Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand, Sage Journals, Volume 18, Issue 2, 5 July 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742766522109785>

16. <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/article/malaysia-utusan-returns-after-a-nine-month-shutdown>

capture through big techs and intensified funding precarity. While digital media platforms such as Malaysiakini and other entities helped disrupt traditional political control by emerging as independent news providers, they too face another form of capture, including SLAPP, coordinated online harassment, and platform algorithms, amongst others.

The cumulative impact on the Malaysian media ecosystem threatens our editorial independence, diversity, declining public trust and weakened access to reliable information and democratic accountability. The economic impact is concentrated on the lack of protection of the rights and welfare of journalists and other media workers, as they experience precarious employment and increase in burnout.

As we navigate this struggling and evolving landscape, change is not just limited to legal reforms, but attention is required on the economic reform and a new model of media itself, including sustainable public-interest funding models, fair digital revenue systems, independent public broadcasting, stronger competition regulation, and protections against ownership concentration.

Table 1: Brief overview of the ownership of notable media organisations¹⁷

MEDIA COMPANY	OWNERSHIP
Star Media Group	The Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) owns nearly 50% shares of the group, with shares held by GLCs such as EPF and Tabung Haji. ¹⁸
Media Prima Berhad	Oversees TV3, 8TV, ntv7, New Straits Times, Berita Harian, and Rev Media. Tan Sri Syed Mokhtar Albukhary and Minister Johari Abdul Ghani own the highest shares. ¹⁹
Media Mulia Sdn Bhd	The publisher and permit holders to Utusan Malaysia and Kosmo. This company is mainly owned by Tan Sri Syed Mokhtar Albukhary. ²⁰
The Sun Daily	Owned by Berjaya Media, a subsidiary of Berjaya Group that was founded by tycoon Tan Sri Dato' Seri Vincent Tan. ²¹
ASTRO	Owned by Usaha Tegas Sdn Bhd, a company created by the late Ananda Krishnan. ²²

17. Refer to Annex for full infographic on ownership of these media organisations.

18. <https://theedgemaalaysia.com/node/684571>

19. <https://theedgemaalaysia.com/article/exminister-johari-now-second-largest-shareholder-media-prima-after-syed-mokhtar>

20. <https://www.bharian.com.my/bisnes/korporat/2024/10/1308325/syed-mokhtar-albukhary-masih-lagi-pemegang-saham-utama-media-prima>

21. <https://www.berjaya.com/about-us/our-founder-and-advisor/>

(Continuation)

The Borneo Post and Oriental Daily	Founded by KTS Group, a Sarawak-based timber company owned by the Lau family. ²³
Daily Express and Overseas Chinese Daily News (OCDN)	Sabah-based papers founded by the late Tan Sri Yeh Pao Tzu, ²⁴ now owned by the Yeh family.
Focus Malaysia	Founded and directed by Datuk Michael Yip Chin Hwee, and was acquired by Inno Mind Works Sdn Bhd. ²⁵
Media Chinese International Limited	The family of the late Malaysian timber tycoon Tan Sri Datuk Sir Tiong Hiew King maintains major shareholdings in this
The Merdeka Times	Fully owned by converted Islamic preacher Firdaus Wong. ²⁷
BFM News	Independent media owned by lawyer Malek Ali, who founded BFM Media Sdn Bhd. 23% of the shares are held by The Edge Group. ²⁸
The Edge Malaysia	Owned by Tan Sri Tong Koi Oong who founded the Edge Media Group, ²⁹ which is independent by nature.

1.3 Public Funding

The Malaysian government introduced the *Dana Inovasi Media* in conjunction with HAWANA (National Journalists Day) 2025. The RM30 million fund³¹ is meant to support innovation and digital transformation, AI adoption and newsroom sustainability to ensure media organisations remain competitive and resilient amid declining revenues and economic viability.

22. <https://avpn.asia/organisation/t-ananda-krishnan-foundation-usaha-tegas/#:~:text=Usaha%20Tegas%20is%20the%20investment,%2C%20Bumi%20Armada%2C%20and%20others.>

23. <https://www.theborneopost.com/2023/03/23/kts-maintains-see-hua-daily-in-efforts-to-preserve-chinese-culture/>

24. <https://www.dailyexpress.com.my/read/6172/yeh-pao-tzu-changed-my-destiny-autobiographer/>

25. <https://www.thestar.com.my/business/business-news/2018/02/23/inno-mind-works-is-new-owner-of-focus-malaysia>

26. <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/society/article/3332451/malaysian-tycoon-tiong-hiew-king-owner-hong-kong-media-conglomerate-dead-91>

27. <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2024/03/09/website-owner-called-up-by-police-over-profs-comments>

28. <https://www.bfm.my/content/podcast/breakfast-grille-bfm-5th-anniversary-ho-kay-tat-malek-ali>

29. <https://theedgemalaysia.com/node/729546>

30. <https://about.malaysiakini.com/accountability/>

31. <https://www.businesstoday.com.my/2025/12/18/rm30-million-media-innovation-fund-to-open-next-month>

LEGAL AND REGULATORY SHIFTS

Malaysia enforces robust laws and policies on employment and/or labour-related issues. Pursuant to the Minimum Wages Order 2024, the minimum wage has since August 2025 been raised to RM1,700 monthly for employers with five or more employees.³⁶

The Employment Act also provides that no employee covered under the Act shall be required to work more than forty-five hours in one week.³⁷ Furthermore, the 2022 amendments to the Employment Act 1955 guarantees maternity leave amounting to 98 consecutive days for each confinement³⁸, whereas paid paternity leave is granted up to 7 consecutive days per child.³⁹ Recent amendments to other State legislations in 2025, particularly the Labour Ordinance of Sabah and the Labour Ordinance of Sarawak, now also cover employees' rights in a more robust manner. Some key changes that are similar to those of the amended Employment Act 1955 involve the extension of maternity leave to 98 days, the introduction of paternity leave, and the reduction in the limit on regular working hours to 45 hours per week.

Journalists as employees are also entitled to join unions under the Trade Union Act 1959, Industrial Relations Act 1967, and Section 8 of the Employment Act 1955. While the Employment Act 1955 only applies to West Malaysia and Labuan, both the Trade Union Act 1959 and Industrial Relations Act 1967 are federal laws, which therefore entitle journalists in all Malaysian states to unionise. This is pertinent to note given the fact that union busting and the fear of unionising still prevails in several states, particularly where there are state laws in place to govern employment matters, such as the Sarawak Labour Ordinance and the Labour Ordinance of Sabah. It is therefore a guaranteed right to all journalists as employees to unionise and form collective action.

Furthermore, on 28 August 2025, the Dewan Rakyat passed the Gig Workers Bill 2025 which is meant to enshrine the rights of gig workers in Malaysia.⁴⁰ CIJ urges collective action by various media stakeholders, including the government, media organisations, and civil society, to push for the inclusion of media gig workers by the Gig Workers Tribunal.

The Malaysian Media Council (MMC) also now plays a key role in addressing complaints pertaining to media practitioners' working conditions and wages. The MMC possesses the mandate to settle disputes involving their respective members, and can further put into place robust and safe whistleblower mechanisms where internal human resources (HR) mechanisms may be compromised within newsrooms. However, the MMC should guarantee this avenue for complaints by inserting distinct provisions within its Code of Conduct⁴¹ or any adjacent notice that covers the rights of media practitioners as employees.

36. Minimum Wages Order 2024 [P.U.(A) 376/2024]

37. Section 60A(d), Employment Act 1955

38. Section 37, Employment Act 1955

39. Section 60FA, Employment Act 1955

40. <https://www.skrine.com/insights/alerts/september-2025/gig-workers-bill-2025-the-future-of-work-for-gig-w>

41. <https://majlismedia.my/aduan/> (MMM's Code of Conduct as of May 2026)

THE ECONOMIC REALITIES OF JOURNALISTS

The labour conditions for media practitioners in Malaysia have, for the past few years, warranted expressions of concern. Despite opportunities for union expansion across media organisations, not all journalists have or are able to unionise for various reasons, such as union busting.⁴² Labour conditions have been observed to vary depending on whether workers in media organisations have unionised or otherwise; while union members are typically empowered to negotiate terms with employers through Collective Agreements, many gaps still exist in the protection of journalists' quality of life and right to fair wages.

The Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ) interviewed nine media practitioners to gauge general working conditions in their respective media organisations.⁴³ As a whole, several key issues have been highlighted as major concerns by media practitioners holding non-management roles:

- Freedom of association and collective bargaining
- Wages and fair and equal remuneration, proportionate to job scopes and experience;
- Non-monetary benefits and support; and
- Career development.

3.1 Freedom of association and collective bargaining

Since 1962 members of the National Union of Journalists (NUJM)⁴⁴ have entered into a total of eight (8) Collective Agreements with their respective media companies, lobbying for improvements in their salaries and working conditions. Collective Agreements ('CA's) between NUJM and the media organisations in Malaysia have historically been significant in institutionalising and protecting the minimum labour rights of journalists.

Unions generally serve the goal of setting standards for wages and working conditions, and CAs serve as a safeguard to ensure timely promotions proportionate to set durations of tenure or work experience.

According to NUJM⁴⁵, the general terms negotiated under the CAs include:

- Working hours
- Salary and increments
- Social benefits
- Dispute and conciliation
- Employment conditions

42. "Voices Under Watch: The State of Malaysia's Media 2024" (International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) 2024) pp. 10–11 <<https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/reports/detail/voices-under-watch-the-state-of-malysias-media-2024/category/publications>> accessed 16.04.2026

43. Sources have been anonymised to protect identities, and as such have been labelled in numerical order (Source 1, Source 2, etc.).

44. <https://www.nujm.org/>

45. <https://www.nujm.org/mainactivities.html>

Most recently in 2025, both Star Media Group Berhad and Sun Media Corporation Sdn Bhd signed their respective 2025–2027 CAs with NUJM. The Star opted to maintain most of its conditions as per its past 2022 CA, with the addition of revised wage increments. The decades of relationship between Star Media Group and NUJM, with the 16th CA (2025 – 2027)⁴⁶, reflect the continuity and sustained bargaining relationship. The Nanyang Siang Pau Sdn Bhd also opted to maintain the status quo since its past 2022 CA. The CAs generally covers matters such as annual increments, wages (proportionate to positions and scope of work) and promotions, leaves (e.g. annual, compassionate, as well as maternity and paternity leaves), medical benefits, transport and subsistence allowances, time off for union business and studies, annual bonuses, safety protocols and provisions, as well as policies on sexual harassment.

The Sun notably reviewed several terms in its CA after a long pause since 2019. While employees received bonuses until 2019, this practice was put to a halt following the expiry of the 2019 CA. Currently, bonuses are paid on a discretionary basis.⁴⁷

Among the terms agreed upon in the 2025 CA were a salary adjustment of 3% under Article 5.1⁴⁸ and a one-off settlement payment of RM300 for lapsed Collective Agreements from 2019–2021 and 2022–2024.⁴⁹ It is further noted that no salary adjustment would be granted under this CA to journalists holding a ‘Special Grade’ position, which entails a salary range between RM4155–RM4644.⁵⁰ This therefore brings into question the guarantees provided for journalists earning above said salary range whose right to earning liveable wages proportionate to rising inflation costs remain unprotected under the CA.

Very often, the impact of a CA is in the effectiveness in its enforcement too. In smaller or financially unstable media organisations, workers may fear retaliation or career stagnation. Furthermore, there remains a practice in several media organisations across Malaysia where union busting occurs by way of companies promoting employees to executive or managerial positions, thus precluding employees from joining unions. It should be noted that the Industrial Relations Act 1967⁵¹ dictates that companies may not arbitrarily exclude employees from joining unions by promoting them to managerial positions without their consent.⁵² The Industrial Court has also held, in the past, that it has the discretion to determine whether or not a person holding an Executive or managerial position may join a union.⁵³

Further, trade disputes⁵⁴ between NUJM and the respective media companies that could not be settled will be referred to the Industrial Relations Department (IRD) for reconciliation. Failure to reach a resolution may result in the IRD referring the trade dispute to the industrial court for arbitration.

A significant development was the establishment of the first NUJ branch at Malaysiakini in 2023. The International Federation of Journalists⁵⁵ considered it groundbreaking and critical as it demonstrated that collective bargaining could extend into digital journalism, and the recognition that independent media workers also needed labour protections.

Freedom of association and the CA framework ultimately provide media workers a clear baseline on employment standards, some level of protection from arbitrary managerial actions, and the

46. https://www.nujm.org/gallery_starmedia.html

47. Article 32, Collective Agreement between Sun Media Corporation Sdn Bhd and National Union of Journalists Malaysia.

48. Article 5.1, Collective Agreement between Sun Media Corporation Sdn Bhd and National Union of Journalists Malaysia.

49. Article 5.3, Collective Agreement between Sun Media Corporation Sdn Bhd and National Union of Journalists Malaysia

50. Article 5.2, Collective Agreement between Sun Media Corporation Sdn Bhd and National Union of Journalists Malaysia

51. Sections 2, 9, and 13 of the Industrial Relations Act 1967

52. *Kesatuan Eksekutif Airod Sdn Bhd v Airod Sdn Bhd* [2014] 4 ILR 398

53. see also the court’s decision in *Dr. A. Dutt v Assunta Hospital* [1981] 1 MLJ 304.

54. <https://www.nujm.org/mainactivities.html>

55. <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/asia-pacific/article/malaysia-ifj-welcomes-groundbreaking-new-nujm-agreement>

agency and leverage to negotiate with the leadership within the economically challenged media ecosystem.

Its effectiveness is, however, constrained by the deeper structural precarity within the current media environment. Many senior journalists state that legacy, specifically print media workers, retained comparatively better employment conditions than workers in digital-native media through the CA. As Malaysia's media business model continues to shift dramatically towards digital newsrooms and reliance on freelancers and stringers within the digital platform-dependent media operations, it has resulted in a situation where many newer organisations either do not have unions or discourage unionisations, or rely heavily on outsourcing or on short-term contracts. The economic pressures, thus, have contributed to the weakening bargaining power, leading to limited space to negotiate terms during layoffs, newsroom downsizing due to AI automation or stagnant wages or indefinite extensions of contracts.

While current CAs mainly protect labour conditions, and not necessarily editorial independence, freedom of association is ultimately a cornerstone in ensuring the voice and agency of all media workers is able to impact the realisation of their economic rights.

3.2 Wages

Low or minimum wages for media workers in Malaysia have deep consequences not only for journalists themselves, but also for the quality, independence and sustainability of the entire media ecosystem. At a *Sembang Santai* session with Sabah journalists in November 2025, the Prime Minister raised the issue that there are cases of journalists with over 10 years of experience still earning around RM2,000 monthly,⁵⁶ especially in Sabah.

CIJ conducted interviews with 5 respondents based in media organisations in East and West Malaysia on the typical salary ranges within several media organisations across Malaysia. Union members can typically be protected under set salary scales as enforced under Collective Agreements governing management and union members. Degree holders typically earn above the minimum wage of RM 1,700, while Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) leavers earn salaries around the minimum wage.⁵⁷ Employees not protected under the Union were also found to receive starting salaries from as low as the minimum wage.

CIJ notes with concern a persistent issue in many media organisations where the wages accorded to journalists are not proportionate to their workload and working experience. In December 2025, Human Resources Minister Steven Sim publicly warned employers against the usage of the RM1,700 minimum wage as a starting point for fresh graduate salaries, calling for *"the lower floor"* to be *"reasonable and respect human dignity."*⁵⁸

Journalists being trained professionals are now earning the same salaries accorded to low-wage work and underpaid roles. Given their long working hours and the high-stress, fast-paced environments they operate under, journalists provide undervalued labour despite the fact that the media stands as the fourth pillar of Malaysia's democracy.

56. <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2025/11/16/pm-anwar-voices-concern-over-low-pay-for-journalists?>

57. Taken from the Collective Agreements between Sun Media Corporation and Star Media Group Berhad with NUJM respectively.

58. <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2025/12/01/hr-minister-warns-employers-dont-peg-fresh-grad-pay-to-rm1700-floor-lowballing-drags-down-entire-wage-structure/200380>

CIJ's interviews surfaced a pattern of low or inconsistent wage brackets in several media organisations across Malaysia. Several media practitioners disclosed their salaries after working for a certain number of years, as seen below.

Table 2: Salary range

	Duration of time working as a media practitioner (years)	Salary range (RM) Per month
Media Practitioner 1 (Based in Peninsular Malaysia)	~20	4,000 - 5,000
Media Practitioner 2 (Based in Sabah)	18	2,300 - 2,400 <i>(With a claimable allowance of RM300)</i>
Media Practitioner 3 (Based in Sabah)	17	2,300

Separately, Media Practitioner 4, based in Peninsular Malaysia, stated that their annual increment may be as low as RM50. A majority of the interviewees reported that bonuses were awarded on a discretionary basis, which was not guaranteed contractually or consistently.

Several respondents reported practices both in Peninsular and East Malaysia where employees were promoted to or employed into positions that require a greater amount of work and higher expectations for performance; however, some of their salaries remained as low as RM2,000–RM3,000 per month.

Unpaid wages are another issue that still persists in today's media ecosystem. In 2024, reports surfaced where The Malaysian Insight and The Vibes had not paid the salaries of their employees for months at the time.⁵⁹ Communications Minister Fahmi Fadzil further commented on this issue, describing the act of leaving wages unpaid as “not appropriate”⁶⁰ and stated that “...a free press is not free [without salary]”.⁶¹ In October 2025, the summons against The Vibes for these unpaid wages was deferred after the employees were paid only partially.⁶²

59. <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2024/10/02/fahmi-tells-media-groups-to-pay-up-resolve-months-long-salary-arrears-as-journalists-call-on-employers-of-the-malaysian-insight-and-the-vibes-to-act/152354>

60. <https://www.bernama.com/en/general/news.php?id=2346957>

61. <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2024/10/02/fahmi-ready-to-mediate-over-unpaid-wages-at-media-outlets>

62. <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/758737>

CASE STUDY 1

An interview conducted with a former employee of The Vibes revealed that these salary-related issues began for the organisation in 2022, and the company had failed to pay mandatory contributions (EPF and SOCSO included) for a total of 27 months until 2025. The employee continued employment based on their employer's assurance that all outstanding dues would eventually be settled. There was eventually a salary arrangement wherein wages (including deductions) were banked directly from the employer's personal account into the employee's account. This employee resigned in 2025 and has yet to receive the outstanding EPF contributions from their employer.

The quality, ethics and sustainability of the entire media ecosystem are greatly impacted by the prolonged low, minimum or unpaid wages for media workers in Malaysia. When media workers are underpaid, in comparison to other professional sectors, they are forced to work multiple jobs, side businesses, or take on excessive freelance work. In order to increase productivity, speed and quantity are often prioritised over investigative depth or leave little time for fact-checking and ethical reflection. This would most often create structural pressure toward sensationalism, clickbait and dependency on external interests rather than public-interest journalism. Further, a poorly paid workforce is less able to resist editorial interference because economic insecurity weakens bargaining power.

We are also seeing a pattern of brain drain and high turnover in newsrooms where talented reporters are increasingly leaving journalism for government-linked communication positions, corporate communication, or joining marketing and digital media sectors.

Low salaries and unstable economic conditions are also resulting in a rise of precarious and gig-based work, where media organisations are pushed towards contract-based engagement and dependent on stringers or freelancers. These workers are vulnerable as they often lack an institutional safety net, social benefits such as EPF, SOCSO or pensions.

The Melaka Media Practitioners Club (Pendika) in November 2025 raised concern⁶³ that many stringers' job stability and social protection remain insecure despite years of service. NUJM found 63% of journalists they had surveyed received low pay despite a reported 70% regularly working overtime.⁶⁴

Ultimately, low or unequal remuneration creates a vicious cycle where talented media workers exit the industry, leading to weaker and lower-quality journalism. The resulting deficit in public trust would then lower revenue and further lead to wage suppression.

63. <https://thesun.my/news/malaysia-news/people-issues/melaka-media-club-pushes-for-better-welfare-and-pay-for-journalists/>

64. <https://www.ifj.org/es/sala-de-prensa/noticias/detalle/article/malaysia-pm-raises-concerns-for-journalists-welfare-and-wages>

3.3 Working conditions

As with wages and remuneration, media workers in Malaysia also face increasingly precarious conditions shaped by economic pressures. Long and irregular working hours are the norm, with some organisations without clear overtime or field work compensation.

Newsroom culture often normalises immediate responsiveness and high output expectations, leading to intense pressure.

In CIJ's interviews, it was found that in addition to low wages, per diems for journalists' meals when conducting field work out-of-state range from RM50-RM60 per day in numerous media organisations across Malaysia. Furthermore, overtime pay is not guaranteed in many media organisations, despite the heavy workload media workers frequently have to undertake daily.

Reporters in this increasingly digital age now increasingly practice mobile journalism (MoJo), a form of digital storytelling using devices such as smartphones for newsgathering. In this regard, journalists are not typically given additional remuneration for photography and videography. CIJ's interviews found that some reporters (based in Peninsular Malaysia and Sarawak separately) are expected to produce stories as quickly as 30 minutes to 2 hours after covering an event. The fluidity of the format of news today also results in journalists being required to cover multiple beats simultaneously as well as to take on the role of reporters, photographers, video editors, and even broadcasters simultaneously, while handling live updates and multimedia tasks, in order to translate news across different mediums within a very short amount of time. This creates a high-pressure environment, while not adequately remunerated. However, a few journalists consider this as them being multi-skilled and making them more marketable.

As stated above, growing dependence on contract workers, freelancers and stringers is leading to precarious conditions with little to non-existent social protection, medical benefits, paid leaves or career development opportunities. CIJ also calls upon media organisations to review practices where part-timers or stringers are mostly employed in lieu of hiring full-time employees. Furthermore, while some media organisations pay their part-time journalists by the day, many stringers receive payment only for stories, photographs, or videos used and published by their employers, thus creating greater instability. These practices run the risk where stringers or part-timers are unable to apply for loans and accumulate savings in the form of EPF and SOCSO contributions to sustain their long-term livelihood.

There are also instances where part-time employees and interns undertake workloads similar to those of full-time employees. This prevents part-timers and interns from pursuing academic endeavours or sustaining any additional jobs, thus further stunting opportunities for them to sustain a living and progress in their careers.

3.4 Promotions and Career development

Promotions and career development in various forms is frequently put on hold for many employees. Given the economic crisis affecting media organisations globally and the demands of the current reporting environment's fast-paced nature, promotion pathways remain opaque, capacity building is often deprioritised and mentorship structures are not institutionalised. Safety training and structured capacity building programmes for reporting skills are not made mandatory in the workplace. This therefore leads to a deterioration in the quality of ethical reporting and overall work by media practitioners, thus negatively affecting the overall quality of journalism in Malaysia.

In terms of career progression, the rights of union members are typically guaranteed under Collective Agreements where promotions are measured to be proportionate to the duration of tenure and/or experience of the employees. Promotions should therefore only be withheld by employers for valid reasons. However, there are instances where performance reviews and the renewal of contracts are delayed indefinitely, or employers cite a lack of funding as a reason to delay promotions. Non-union media workers, on the other hand, are not protected in law by any Collective Agreements where promotions and proportionate salary scales are concerned.

Unsustainable working environments and dissatisfaction among employees inevitably discourage media practitioners, particularly young journalists, from continuing their careers in journalism. This issue, therefore, leads to high turnover rates and affects the quality of work produced by media workers across the country. As such, media narratives remain stagnant and the media ecosystem as a whole shows a very slow progression in adapting to new, emerging environments such as the digital and technological wave. Innovation and an ensured quality of journalism in this modern age risk being put on hold when basic rights such as fair remuneration and dignified working environments continue to dominate narratives affecting the media.

3.5 Gender Dynamics

Due to the intersectional nature of gender-based issues, women and gender non-binary individuals in media are particularly susceptible to the issues impacting the media today. Women and LGBTQI+ individuals in the media run a higher risk of facing harassment on the job, both in online and offline spaces. The existing culture in media promotes misogyny in both offline and online spaces. Women in online spaces are consistently subject to hate speech and online gender-based violence. This is particularly exacerbated where news reports now take on an increasingly online nature, and user-generated comments under said media reports, particularly on gender-related issues, reflect misogynistic opinions and harmful stereotypes.⁶⁵

Women therefore have to undertake added risks throughout their careers in journalism. This hostile environment against women is further bolstered by the patriarchal environment and toxic masculinity in which the Malaysian media operates. Senior editorial positions are still largely held by men, with little to no change in the number of women taking up leadership positions in newsrooms. The women who are able to break the glass ceiling are then posed with the issue of

65. <https://x.com/ainhsaifulnizam/status/1977211947692310674?s=46&t=5ujWKIt7gKYItOUmnb-CJg>

operating within a highly patriarchal environment, where they struggle to influence the overall reporting environment.

A recent survey by CIJ made in conjunction with International Women's Day 2026⁶⁶ revealed that women in the media still struggle to prove their professional capacity to lead and make decisions in the face of communities that prioritise traditional gender norms, while others found themselves having to justify their maternity leaves. Women in the media generally struggle with stereotypes perpetuated by newsroom cultures that deprioritise gender-sensitive issues. In recent interviews conducted by CIJ, several women journalists highlighted several issues faced during the course of their careers:

- **Sexual harassment**

Women in media are frequently subjected to sexual harassment both within and outside of their newsrooms. Many women are reluctant to report instances of sexual harassment within the workplace due to newsroom cultures that promote victim-blaming and effectively silence survivors. Furthermore, women journalists are frequently exposed to unsafe working environments where they are sent out into the field.

In 2024, a female journalist was sexually harassed by an employee of a political party while she was covering the Sungai Bakap state by-election campaign. Despite multiple witnesses being present at the time of the incident, the police eventually classified the case as no further action (NFA).⁶⁷ No justification was provided by the authorities for releasing the perpetrator, nor was there any reported public apology issued by him. Cases such as this showcase how the environment for women in media remains unchanged, where women journalists lack adequate protection by the authorities and/or their employers whilst on the job.

This is particularly true in 'jolak' practices, which expose women journalists to physical and sexual harassment. Malaysiakini journalist S Vinothaa comments on this practice as such:

"Jolak has to stop. It's unhealthy, unnecessary, and demeaning to journalists. Have a space for journalists to wait, go greet them, meet them, and talk to them. If a particular journalist has additional questions they don't want others to know, what we used to do in the '90s [was we found] them in a different location – called a 'scoop', which we don't do these days... In a press conference, give journalists a mic. Their questions need to be heard by everyone [and the other media]."

66. <https://www.facebook.com/100064812815292/posts/1348862143950867/?mibextid=WC7FNe&rdid=61qFnAiSIOZJ4IV4#>

67. <https://www.bernama.com/en/news.php?id=2331328>

CASE STUDY 2

Media Practitioners A and B are journalists in separate media organisations. **Media Practitioner A** cited an instance where she was subsequently harassed by their interviewee after covering a story on him. **Media Practitioner B** is a former sports journalist who was frequently subjected to comments about her appearance in the course of her work, particularly since she worked in a male-dominated field. Media Practitioner B has also cited concerns where she has to ensure she does not appear *“too pretty”* or *“too polished”* when reporting the news in online spaces for fear of being reduced to her appearance by online audiences, thus diminishing her professional work.

Both Media Practitioners have expressed concerns for their safety due to the increasingly online nature of their work. Given the visual nature of social media content, women journalists' faces and identities are shown in public online spaces (social media) and are thus exposed to potential online harassment that could translate to offline harms.

Women journalists, in the pursuit of reportage, often risk their safety to obtain stories or exclusives. In instances where women face harassment in the course of their work, a popular solution for many media organisations is to prevent these journalists from pursuing specific stories in male-dominated areas such as sports or politics. This results in a practice of denying women their right to progress in their careers and to pursue journalistic work instead of enforcing meaningful protocols to mitigate and address the safety risks these women undertake. Mental health support is also largely deprioritised for survivors.

The frequent exposure of women journalists to harassment and intimidation, as well as the inadequate measures put in place to mitigate and address online and offline gender-based violence and discrimination, creates an environment where women are either silenced and shamed into enduring more harm, or pushed to leave their careers in the media.

- **Dual or triple burden – Balancing maternity, child care and career progression**
There is a culture in some newsrooms where women face unspoken repercussions after taking their maternity leave. Due to traditional family narratives in Malaysia, mothers typically have to balance their careers with their care burdens. Once a woman takes her maternity leave or an extended break away from work, this reduces her opportunities for career progression. Therefore, women in newsrooms typically face the guilt and pressure to return to work after having children.⁶⁸

68. <https://www.facebook.com/100064812815292/posts/1348862143950867/?mibextid=WC7FNe&rdid=6lqFnAiSIOZJ4IV4#>

CASE STUDY 3

Media Practitioners C is a mother and journalist who has recounted experiences where newsrooms have refused to allow any level of flexibility for women journalists' working arrangements, despite the fact that they play a dual role as journalists and caregivers.

Women in the media are thus often forced to choose between sustaining their careers and having families. This newsroom culture enforces a working environment that stifles the capacity of women with caregiving expectations and responsibilities to progress in their career.

- **Negative stereotypes**

Women in the media are also frequently subjected to negative stereotypes both within the workplace and when working in the field. The issues women in media face are also intersectional in nature; often, women in media are also subjected to layered stereotypes due to their age, race, or religion.

CASE STUDY 4

Media Practitioners C and D from separate media organisations observed comments made by management that specifically stereotyped Malay women wearing *tudung* or hijabs in the workplace. Similarly, **Media Practitioner E** cited a practice where women in broadcast media were frowned upon by management when they decided to start donning a *tudung* or hijab. Furthermore, she noted instances where older women in broadcast journalism were expected to maintain their aesthetics at risk of receiving comments on their age and appearance, while their male counterparts did not receive such treatment by audiences and management. Postpartum women face intense pressures to fit into body stereotypes.

Media Practitioner F, on the other hand, cited instances where she was initially denied access by local communities to certain areas when covering a story out in the field on the basis of being stereotyped as an Indian woman.

It should be further noted that women face intersectional issues where their labour rights are at risk. Mothers and/or caregivers are unable to afford daycares for children due to the fact that journalists' wages are not sustainable in an increasingly expensive economy.

As a result, fewer women are able to influence narratives in newsrooms, thus effectively impacting the quality of ethical reporting. Headlines are typically tailored to clickbait audiences and gender-sensitive reporting remains a challenge in the media space.

Queer journalists face even greater risks in the face of these aforementioned issues. Given the increasingly hostile treatment of the LGBTQ+ community in Malaysia, queer journalists are in an even more vulnerable position where they are unable to directly elucidate their experiences dealing with any form of harassment or discrimination.

In conclusion, women in the media still face many challenges in the course of their work. Newsroom cultures do not adequately promote women in leadership and decision-making positions, provide adequate protection for women journalists, and encourage career growth for many women, particularly when these women are mothers and/or caregivers.

The lack of active inclusion of women and the LGBTQ+ community in the media inevitably impacts the quality of ethical reporting.

This is seen, for instance, in the various media reports covering the alleged '*parti songsang*' or '*gay party*' that reportedly took place in Kota Bharu, Kelantan, in July 2025.⁶⁹ Despite investigative reports by civil society and some media organisations such as Code Blue⁷⁰ and Malaysiakini⁷¹ revealing that the incident was a health screening event organised by the Ministry of Health, many media organisations had published reports using derogatory terms that painted the LGBTQ+ and the health event in a negative light.

In light of the aforementioned issues, CIJ therefore recommends that:

1. In tandem with the rights accorded under the Anti-Sexual Harassment Act 2022, media organisations should commit to verified gender-sensitive trainings at regular intervals.
 - These trainings should involve all persons within the newsroom, including management, HR staff, and part-time media practitioners or stringers.
2. Media organisations must enforce policies on sexual harassment with robust grievance mechanism procedures.
3. Media organisations should also enforce policies that guarantee mental health support with a particular gender-sensitive lens for all personnel.
4. The Ministry of Communications, Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development and the Malaysian Media Council must empower media practitioners to report sexual harassment in newsrooms through the Media Council's complaints mechanism or the Anti-Sexual Harassment Tribunal.

69. <https://www.astroawani.com/video/video-terkini-x7sio1/pesta-gay-di-kelantan-gagal-20-lelaki-ditahan-x9n23bg>

70. <https://codeblue.galencentre.org/2025/07/ngo-provides-details-on-hiv-outreach-after-kota-bharu-police-raid/>

71. <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/749482>

5. All stakeholders, including the government, civil society, and media, must promote inclusive workspaces, enforcing anti-discrimination policies that include women and their intersectional gender-sensitive issues.
6. The government discourages '*jolok*' practices and provides respectful spaces for the media to conduct meaningful interviews with politicians and public authorities.
7. Funders of media organisations should enforce requirements for media organisations to commit to maintaining gender-inclusive spaces within the workplace.

THREATS TO PRESS FREEDOM

4.1 Digitalisation and AI

In recent years, artificial intelligence and technological advancements have become a focal point in the way the media operates. The digitalisation of information has evolved to the point where most news content is published on digital platforms; print media has increasingly shifted to digital media. This digital environment therefore impacts the media both positively and negatively.

On one hand, the digitalisation of information and the increased access to social media strengthen connectivity. Newsrooms are now able to reach a wider range of audiences, while language translation services are widely available online.

However, algorithms heavily influence the media ecosystem. The ownership of information lies in the hands of narratives dominated by tech giants and social media platforms, including companies such as OpenAI, Anthropic, NVIDIA, Google, Meta, ByteDance, and DeepSeek. Government agencies such as the MCMC are now increasingly granted control and access to data, as seen in the 2025 amendments made to the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 ('CMA') which expands the powers of the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) ("police officers or an authorised officer") to access communication data upon request,⁷² and increases penalties under Section 233 of the Act. It should be noted that Section 233 is frequently used against the media, as seen in the aforementioned section of this report.⁷³

Furthermore, newsrooms now have to compete with other sources of information available on digital platforms, particularly social media platforms. This results in common newsroom cultures where output quantity is often prioritised and journalists are expected to churn out an overwhelming number of stories per day. This fast-paced nature of reporting is aimed at helping media organisations survive the race for relevance amidst a surplus of online content and algorithmic biases. However, when media organisations are forced to chase numbers, journalists are not empowered to expand the scope of their reporting to undertake more innovative or investigative pieces. Consequently, newsrooms across Malaysia suffer from a decrease in the quality of reporting.

72. Section 252A of the CMA 1998 (2025 Amendment)

73. Refer to the 'Safety of the Media: Legal Safety' section in this report.

Artificial intelligence now plays a significant role in the production and dissemination of news content. In Southeast Asian countries, many Press/Media Councils have already published their respective local guidelines on the use of AI in journalism. The Malaysian Media Council has also disclosed its own plans to expand its Code of Conduct to include similar AI guidelines.

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. The use of AI in newsrooms has expanded beyond generating content and is now applied in data analytics, search engine optimisation, and the adaptation of news content to match the rapid growth of algorithms and the modern digital environment.

During its live coverage of the 17th Sabah state elections in 2025, TV3 used its first AI-powered host.⁷⁴ The Star has also revived its 'Dear Thelma' advice column with the use of an AI model trained by the information taken from the previous 'Dear Thelma' series,⁷⁵ which has since received many submissions from the general public.

However, it should be noted that an over-reliance on AI in the production of news as well as a lack of rights-based practices in its application has been shown to negatively impact journalists and the larger media ecosystem. AI-driven algorithms are capable of pushing forth narratives dominated by the Global North or technocrats who retain ownership control over AI companies and systems, thus risking a deterioration in media freedom.

Some common issues that significantly affect the rights of the worker, as well as the overall safety and value of the media, are as follows:

1. Transparency

While several newsrooms across Malaysia have general policies on the use of AI, Malaysia does not generally have nationwide guidelines on the use of AI in newsrooms. The extent of the implementation of AI policies in each newsroom is not transparent; it is therefore unclear whether or not newsrooms routinely apply human rights risk assessment policies in the use of AI systems. Furthermore, transparency in terms of disclosure of the usage (including the extent of usage) of AI in generating news or synthetic content is not guaranteed by media organisations.

2. Lack of editorial oversight

Editorial oversight and human language remain an essential part of reporting. In April 2025, Sin Chew Daily mistakenly published an AI-generated picture of an incomplete *Jalur Gemilang* flag in its newspaper, sparking the scrutiny of the authorities and public.⁷⁶ This incident and several other subsequent instances where AI-generated artwork of the *Jalur Gemilang* flag was depicted erroneously by other parties such as the Education Ministry, showcase the high risk of 'AI slop' impacting the quality of publications.

74. <https://www.bharian.com.my/hiburan/selebriti/2025/12/1479558/tv3-stesen-tv-pertama-guna-hos-ai-sempepa-prn-sabah-ke-17>

75. <https://asianews.network/news-organisations-in-asia-pacific-embrace-ai-innovations/>

76. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/jalur-gemilang-artificial-intelligence-malaysia-incorrect-flag-education-ministry-sin-chew-5096601>

3. Labour rights and the increasing replacement of journalists with AI

In mid-2024, it was reported that Media Chinese International Limited (MCIL), the parent company of Nanyang Daily, Sin Chew Daily, and China Press, planned to lay off 44% of its staff over the next five years⁷⁷ (up to 800 employees) after experiencing its largest net loss since 1998 (RM61 million for the financial year that ended in March 2024).⁷⁸ MCIL further disclosed plans to reduce its workforce by integrating AI into its operations.

While it cannot be ignored that the financial strain on media companies inevitably leads to difficult decisions being made with regard to the workforce, the welfare of employees must be prioritised.

Furthermore, the replacement of journalists with AI effectively removes the element of humanity in the delivery of news, thus risking a reduction of trust in media by the public. This is seen in a study conducted by KPMG which revealed that only 46% of its respondents (48,000 people across 47 countries) trusted AI systems⁷⁹. Forbes recorded in March 2025 that 71% of social media images were AI-generated, and deepfake fraud attempts had increased from 0.01% to 6.5% globally.⁸⁰ In the midst of an increasing amount of dis/misinformation online, the media now has the opportunity to consider its value in delivering reliable news that improves trust and connection with the general public through human journalists willing to explore angles that are distinct from AI-generated content that can be easily regurgitated by any other source of information online.

4. Intellectual property and data privacy

Malaysian media remains susceptible to intellectual property and personal data theft. This is particularly exacerbated by the fact that the Personal Data Protection Act 2010 (PDPA) does not cover government agencies, who therefore may be able to access media companies' data with no liability in the event of subsequent data leaks or hacking.

Globally, the media industry struggles with data scraping conducted by AI firms and news aggregators. Several coalitions such as the coalition of UK media companies (including BBC, the Guardian, and Sky News)⁸¹ as well as the South African Competition Commission⁸² have resorted to collectively pushing for AI developers and digital platforms to guarantee content control and remuneration for the content taken from publishers and media organisations. Similarly, Southeast Asian (and particularly Malaysian) media organisations should now consider next steps in guaranteeing the rights of journalists and the overall media ecosystem. This in turn provides equitable solutions to the financial struggles media companies face in adapting to the digital shift instead of resorting to cutting jobs and pushing journalists to take on more unpaid work.

Often, these issues stem from a lack of human, editorial oversight and adequate policies, as well as the practical enforcement thereof, in newsrooms to ensure that the use of AI remains ethical and transparent, and to retain instead of replacing the unique value of the media.

77. <https://www.campaignasia.com/article/media-chinese-to-layoff-44-employees-in-malaysia-and-replace-them-with-ai/4395215x1a38knzbw5oilch4z0>

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

79. <https://kpmg.com/my/en/insights/2025/05/trust-attitudes-and-use-of-artificial-intelligence.html>

80. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bernardmarr/2025/03/10/15-mind-blowing-ai-statistics-everyone-must-know-about-now/>

81. <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2026/feb/26/guardian-joins-media-coalition-to-protect-original-journalism-from-unpaid-use-by-ai>

82. <https://rsf.org/en/south-africa-rsf-contributes-major-advancement-towards-right-reliable-information-competition>

The use of AI in journalism is intended to streamline processes and lift heavy workloads, therefore allowing media workers more space and time to innovate and focus on more high quality journalistic work. With the use of emerging technologies, journalists are therefore encouraged to use the time and resources saved to pursue more creative angles in their stories. This then expands the media's capacity to, for example, tackle niche angles in investigative journalism or represent unique community voices, thus enhancing the media's distinctive value as facts-based representatives of our democracy. AI therefore cannot and should not be used to replace human integrity and ethical, factual reporting.⁸³

COMMENT BY PROF. ZAHAROM NAIN

**Director of the Allianz Centre for Governance (ACG) & Board
member, Malaysian Media Council**

I believe the initial reaction to AI – at least in Malaysian newsrooms – was one of confusion, with many not knowing what was in store. The confusion appears to be there still. But with greater information, knowledge and utilisation of AI, media owners at least seem to be looking at the economic/financial advantages of adopting AI to cut costs in a society driven by neo-liberal economics. Continuing to adopt a profit maximising stance, it would seem that these owners would willingly lay off staff and allow AI to take their place. And their rights be damned. The media workers/professionals – journalists, broadcasters – in Malaysia, by and large see much of AI as a tool and, eerily sometimes, as a confidant.

As a tool, AI and its use raises questions of ethics – the ethics of aggregators; those who 'lift' material from various sources on the Net, coming up with a composition or news story that has little to do with journalistic skills and integrity.

Quite the opposite actually, since all this poaching of other writers' material without attribution is essentially stealing the original works of others and presenting them as one's own. It becomes a case – and there are real signs of this actually happening – where journalists are rewarded for their AI skills rather than their learned and practised researching, evaluating and writing skills. Human skills that now seem to be at risk of becoming obsolete.

As a 'confidant' some news reporters (and others) seem to think that AI provides them with a unique repository of knowledge, a personal and private data bank. But this is being challenged in courts overseas now where it has been found that such material is not provided protection. So, reporters, lifters, aggregators beware.

83. <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2026/02/08/ai-strengthens-journalism-rather-than-replaces-it-says-lanang-mp>

4.2 Safety and Security

The Cost of Legal Intimidation and Harassment

The media in general face continuous threats to their legal, physical, and mental safety. Legal threats persist in the form of crackdowns by authorities, enabled by restrictive laws regulating the media, such as:

- Sections 211 & 233, Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 (CMA)
- Sedition Act 1948
- Sections 203A, 499, and 500, Penal Code (on criminal defamation)
- Section 114A, Evidence Act 1950
- Official Secrets Act 1972
- Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984 (PPPA)

Notably, it was reported in November 2024 that the Ministry of Home Affairs has proposed amendments to the PPPA that effectively, inter alia, extend the powers of governance to digital media and reintroduce the renewal of media licenses to every three (3) years.⁸⁴ CIJ's media monitoring has further recorded an emergence in the use of the PPPA to investigate the media in 2025, where Sin Chew Daily was investigated by the authorities under Section 4(1)(b) of the PPPA after mistakenly publishing a paper depicting an incomplete illustration of the *Jalur Gemilang*.⁸⁵

Prior to 2025, investigations and bans enforced under the PPPA did not involve the media for several years. This trend shows a worrying expansion of the regulation of the media by not only the Ministry of Communications, but also the Ministry of Home Affairs.

Investigations against media organisations and journalists further persisted under the umbrella of the abovementioned laws, including:

- For several months, MalaysiaNow editor Abdar Rahman Koya was repeatedly investigated by the police under Section 500 of the Penal Code and Section 233 of the CMA following MalaysiaNow's articles on an alleged mineral exploration license scandal in Sabah involving businessperson Farhash Wafa Salvador Rizal Mubarak.⁸⁶
- In March 2025, Malaysiakini journalist B Nantha Kumar was detained by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) after publishing an article exposing an alleged migrant smuggling syndicate at KLIA.⁸⁷ MACC claimed that Nantha had solicited an RM20,000 bribe from a foreign worker as inducement to not publish two articles on the foreign worker syndicates. However, Nantha denied these allegations and claimed that he was merely performing his duties as an undercover source to pursue his investigation. Malaysiakini and Nantha's lawyer further maintained that Nantha was an award-winning journalist who "risked his life to expose [the migrant syndicates]".⁸⁸
- In January 2025, Malaysiakini received a request from the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) and the police to access the media organisation's

84. IFJ, 'Malaysia: Proposed PPPA amendments threaten media independence' (4 December 2024) < <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/malaysia-proposed-pppa-amendments-threaten-media-independence> > accessed 27 May 2025.

85. <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2025/04/18/jalur-gemilang-gaffe-no-need-for-excessive-action-investigate-fairly-based-on-facts-say-nuj-cij>

86. <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/752593>

87. <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2025/03/07/journalist-speaks-out-after-macc-probe-into-bribery-allegations>

88. <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/737267>

backend content management system under the guise of a “data preservation operation”. Malaysiakini’s executive director, RK Anand’s laptop was also seized in the process. This request was made in relation to an article published by the news portal about former Minister of Health Khary Jamaluddin.⁸⁹ The authorities maintained that non-compliance with providing backend access would be considered a legal offence.

The aforementioned cases show a trend where the media is repeatedly impeded from carrying out its duty to report facts. Investigative journalists are particularly vulnerable to these crackdowns. This, in turn, maintains an environment of fear that promotes both self-censorship and censorship induced by political and legal pressure.

UNESCO⁹⁰ and the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ)⁹¹ have stated that economic and reputational pressures through litigation can make critical public interest journalism financially unfeasible and subtly stifle investigative reporting. As can be seen above, the journalists and media organisations are financially burdened by legal intimidation, which frequently take the form of police investigations, licensing threats, defamation lawsuits, or SLAPPs. Even where cases do not necessarily proceed beyond police investigation or even ultimately succeed, the resources of newsrooms can be depleted by legal defence expenses, prolonged court cases, insurance premiums, and compliance fees, especially for independent and small digital media firms. Further, freelance journalists are particularly vulnerable as they often lack institutional support or legal representation provided by the media organisation.

Although reforms have been discussed in recent years in Malaysia, journalists, media practitioners and other stakeholders within the media ecosystem continue to stress that the possibility of criminal investigation or civil litigation, the economic costs of reputational harm and psychological pressure may undermine robust reporting on matters of public interest and encourage self-censorship. The cumulative effect is not merely financial loss, but the erosion of independent journalism as a public good.

The current legal and political landscape also calls into question the Malaysian government’s commitment to upholding its promises to ensure that the media is able to independently self-regulate through the functions of the Malaysian Media Council.

Safety on the Job

In addition to legal pressures, journalists’ safety on the job is further impacted where working conditions and existing systems do not preserve the safety and security of the media.

- Recently in January 2026, Free Malaysia Today (FMT) journalist Rex Tan came under public attack after posing a question to former UK Member of Parliament George Galloway on xenophobia and divisive narratives in Malaysia at a lecture titled “Gaza Exposes the Complicity of International Actors”.⁹² The journalist was subsequently met with a wave of harmful speech online, some of which amounted to threats and doxxing.⁹³ Furthermore, Rex was arrested and detained on 17 January 2026 under Section 4(1) of the Sedition Act, Section 233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act, and Section 505(c) of the Penal Code.⁹⁴

89. <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/732995>

90. <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-launches-global-initiative-address-legal-harassment-journalists>

91. <https://www.ifj.org/>

92. <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2026/01/1358602/updated-journalist-rex-tan-released-after-arrest>

93. <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2026/01/1359455/saifuddin-enough-harassment-threats-against-rex-tan-and-his-family>

94. <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2026/01/1358602/updated-journalist-rex-tan-released-after-arrest>

- In response to the public backlash, Rex issued an apology⁹⁵ and resigned from FMT. CIJ notes with concern the two-fold threat to the safety of journalists made clear in instances such as this, which involves the threat to job security, especially for young journalists navigating their early careers, and the lack of protection from harassment and legal intimidation. If and when journalists pose questions that stir active public discourse, there are no clear and robust measures set in place on social media platforms and in online spaces to ensure that discourse remains ethical. The investigations launched against Tan by the authorities were also punitive and disproportionate in nature,⁹⁶ thus setting a negative precedent that promotes a culture of self-censorship.
- Furthermore, this incident sets a precedent where news organisations relinquish any form of vicarious protection over their employees. This case risks reigniting the fear of reprisal, particularly among young journalists, in the event they face backlash for questions and comments made out on the field.

TESTIMONY

REX TAN

In a whirlwind of events, I was doxxed and grossly vilified online, and later arrested and remanded under the Sedition Act, Penal Code, and the Communications and Multimedia Act. In the midst of it all, my former employer presented me with an ultimatum to either resign or be terminated.

Three months later, I am still reeling from this controversy. Plans for marriage and buying a house derailed, loved ones traumatised by the mob's insults and threats. Not to mention, employers are shying away from hiring me, and my reputation as a journalist has been irreversibly obliterated. It pains me to consider that I might not be able to practise journalism anymore, for through this career, I learned to see Malaysia in all its splendid diversity.

With a police investigation still hanging over my name, I am stuck in an uphill battle in my attempts to regain employment. This further highlights the importance of unions in safeguarding the career security of non-executive workers.

At the same time, I hope that oversight mechanisms would be established by the relevant authorities to protect and support any individuals from the malpractices of unethical media outlets or parties.

95. <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2026/01/15/an-apology-from-rex-tan>

96. <https://rsf.org/en/suspected-sedition-simply-asking-question-worrying-investigation-malaysian-journalist-rex-tan>

- On 25 November 2025, sports journalist and co-founder of Twentytwo13 Haresh Deol was assaulted in Bangsar in the afternoon.⁹⁷ Haresh was assaulted by two individuals following a meeting at Alexis Bistro with several persons from the football scene⁹⁸ and sustained soft tissue damage and swelling to the face and body. The police reportedly claimed that the motive of the attack was “personal” and subsequently a case of mistaken identity.⁹⁹ The other suspect remains at large. CIJ’s source¹⁰⁰ maintains that after the incident, a police report was lodged by another individual who had attended the meeting in fear of their safety. However, they have not heard from the police since the report was lodged. Regardless of the alleged motive, this case marks one of many where journalists fear for their safety, with little to no measures put in place to mitigate such risks or to address incidents such as these in a robust and transparent manner.
- In November 2025, Mohamad Asri Shafii, a correspondent at Astro Awani, passed away from a heart attack while travelling home after covering the evacuation of Malaysians during the floods that occurred in Hatyai, Thailand.¹⁰¹ His vehicle was caught in floodwaters and Mohamad Asri had allegedly attempted to push his car before collapsing on the road. The Perlis correspondent reportedly had a history of heart-related issues, and left behind six children and a wife.¹⁰²

CIJ notes the need for various media organisations to conduct risk assessments before sending journalists out into the field. While health and safety issues may unexpectedly occur on the job, stronger mitigation measures can be enforced before, during, and after the reporting process. This is particularly pertinent where every individual has unique, intersectional needs that may be impacted when conducting their duties.

CIJ notes and encourages specific provisions in CAs and company policies where medical costs incurred while journalists are on assignments to cover hazardous incidents are borne by the company, as seen in The Star’s CA.¹⁰³ Several other media organisations put in place insurance policies for the coverage of dangerous situations such as natural disasters. However, a large gap in safety-related policies and protocols remains in many media organisations across Malaysia.

- CIJ interviewed four other media practitioners on the matter of safety and security in the course of their work. **Media Practitioner A** reported feeling unsafe in the course of their work, noting instances where their car was damaged and they were followed by suspicious persons near their workplace. **Media Practitioner B** recounted feeling uncomfortable on multiple occasions where they were approached by strangers who recognised them from their media organisation’s broadcast. Two interviewees from separate media organisations reported that their organisations do not have any risk assessment policies put in place, nor were there concrete policies enforced to ensure the physical safety of journalists in the course of their work. All respondents claimed that their respective employers and HR personnel did not adequately respond to complaints regarding their safety on the job.

97. <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2026/01/1361914/updated-delivery-man-fined-rm2000-assaulting-journalist-haresh-deol?source=widget>

98. <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/opinion/2025/12/02/the-football-meeting-that-blows-open-the-haresh-deol-assault>

99. (NST) n 12

100. Source’s identity kept anonymous for security purposes.

101. <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2025/11/1323818/astro-awani-journalist-dies-while-pushing-flooded-car-perlis-say-police>

102. <https://www.sinardaily.my/article/731995/focus/national/astro-awani-journalist-dies-after-hatyai-flood-coverage-suspected-heart-attack>

103. Clause 26 (v), Collective Agreement between Star Media Group Berhad and National Union of Journalists Peninsular Malaysia

- Four respondents from separate media organisations reported abusive practices within the workplace. Harassment ranged from the practice of microaggressions – including racial stereotyping, to verbal threats of violence and sexual abuse. Two respondents cited that they felt unsafe reporting these instances to HR, fearing reprisal and/or that no action would be taken to protect them.

Despite the existence of anti-harassment policies in many media organisations, inadequate protection exists where no action is taken to properly address these issues. In high-stress work environments such as the environment in which the media operates, unsavoury and even abusive practices exacerbate the mental health of all persons involved. This therefore heavily impacts the quality of journalistic work.

Moreover, there is a psychological toll on journalists facing these threats. These journalists operate within an environment of uncertainty where there is a lack of protection by their respective media organisations' management, the authorities, and surrounding communities. In Collective Agreements such as the Sun's CA,¹⁰⁴ there is a specific preclusion of the Company from bearing any cost pertaining to "the treatment of mental ailments".

Safety training and revisions of safety protocols, if any, are also scarce and deprioritised in media organisations across the country. Furthermore, no additional compensation is typically offered when journalists undertake additional risks when covering natural disasters or other hazardous events.

In conclusion, the safety of journalists across Malaysia remains under threat. Given the precarious environment under which journalism operates, the general media is therefore becoming increasingly restricted – particularly in instances where investigative journalists face threats and backlash for their work. Broadcast journalists further face many risks given the public-facing nature of their work, especially women in broadcast journalism, with inadequate protection accorded to them in the systems governing the media, including systems operating within media organisations and in external policies enforced by the government of the day.

Recommendations

CIJ therefore recommends:

- Archaic and repressive laws such as the **Sedition Act, Communications and Multimedia Act, Printing Presses and Publications Act, Official Secrets Act, and Sections 203A, 499, and 500 of the Penal Code**, to be abolished and/or amended to ensure the independence of the media;
- The Malaysian Media Council, and other media-related stakeholders to empower the media by allocating resources in the form of development funds and trainings to ensure the safety of the media;
- Social media platforms to specifically enforce measures to protect the doxxing, harassment, and intimidation in the form of hate speech against media practitioners in online spaces;

104. Article 23.9 (c), Collective Agreement between Sun Media Corporation Sdn Bhd and National Union of Journalists Malaysia

- Media organisations to enforce structured risk assessment procedures and safety protocols that take into account the physical, legal, and mental safety of all its employees (part-time and full-time);
- Media organisations to cover mental health as an aspect in considering the safety of journalists; and
- Anti-harassment policies to be adequately and actively enforced within the workplace, with independent and robust grievance mechanisms put in place.

FEATURE: SABAH MEDIA

An Outlook of the Sabah Media Landscape by a Representative of the Sabah Journalists Association (SJA)

When we talk about journalism in Malaysia, the conversation often centres around what is happening in Kuala Lumpur. But working as a journalist in Sabah comes with a very different set of realities that are not always seen or fully understood from across the South China Sea.

In Sabah, distance is more than just geography. It affects access, resources and sometimes even the level of attention a story receives. For many journalists here, especially those reporting outside Kota Kinabalu, the job involves long travel, limited connectivity and covering communities that are not always easy to reach. And when things go wrong, help is not always nearby.

Safety is something we think about, even if we don't always say it out loud. Reporting on issues like illegal logging, undocumented communities, or enforcement activities can be sensitive. Most of the time, there are no clear guidelines on what protection journalists have in these situations. Sabah has also seen moments where the risks were far more visible. During the Lahad Datu standoff in Kampung Tanduo, journalists were deployed to cover a developing security crisis involving armed militants. Many reported from areas close to the conflict zone, working under uncertain and dangerous conditions, with limited access to verified information and real-time updates. It was a stark reminder that journalists here are sometimes expected to operate in high-risk environments, often without structured safety protocols.

Two years later, during the 2015 Sabah earthquake, journalists again found themselves working in risky conditions. Reporting from areas around Mount Kinabalu meant dealing with aftershocks, unstable terrain and limited access to safe zones, all while trying to keep the public informed as rescue efforts unfolded.

Even in more recent situations, the risks have not gone away. In 2026, journalists covering an early morning case at Pantai Tanjung Aru 3 in Kota Kinabalu faced a frightening moment when the boat they were on caught fire while transporting a body recovered along the rocky shoreline.¹⁰⁵

Alongside security personnel, journalists had to deal with the immediate danger before even thinking about filing their reports. It is a reminder that sometimes, the job puts you directly in unpredictable situations.

I experienced a different kind of vulnerability early in my career. In 2015, I reported on a stolen car case in Long Bawan,¹⁰⁶ based on a tip that came through contacts in Ba'kelalan. The story gained attention and eventually became an issue that drew the authorities in. I was called in by the police over the report.

105. <https://www.hmetro.com.my/amp/utama/2026/03/1328556/polis-dan-wartawan-terjun-laut-bot-terbakar-ketika-ambil-mayat>

106. <https://www.theborneopost.com/2015/02/02/stolen-sabah-cars-in-indonesia/#ixzz3QkSxY6az>

What stayed with me was not just the questioning, but the fact that I went through it alone. There was no backup from my employer. No senior colleague accompanied me. I went to the police station on my own, with only my source who came voluntarily.

Looking back, I felt that I should have been supported, or at least guided through the process. But at the time, it felt like something I just had to handle as part of the job. For women journalists, there is another layer to consider. Assignments in rural or unfamiliar areas can feel different when you are on your own.

During election coverage, we are usually assigned and split by areas. I am normally responsible for the northern west coast: Pitas, Kudat, Kota Marudu, and Kota Belud. Things are a bit easier now, with many campaign activities streamed live, allowing us to follow developments online. But it wasn't always like this. I still remember getting lost one night in a remote village in Kota Belud, back when navigation apps like Waze didn't exist.

It was a stark reminder of the risks, especially as a woman travelling alone navigating unpaved roads in complete darkness, with no streetlights and no mobile coverage. In such situations, even the thought of an emergency leaves you feeling completely helpless, with no immediate way to call for assistance.

Online harassment has also become part of the landscape, especially as more journalists engage with audiences on social media. These are not always headline-grabbing challenges, but they are constant and they shape how journalists, especially women, approach their work. At the same time, journalists today are also dealing with another growing challenge: misinformation and public distrust.

In 2025, a case in Papar involving the death of a Form One student (Zara Qairina) sparked controversy, following allegations of bullying and claims that the death involved a washing machine. The situation quickly escalated online,¹⁰⁷ with various narratives circulating across social media.

Journalists on the ground had to navigate not just the facts, but also public perception. In many instances, emotionally charged posts by social media users gained more traction than verified reporting. Some journalists even faced ridicule, accused of not telling the truth, when in reality they were reporting based on confirmed information. It reflects a worrying trend where misinformation and disinformation can shape public opinion faster than factual reporting, making the job of journalists even more challenging.

Like everywhere else, newsrooms in Sabah are also adjusting to the rise of AI. It has its benefits. For smaller teams, tools that help with transcription or drafting can save time. But there is also a concern that journalism could become too dependent on speed and convenience. In a place like Sabah, context matters a lot. Local languages, cultural complexity and ground realities cannot always be captured by a machine. There is also a risk that smaller organisations, facing resource constraints, may rely on AI in ways that affect the depth and quality of reporting.

Then there is the environment we work in. In Sabah, pressure is not always direct, but it is

¹⁰⁷ <https://www.dailyexpress.com.my/news/264903/sabah-journalists-warns-of-harassment-fake-news-in-zara-case-coverage/>

understood. There are times when journalists hold back, especially when dealing with sensitive political or business-related issues. It is not always about fear of arrest. It can be about losing access, damaging relationships or being quietly sidelined. These are decisions journalists navigate every day, often without much discussion.

At the same time, Sabah has stories that deserve more attention. From indigenous land rights to environmental concerns and cross-border issues, these are not just local matters. They are national ones. But telling these stories properly takes time, trust and resources, which are not always easy to come by.

Despite all this, journalists in Sabah continue to do their work. Quietly, consistently and often without much recognition. But if we want to talk seriously about media freedom and the future of journalism in Malaysia, then Sabah cannot be left out of the conversation.

Additional Statistics on Sabahan Journalists based on a survey conducted by SJA (16–18 January 2026)¹⁰⁸

A survey was conducted in January 2026, involving a total of 72 respondents. 62.5% of these respondents were media practitioners in local Sabahan media, while 22.2% worked in national media and 9.7% were reporters with online/digital media. Of these 72 respondents, 61.1% were permanent employees while 31.9% were stringers, and the remaining 7% (minority) were contract workers.

It was found that only 15.3% of the respondents earned RM4,000 and above monthly (without allowances). 23.6% of the respondents earned between the ranges of RM1,500–RM1,999 and RM2,000–RM2,499 respectively. Additionally, a majority of the respondents worked for over 10 years in the media industry. 58% of the respondents also reported an average monthly expenditure of RM2,000 and above.

108. Further information can be obtained by inquiry (Sabah Journalists Association).

FEATURE: SARAWAK MEDIA

Opinion on the Sarawak Journalism Outlook by Commonwealth Journalists Association (CJA) Sarawak branch and Kuching Division Journalists Association (KDJA)

The media landscape in Sarawak, Malaysia's largest state by land area and home to a vibrant yet tightly knit journalistic community, reflects both the broader challenges facing Malaysian media and unique regional dynamics.

With outlets like Borneo Post, New Sarawak Tribune, Utusan Borneo, and state broadcasters such as TV Sarawak operating in a multicultural, resource-rich but often politically sensitive environment, Sarawakian journalists navigate a delicate balance.

Self-censorship, labour law disparities, stalled unionisation efforts, and a resilient sense of community define their daily realities. Increasingly, artificial intelligence (AI) tools are emerging as practical aids in this constrained ecosystem. These viewpoints, drawn from the lived experiences of Sarawakian media practitioners, are supported by national and regional data on press freedom, employment conditions, and technological adoption.

Self-censorship remains a pervasive survival strategy among Sarawakian journalists, driven by fears for personal safety and livelihood. In a country where media ownership often intertwines with political interests, practitioners frequently avoid stories touching on sensitive local issues – such as land rights disputes involving indigenous communities, environmental concerns tied to logging or palm oil, or political patronage networks – out of concern for repercussions.

Journalists in Sarawak and across Malaysia often withhold bylines or soften coverage to protect their careers. This tallies with Al Jazeera Institute analysis from early 2026¹⁰⁹ describing journalists preferring “silence over risking their livelihoods,” with some requesting anonymity even when critiquing working conditions, citing reputation risks in a small industry.

In Sarawak's context, where major media outlets have historical ties to state or federal powers, even drafting a story on controversial development projects can feel like career suicide. This self-censorship should not be seen as timidity but a rational response to documented hostility, including online harassment and economic retaliation, as flagged in CIJ's 2024 snapshot of the Malaysian media.¹¹⁰

109. <https://institute.aljazeera.net/en/ajr/article/2552>

110. <https://cijmalaysia.net/malaysian-media-landscape-a-snapshot-of-2024/>

Compounding these risks are distinct labour laws in Sarawak, which historically hindered media practitioners from advocating for workplace improvements. Unlike Peninsular Malaysia's Employment Act 1955, Sarawak operated under its own Sarawak Labour Ordinance (SLO), which until amendments effective in May 2025 provided fewer protections on overtime, rest days, and workplace safety for certain categories of workers.

These disparities created uneven bargaining power, making it riskier for journalists across Sarawak to challenge low pay or poor conditions without unified legal recourse. Even post-amendment, the legacy of regional fragmentation persists, as the Trade Unions Act 1959 historically required unions to be registered separately for Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah, and Sarawak, fragmenting collective strength.

Meanwhile, attempts to unionise Sarawakian and Malaysian media practitioners underscore these structural barriers. In the 1990s and early 2000s, efforts to unionise by local practitioners faced resistance from media agencies wary of collective demands during economic downturns. These failures have perpetuated a cycle where speaking up against injustices – whether editorial interference or exploitative hours – jeopardises not just one's job but the entire fragile ecosystem.

For journalists in Sarawak, a persistent myth suggests that the state's unique legal status creates a "blind spot" for union rights. In reality, the Trade Unions Act 1959 and Industrial Relations Act 1967 are federal laws that apply nationwide. Sarawakian media workers have the absolute right to unionise, provided the union is registered within the state.

The Sarawak Labour Ordinance (SLO) is often misunderstood as a barrier to collective action. It is not. While the SLO sets the "floor" for individual benefits (wages and leave), federal Acts provide the "ceiling" for collective bargaining. The landscape shifted significantly on May 1, 2025, with the SLO (Amendment) Act 2025. This update harmonised Sarawak's laws with the rest of Malaysia, offering newsrooms critical protections including universal coverage (rights now apply to all employees, regardless of salary); reduced hours (the work week is capped at 45 hours); and enhanced leave (98 days maternity and 7 days paternity leave).

The law is no longer an obstacle. For the Sarawakian journalist in 2026, the door is wide open to organise and advocate for the future of the fourth estate.

In this challenging context, AI has become a vital ally for Sarawakian journalists, enhancing efficiency without replacing human oversight. Practitioners increasingly deploy AI for research and ideation (e.g., summarising public documents or suggesting angles), transcribing interviews, translating multilingual content – crucial in diverse Sarawak – and generating graphics or infographics to accompany articles.

In Sarawak, several media outlets integrate AI for voice-to-text, multilingual functions, and visual storytelling, boosting productivity in under-resourced newsrooms. Globally and locally, these tools address economic fragility by reducing manual labour and allowing focus on investigative

depth. However, ethical guidelines remain essential to prevent over-reliance or bias amplification. Yet, from these constraints emerges a hallmark of Sarawakian media: a profound sense of community and mutual support. In a state with a relatively small fraternity of practitioners – spanning English, Malay, Chinese, and Iban-language outlets – competitiveness coexists with camaraderie. Journalists routinely share tips, sources, or even story leads across rival outlets, mentor juniors regardless of rank, and offer emotional or practical aid during crises.

This “fraternity” ethos, often described anecdotally by local practitioners, counters isolation in a high-pressure environment. It echoes broader Malaysian media trends where personal networks sustain ethical journalism amid systemic pressures, fostering resilience that formal unions could not achieve.

Ultimately, Sarawakian media’s story is one of quiet defiance. With Malaysia’s press freedom score improving modestly and labour alignment underway, sustained reforms – stronger source protection, genuine collective bargaining, and ethical AI frameworks – could embolden journalists to report bravely. For now, the fraternity’s solidarity and technological adaptation ensure that, even in silence on some fronts, the press in Sarawak continues to inform, connect, and endure.

RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 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.
Ideally, the administration of the fund should be transferred to the Malaysian Media Council so it could maintain independence and prioritise media sustainability, centring the human rights of journalists, and uphold public-interest reporting while ensuring non-interference with editorial independence.
- **Formalise revenue-sharing from global tech giants to domestic media** as a priority sustainability initiative. The government can study and adapt similar bargaining models in Australia (proposed News Bargaining Incentive¹¹¹) and Canada (Online News Act¹¹²) which requires dominant platforms to compensate media organisations when their content is made available on their digital services. The government can also consider amending the Copyright Act 1987 to embed revenue sharing similar to the EU Directive on Copyright in the Digital Single Market¹¹³ (particularly Article 15) which introduces a “neighbouring right for press publishers, requiring platforms to pay for the use of news snippets” and content.
- 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, which have a high economic cost for the media.
As previously recommended by CIJ, the moratorium must be followed by a comprehensive review to amend or repeal these laws to align them with international human rights standards.
 - **Adopt anti-SLAPP guidelines** to prevent vexatious legal actions intended to intimidate journalists, drown them in legal costs and ultimately suppress public interest reporting.
 - **Amend legislation addressing labour rights**, such as the Employment Act 1955, to provide clearer protection for non-traditional media workers, including freelancers, contract journalists, and gig-based content creators. The implementation of the Gig Workers Act 2025 should be accelerated to ensure that it explicitly covers journalists, stringers and freelance media practitioners.

111. <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/consultation-news-bargaining-incentive-now-open>

112. <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/online-news.html>

113. <https://www.wipo.int/en/web/wipo-magazine/articles/copyright-in-the-digital-single-market-a-taster-42399>

- Malaysia should **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.

7.2 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 by ensuring transparent salary structures, timely wage payments, fair overtime compensation, insurance coverage during high-risk and hazardous assignments, consistent with labour standards under Malaysian and international law.
- 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, particularly for investigative reporters and journalists exposed to online harassment, legal intimidation, or traumatic reporting environments.
- **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.

7.3 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**. It should also introduce compliance (or certification) mechanisms and conduct periodic industry audits to encourage accountability of its members.
- The MMC should **create awareness on its grievance mechanism**, which could eventually support independent complaints and employment related disputes involving journalists, particularly freelancers and digital media workers who may lack bargaining power.
- 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.
- Such data would support evidence-based policymaking and identify emerging threats to journalists' economic rights.

Media Ownership

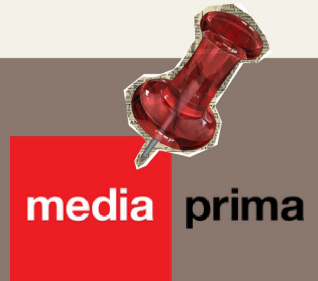


Star Media Group
Controlled by the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), with nearly 50% shares on the group and GLCs such as EPF and Tabung Haji

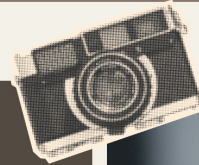


Media Prima

Oversees TV3, 8TV, ntv7, New Straits Times, Berita Harian, and Rev Media. Tan Sri Syed Mokhtar Albukhary and Minister Johari Abdul Ghani have the highest shares



Media Mulia Sdn Bhd
Publisher and permit holders to Utusan Malaysia and Kosmo
Wholly owned by Tan Sri Syed Mokhtar Albukhary



The Sun Daily

Owned by a subsidiary of Berjaya Group, Berjaya Media, founded by tycoon Tan Sri Dato' Seri Vincent Tan



Media Ownership



Astro

Owned by Usaha Tegas Sdn Bhd, company created by the late Ananda Krishnan



The Borneo Post

Founded by KTS Group, a Sarawak-based timber company owned by the Lau Family



Daily Express

Founded by the late Tan Sri Yeh Pao Tzu and owned by the Yeh family. The Yeh family retains the same ownership over the Overseas Chinese Daily News (OCDN).



Media Chinese International Ltd

Controlled by the family of the late Tan Sri Datuk Sir Tiong Hiew King, a Malaysian timber tycoon. The Tiong family maintains control through major shareholdings



Media Ownership



The Merdeka Times
Fully owned by converted Islamic preacher Firdaus Wong



BFM News
Independent media owned by lawyer Malek Ali who founded the BFM Media Sdn Bhd, with 23% of shares held by The Edge Group



The Edge Malaysia
Owned by Tan Sri Tong Koi Oong who founded The Edge Media Group, independent by nature



Malaysiakini
Co-owned by journalists (Premesh Chandran and Steven Gan), with shares owned by the Media Development Investment Fund. Independent by nature



Focus Malaysia
Founded and directed by Datuk Michael Yip Chin Hwee, acquired by Inno Mind Works Sdn Bhd



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Yet, from these constraints emerges a hallmark of Sarawakian media: a profound sense of community and mutual support. In a state with a relatively small fraternity of practitioners – spanning English, Malay, Chinese, and Iban-language outlets – competitiveness coexists with camaraderie. Journalists routinely share tips, sources, or even story leads across rival outlets, mentor juniors regardless of rank, and offer emotional or practical aid during crises.

This “fraternity” ethos, often described anecdotally by local practitioners, counters isolation in a high-pressure environment. It echoes broader Malaysian media trends where personal networks sustain ethical journalism amid systemic pressures, fostering resilience that formal unions could not achieve.

Ultimately, Sarawakian media’s story is one of quiet defiance. With Malaysia’s press freedom score improving modestly and labour alignment underway, sustained reforms – stronger source protection, genuine collective

bargaining, and ethical AI frameworks – could embolden journalists to report bravely. For now, the fraternity’s solidarity and technological adaptation ensure that, even in silence on some fronts, the press in Sarawak continues to inform, connect, and endure.

The media landscape in Sarawak, Malaysia’s largest state by land area and home to a vibrant yet tightly knit journalistic community, reflects both the broader challenges facing Malaysian media and unique regional dynamics.

With outlets like Borneo Post, New Sarawak Tribune, Utusan Borneo, and state broadcasters such as TV Sarawak operating in a multicultural, resource-rich but often politically sensitive environment, Sarawakian journalists navigate a delicate balance.

Alongside security personnel, journalists had to deal with the immediate danger before even thinking about filing

their reports. It is a reminder that sometimes, the job puts you directly in unpredictable situations.

For women journalists, there is another layer to consider. Assignments in rural or unfamiliar areas can feel different when you are on your own.

Online harassment has also become part of the landscape, especially as more journalists engage with audiences on social media. These are not always headline-grabbing challenges, but they are constant and they shape how journalists especially women approach their work.

At the same time, journalists today are also dealing with another growing challenge: misinformation and public distrust.

At the same time, Sabah has stories that deserve more attention. From indigenous land rights to environmental concerns and cross-border issues, these are not just local matters. They are national ones. But telling these stories properly takes time, trust and resources, which are not always easy to come by.

