



Moving Mountains: The Challenges of Religious Representation in Malaysia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Despite Malaysia's upward socioeconomic development, rapid modernisation, and successful middle-class formation over the past forty years, and although Malaysia is often celebrated for its multicultural heritage, religion remains a highly sensitive topic of discussion.

But while there are statistics that seem to offer a clear view into a country's treatment of journalists and media practitioners, Pacific Asian scholars in media systems and comparative media studies have questioned whether these are sufficient for an in-depth understanding and potential rebuilding of each local media landscape. The main problem with the statistical methodology is that the categories devised and assigned are predicated upon the Western European and North American model for the development of journalism and design of media systems. This bias in analytic perspective inevitably means that unique and non-Western media systems such as the Chinese, Singaporean, Indonesian, and Malaysian ones become overly easy victims of 'inadequate' or 'under-development' in the statistical big picture.

This is why for the purpose of this report, we chose to explore stakeholders' perspectives from the Malaysian media industry and local religious organisations, from both Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia. This year-long experimental fieldwork is key for its close and intimate engagement with local stakeholders, which thus may provide crucial and in-depth qualitative insights as a complement to existing statistical reports.

This report is structured into five parts:





A basic overview of the religions and religious demographics in Malaysia

There are many religions and belief systems in Malaysia, but some are more dominant and politically influential than others. Some of the major religions or belief systems in Malaysia include Islam (which is the official religion of the Federation of Malaysia, as stated in the Federal Constitution), Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Confucianism, and Taoism.



A basic overview of Malaysia's media landscape

The journalistic landscape in Malaysia is diverse, but there are a number of recurring and common challenges, including political censorship, economic ownership, and the specific inadequacies within organisational practices. Press freedom in Malaysia is influenced by a set of historically situated factors. The binary assumption that, either there is press freedom, or there is none at all, is not adequate for an understanding of what the media and journalistic industries are facing. A critical overview of the media in Malaysia entails examining the political (e.g. law, abuse of law, political patronage, intimidation, physical safety, the role of vigilantes), economic (who owns and controls the media), and organisational (e.g. ethical framework, journalistic training, human and financial resources) aspects of the press and the media industry. With the use of digital, new, and social media, Malaysians have been building their own media stories. This is a fairly recent development in the media landscape (no longer just an 'industry') of Malaysia, where the distrust of traditional news sources and the rise of independent media practitioners (who may not have undergone professional training) have long and irrevocably disrupted the traditional boundaries between media producers and media consumers. All these new possibilities and phenomena in the contemporary Malaysian media landscape would mean completely different implications for different stakeholders.



Insights from the year-long fieldwork into the challenges and needs of reporting religious issues in the Malaysian media

Religion remains a highly monitored topic both among political authorities and ordinary citizens due to an unresolved legacy of religious sensitivities. It has also become clear that the media and journalists are not entirely independent when reporting, writing, editing, and publishing, due to the regulatory roles of the media's economic, political, and organisational backgrounds. These two separate factors together explain why religion-related news stories and public conversations are particularly difficult to write, frame, and publish by the Malaysian mainstream news portals, journalists, and media practitioners.

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Lessons from the Diverse Voices Workshop series

This three-day series of workshops included sessions on reporting techniques, social media and search engine optimisation, legal training, digital and physical security. There were also interfaith panel sessions where religious representatives were connected with journalists and other media practitioners. The SEO and social media sessions provided a helpful update for the participants on contemporary communication technologies. The session on 'Media and Law' in Malaysia provided a lawyer's expert overview of the Malaysian legal system and court system to the participants. The sessions on physical and digital security highlighted the specific ways in which journalists can protect themselves when on assignment. The interfaith panel sessions gathered different viewpoints from seven different speakers of different backgrounds, including an atheist. One apparent observation is the strong roles that religion still plays in the everyday life of many Malaysians.

Questions and recommendations for stakeholders

The journey of building a diverse, friendly, and never-authoritarian nation is long, often difficult, and most likely a grassroots and collaborative one. This fieldwork only provided a glimpse into what is possible, what is needed, and what is calling. One thing that clearly emerged from our conversations with journalists and religious representatives was that there is a lack of sustainable resources. While there are existing journalist groups and unions, including the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) and Institute of Journalists (IOJ) in Malaysia, these are not focused on supporting the religious reporting process. Rather, they provide more general support for journalists. At the same time, there is a need for more strategic budget allocations ie. funding that focuses on long-term initiatives rather than on short-term schemes and one-off production grants.



INTRODUCTION



Despite Malaysia's upward socioeconomic development, rapid modernisation, and successful middle-class formation over the past forty years, and although Malaysia is often celebrated for its multicultural heritage, religion remains a highly sensitive topic of discussion. Here, 'sensitivity' is not only a feeling of fear and self-restraint towards speech, but the symptom of a broader and unresolved structural impasse. The lack of interactions between various religious communities in the country, in an observed attitude of non-interference, can be attributed to a more general condition where the freedom of expression, freedom of religion, and healthy sociopolitical conversations have yet to become a fundamental and normative practice in the development of participatory institutions in this young democracy over the past few decades.

Under this condition, speech is often monitored and limited by a wide collection of individuals, groups, and institutions who possess the means to legal, financial, and executive forms of punitive measures. Moreover, in the expanding digital environment, local media experts and observers have reported on the rise of online vigilantes ('digilantes') and mob social media accounts who, with impunity, effectively restrict spaces for expression, dialogue, and interaction among online Malaysians with hate speech, abuse, police reporting, and gendered, rape, and death threats, as various actual forms of intolerant reactions and intimidation in Malaysian society.

Compared to broader Asia Pacific, Malaysia remains methodically concluded as one of the few “weak-performing democracies.” In the context of this report, Malaysia’s troubling position from the region is attributable to the country’s continually poor performance in securing, let alone upholding, two fundamental tenets of a participatory democracy: (1) freedom of religion and (2) press freedom. In other words, the connection between the level of religious freedom and that of press freedom in Malaysia lies in the legal framework under which ordinary citizens would participate and interact in religious and political conversations, local community-(re)building, and cultural activities.

Here, observed are potential shortcomings in Malaysia’s formal condition for citizen engagement and participation. A clear and direct manifestation of this structural inadequacy is the extent to which, and the manner with which, religious issues and activities are reported and discoursed (or, the absence of it) by local journalism and new media practices.

According to the World Bank indices (see Figure 1), Malaysia is below the world median level with regard to the freedom of religion. In comparison with a number of countries from Asia and Europe, Malaysia’s performance in protecting and upholding the freedom of religion remains apparently inferior. To be exact, these indices are produced by evaluating five attributes of a measured country: (1) representative government, (2) fundamental rights, (3) checks on government, (4) impartial administration, and (5) participatory engagement.

Figure 1: A comparison of freedom of religion indices between Malaysia and selected countries from around the world.

Countries	Score
Switzerland	0.85
Germany	0.82
World Median	0.76
Greece	0.74
Indonesia	0.67
Singapore	0.67
Malaysia	0.59
China	0.14



In terms of press freedom, the 2020 index of *Reporters Without Frontiers (RSF)* ranks Malaysia at 101th out of 180 countries compiled (see Figure 2 for a comparative chart). Although the abuse score of Malaysia is 0, the global score given to Malaysia is 33.12, which, according to the assigned categories, indicates that press freedom in the country is facing a “problematic situation.”

Figure 2: A comparison of press freedom scores between Malaysia and selected countries from around the world

Countries	Abuse Score	Global Score
Malaysia	0	33.12
China	80.43	78.48
Germany	19.46	12.16
Greece	0	28.80
Indonesia	17.92	36.82
Singapore	0	55.23
Switzerland	0	10.62



Yet, although these indices may seem to offer a clear view into a country’s treatment of journalists and media practitioners, Pacific Asian scholars in media systems and comparative media studies have questioned whether these are sufficient for an in-depth understanding and potential rebuilding of each local media landscape. **The main problem with the statistical methodology is that the categories devised and assigned are predicated upon the Western European and North American model for the development of journalism and design of media systems.** This bias in analytic perspective inevitably means that unique and non-Western media systems such as the Chinese, Singaporean, Indonesian, and Malaysian ones become overly easy victims of ‘inadequate’ or ‘under-development’ in the statistical big picture. Universalist statistical comparison is itself incomplete, insofar as every sociocultural situation posits quite different challenges for freedom of religion, press freedom, and media reform.

Therefore, while there are many ways to explore issues of religious freedom, religious reporting in the media, and why religion-related conversations and inter-religious debates remain a difficult domain of public engagement, this report addresses stakeholders’ perspectives from the Malaysian media industry and local religious organisations, from both Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia. This year-long experimental fieldwork is key for its close and intimate engagement with local stakeholders, which thus may provide crucial and in-depth qualitative insights as a complement to existing statistical reports.

Moreover, these stakeholder interactions have taken into account recent developments that sent Malaysia into a state of flux, including, for instance, (1) a political uncertainty that came with the abrupt change of government in March 2020, and (2) the coronavirus pandemic lockdown. These procedures allow for critical awareness into the adaptive processes and professional experiences within the local media industry, religious groups, and other relevant stakeholders, from East and Peninsular Malaysia.

This report stems from a broader project, ***Diverse Voices: Supporting Religious Freedom through Engagement with the Media and Civil Society***, whose goal is to improve the quality, quantity, and dissemination of reporting on religious freedom issues to promote more democratic, tolerant societies. More specifically, *Diverse Voices* aims to (1) strengthen the capacity of journalists to safely and legally increase accurate, balanced, and responsible reporting of religious freedom issues, and to (2) strengthen collaboration between civil society organizations, the media and key stakeholders, to protect religious freedom at the local, national, and regional levels.

This report is structured into five parts. First, a basic overview of the religions and religious demographics in Malaysia is provided. Second, a basic overview of Malaysia's media landscape is provided. Third, insights from the year-long fieldwork into the challenges and needs of reporting religious issues in the Malaysian media are presented, investigated, and discussed. Fourth, lessons from a *Diverse Voices* workshop series, catered towards local journalists and media practitioners, are discussed. Finally, having summarised the insights and lessons from this project, in light of the religious and media landscape in Malaysia, this report concludes with a number of questions and recommendations for the relevant stakeholders.



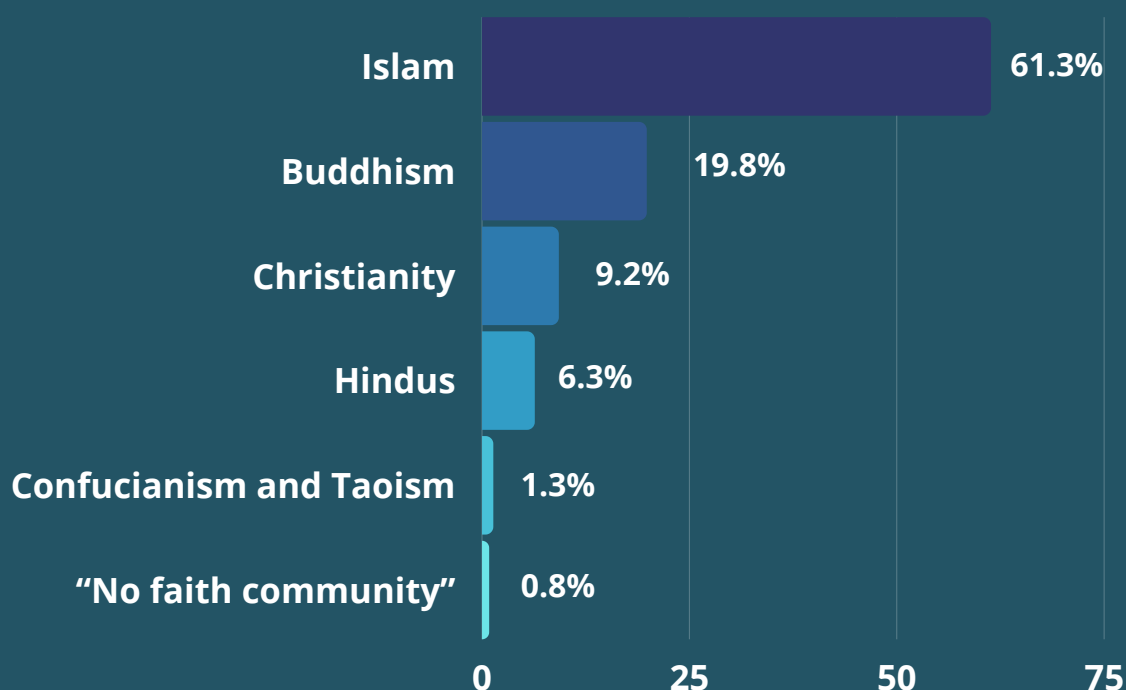
1) RELIGIONS IN MALAYSIA

“There are still many aspects that we don’t understand about being sensitive towards other ways of life and religious beliefs. People always say, Christians have to understand Islam, Hindus have to understand Islam, Buddhists have to understand Islam... But how can we further increase the awareness of other religions and cultures of the non-Muslims?”

-- Excerpt from an interview with Mohamed Razif, the Press Secretary to the Minister in the Prime Minister’s Department in charge of Religious Affairs --

There are many religions and belief systems in Malaysia, but some are more dominant and politically influential than others. Some of the major religions or belief systems in Malaysia include Islam (which is the official religion of the Federation of Malaysia, as stated in the Federal Constitution), Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Confucianism, and Taoism. Figure 3 shows the religious demographics in Malaysia, following the 2010 Population and Housing Census of Malaysia:

Figure 3: Common religions in Malaysia and estimated percentage of the population within each religion



As observed in the opening excerpt from an interview with the press secretary to the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department in charge of Religious Affairs, peace and harmony among the many and diverse religious communities in Malaysia have yet to be achieved. This could be due to many different reasons. First, one of these would be the lack of opportunities and spaces for inter-religious interactions and discourses, especially in the mainstream media and journalistic platforms. Second, as the press secretary has hinted, religious freedom and an open-mindedness towards the non-Muslim and non-Islamic ways of life need to be further cultivated in the country. In fact, both of these reasons are often interconnected.

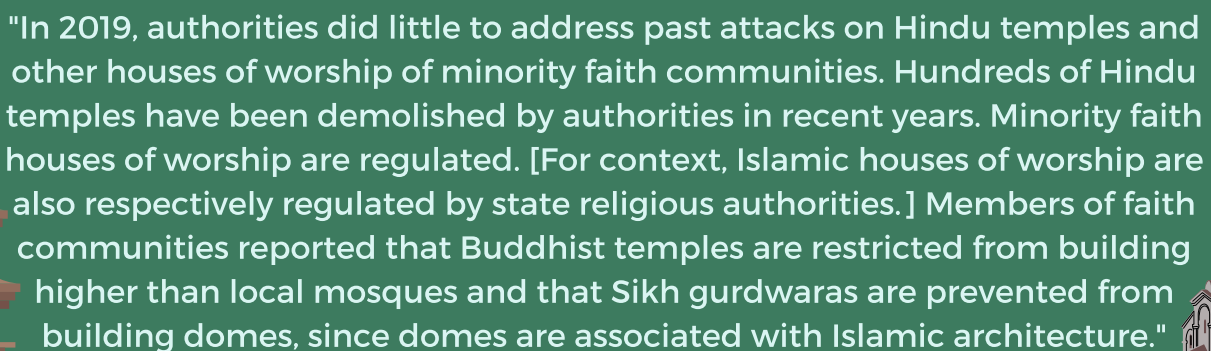
The Federal Constitution of Malaysia formally protects the freedom of religion in Malaysia. Article 3(1) explicitly states that, "Islam is the religion of the Federation; but other religions may be practised in peace and harmony in any part of the Federation." Article 11(1) explicitly states that, "every person has the right to profess and practise his religion and, subject to Clause (4), to propagate it." Article 11(3) explicitly states that, "every religious group has the right: (a) to manage its own religious affairs; (b) to establish and maintain institutions for religious or charitable purposes; and (c) to acquire and own property and hold and administer it in accordance with the law."

However, despite the formal constitutional guarantee of religious freedom, experts and observers have warned against a potential for arbitrariness in the maintenance of religious freedom in the country. This arbitrariness is not uncommon with the protection of other fundamental democratic rights in the country (such as the freedom of speech in Article 10 of the Federal Constitution, due to an ambiguity in the legal inscription that amounts to such concerns as unclear boundaries of right and wrong, inconsistent enforcement, and potential abuse of the legal apparatus. A strongest example is that, although Article 11(5) explicitly states, "this Article does not authorize any act contrary to any general law relating to public order, public health, or morality," it remains obscure what 'general law' literally means, and what 'public order, public health, or morality' practically means. The constitutional article on the freedom of religion therefore has left open a room for an arbitrariness that might prove contrary to the most basic protection of religious freedom.



In light of this, the needs assessment session with various faith communities in Malaysia teased out many examples of a persistent close-mindedness in Malaysian society. A number argue that certain religions receive more press coverage than the others. A Shia expert observes that Shia Muslims have to be “in hiding” to mitigate the risks of state persecution and public denunciation. For instance, *The New Straits Times* [published a story](#) on the sudden raids and detentions of Shia Muslims, a “long-persecuted community,” by local religious officials. Furthermore, director of the Baha’i Office of External Affairs, Vidyakaran, also wonders whether harmony means the “absence of conflict,” whether religion must always be kept in the private sphere, and whether spiritual insights could be leveraged for solving real world problems. These viewpoints also raise the question as to how it would be possible to elevate and promote fresher, innovative, and more inclusive manners of public conversations and debates on religion, faith, belief system, theology, philosophy, and cultures.

On the other hand, Malaysia has not always had the best democratic performance in protecting the freedom of religion and spaces for inter-religious intermingling for the citizens. For example, as the Shia expert hinted, the meaning of ‘Malay’ is less personal and social, than it is institutional and legal. To be Malay, is to also and only be a specific type of Muslim. With regard to inter-religious contact, political authority in the country prohibits and restricts, if not just discourages, the promotion of non-Islamic elements in the public sphere. As the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) [illustrates](#),

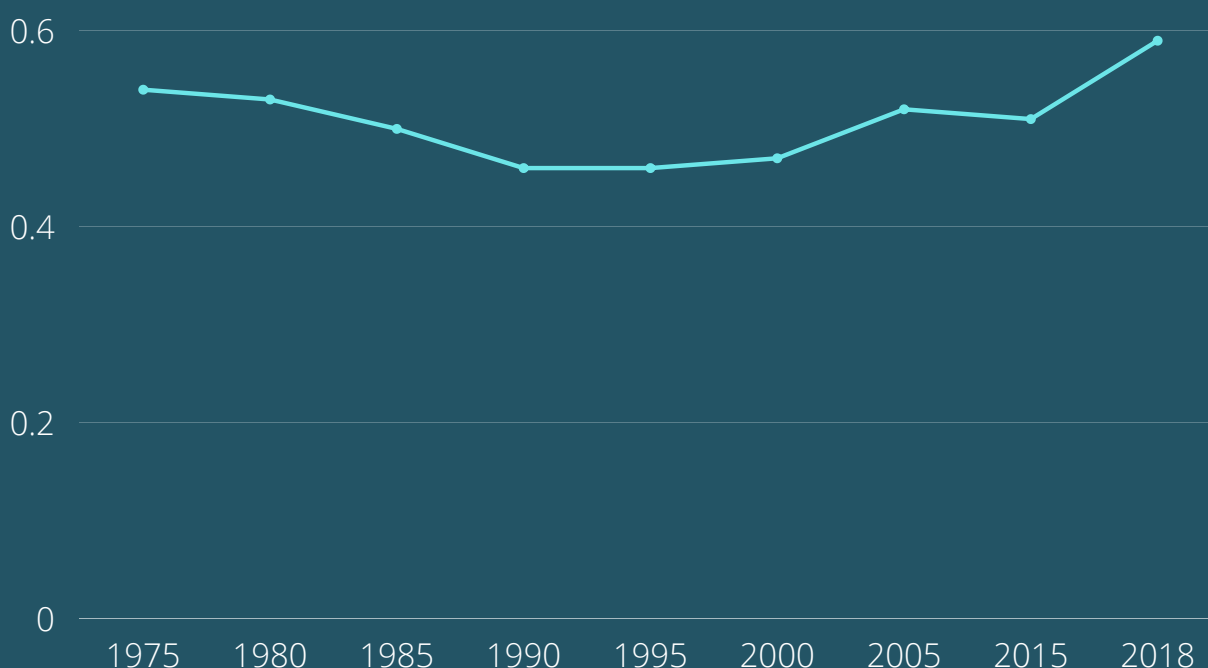


"In 2019, authorities did little to address past attacks on Hindu temples and other houses of worship of minority faith communities. Hundreds of Hindu temples have been demolished by authorities in recent years. Minority faith houses of worship are regulated. [For context, Islamic houses of worship are also respectively regulated by state religious authorities.] Members of faith communities reported that Buddhist temples are restricted from building higher than local mosques and that Sikh gurdwaras are prevented from building domes, since domes are associated with Islamic architecture."

According to the World Bank [indices](#) (see Figure 4), Malaysia’s performance in upholding the freedom of religion has been consistently low in the past forty years (as compared to the World Median score: 0.76). However, one can also observe that the score has slightly improved in the past few years. It remains uncertain whether this has been implicated by a [far-reaching spirit of emancipation across civil society and media professional networks](#) that came after the country’s first-time-ever change of government in the fourteenth General Elections (GE14). It also remains unknown how long this trend of improvement in the basic security of religious freedom would last. At least from the fieldwork, active ‘sensitivity’ and self-restraints when discussing religions among faith communities, journalists, and media practitioners remain observably intact.

Figure 4: Malaysia's freedom of religion scores from 1975 to 2018

Year	Score
1975	0.54
1980	0.53
1985	0.50
1990	0.46
1995	0.46
2000	0.47
2005	0.52
2010	0.51
2015	0.50
2018	0.59



The topic of religion and faith continues to provoke tremendous sensitivity and concrete fear in Malaysia. Race and religion have been the most divisive issues in Malaysia, and these tensions were brought to the surface when press freedom increased after Pakatan Harapan took over the government in 2018. This is not only because Malaysians remain generally quite attached to family and religious traditions. It is also because religion in Malaysia is less a private free choice and personal affirmation, and more an institutionally and legally surveilled, managed, and maintained structure of discourses and practices. This 'sensitivity', and this 'structure', are often the elusive and unresolved barriers to promoting and improving inter-religious and inter-racial interactions, understanding, and friendship. On the contrary, what is possible can be witnessed in Jalan Tokong, Melaka, also called "harmony street" by The Malay Mail, where the Sri Poyatha Moorthi Temple (est. 1781), the Kampung Kling Mosque (est. 1872 [1748]), and the Cheng Hoon Teng Temple (est. 1645) have co-existed for hundreds of years.

2) MEDIA IN MALAYSIA

2.1. The press. Print media. Press freedom.

The journalistic landscape in Malaysia is diverse, but there are a number of recurring and common challenges, including political censorship, economic ownership, and the specific inadequacies within organisational practices.

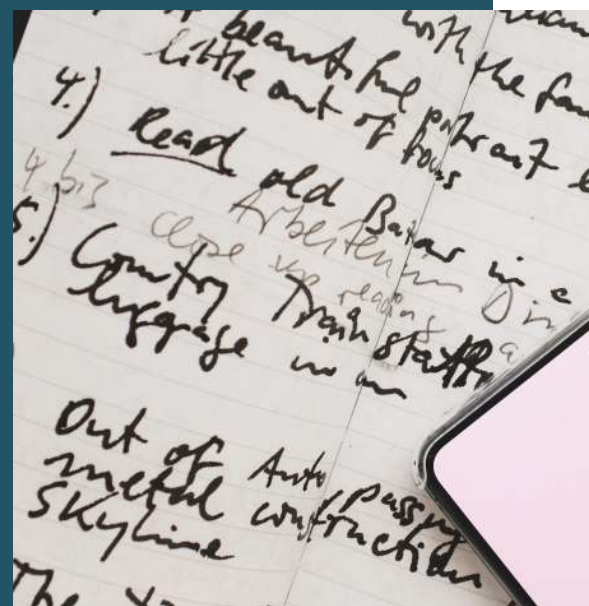
East Malaysia, Peninsular Malaysia.

The newsroom and working environment and experiences in East Malaysia would be different from those in Peninsular Malaysia. This is partly because the issues and concerns that journalists and locals have to address are quite different in both sides of the country. The fieldwork by Projek Dialog in Sabah has gained interesting local insights. The needs assessment and editor engagement session in Sabah reveals that 'land rights', for instance, is a larger issue than race and religion in the Eastern state. Furthermore, it seems that besides the fact that most journalists in Sabah are not part of a union, many of the local papers are also understaffed and journalists lack adequate training in research, source gathering, and fact-checking. In Sarawak, media outlets such as *The Borneo Post* and *The Sarawak Report* often shed key light on specific local issues such as the illegal logging of timber resources.

Languages.

The local press is also diverse by languages, encompassing mainly the Malay, English, Mandarin, and Tamil languages, which are the main languages used by the different ethnic groups in the country. Malay publications include *Utusan Malaysia*, *Sinar Harian*, and *Berita Harian*. English publications include *The Star*, *Malaysiakini*, and *The Malay Mail*. Mandarin publications include *The China Press*, *The Oriental Daily*, and *The Sin Chew Daily*. Tamil publications include *Makkal Osai* (formerly, *Tamil Osai*), *Malaysian Nanban*, and *Tamil Nesan*.

In terms of TV and radio news, key channels include TV3 news, *Astro Awani*, Radio Television Malaysia (public broadcaster), TV9 news, NTV7 news, 8TV news, and Bernama News Channel. Digital News Report 2020 from the Reuters Institute highlights that TV3, *Astro Awani*, and RTM are the most consumed in this category.



In Malaysia, press freedom is not a zero-sum matter. It is influenced by a set of historically situated factors. The binary assumption that, either there is press freedom, or there is none at all, is not adequate for an understanding of what the media and journalistic industries are facing. A critical overview of the media in Malaysia entails examining the political (e.g. law, abuse of law, political patronage, intimidation, physical safety, the role of vigilantes), economic (who owns and controls the media), and organisational (e.g. ethical framework, journalistic training, human and financial resources) aspects of the press and the media industry.

A common challenge for the media in Malaysia is the legacy of media ownership by establishment actors and publication-related legal restrictions and state censorship which, together, constitute a concrete and effective barrier to newsroom reform and improvement in journalistic practices, the rethinking and overhaul in media practices, elimination of pro-government reporting bias and suppression of alternative voices, and the protection of media workers' welfare, physical safety, rights to factual reporting and publication, and financial security.

In January 2020, as a long-anticipated opportunity that has emerged from the historic government change from GE14, a Malaysian Media Council pro-tem committee has convened for the first time and produced a draft bill. Although the direction of this crucial initiative has been unfortunately disrupted by the sudden influx of political uncertainty in Malaysia a few months later, six principles were put forward as the basis of a Malaysian Media Council, worth-noticing:

1 The scope of the council shall cover all forms of media including print, broadcast and online and shall cover private as well as public-owned media.

2 The media council will not cover individual speech on social media or blogs, for which other laws currently or should cover.

3 That participation in the council will be on a volunteer or opt-in basis and that there will have to be sufficient benefits and incentives for the media industry to participate.

4 Laws that curb press freedom or inhibit good journalistic practices will have to be abolished.

5 The council will have a code of conduct for media as well as a proper grievance procedure.

6 The council will also look into the overall sustainability of the media industry, improving journalism standards and media literacy.

Other than the potential for collectivity in the media industry, a new concern emerged in the past few years. Media practitioners have begun to rethink the practicality and sustainability of the business model by which media companies or outlets are run. One of the interviewees, from *Between the Lines*, has made a succinct and analytic summary of why the local media industry is facing a new crisis in the business model:

“The business model is unsustainable. The biggest mistake the media industry ever made was thinking that they can afford to run a business where they give away their products for free. And the problem with that, the problem with that thinking, is that because advertising and real estate have become quite limitless, the value of each click, each impression, each ad, went down to, literally, a percentage of a cent. When that happened, it became a game of scale. And in our industry, we are never going to have that kind of scale, especially when the market is this fragmented in Malaysia.”

In other words, the strategy where the media industry’s heavy reliance on ads revenues has become increasingly unsustainable speaks to a broader phenomenon where Malaysian media consumers (and prosumers) no longer have to rely on the mainstream media for information about their community, their country, and the world. This is partly attributable to a rapid growth in the use of new media in the country throughout the past two decades.



2.2. New media. Digital media. Convergence media.

This decade of the 2010s has seen a local explosion of discourses on the Fourth Industrial Revolution, or the Industrial Revolution 4.0, especially among business leaders and politicians in the country. The idea is to promote a successful digitisation of all industrial and social sectors. According to the January 2020 report by DataReportal, Malaysia’s internet penetration rate is currently at 83%. This means that, out of 32.16 million Malaysians, 26.69 million Malaysians have, in various ways, access to Internet connection and its communicative affordances.

Furthermore, DataReportal also reports that 98% of Malaysians own mobile phones of any type, and 97% of Malaysians own smartphones of any type. 98% of Malaysians use their Internet-connected smartphones to watch videos, 56% listen to online radio stations, and at least 35% of the locals listen to podcasts.

The local media industry has since long moved online. Most, if not all, of the outlets mentioned in the previous section host respective online news portals. According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020, *Malaysiakini*, *Astro Awani Online*, and *The Star Online* are the three most consumed news portals among Malaysians. In fact, it is reported that, in 2020, 86% of Malaysians prefer online platforms to TV and print as sources of news. 81% of Malaysians use their smartphones to access the news. Moreover, new media portals have emerged in the past decade, such as *Between the Lines*, *CILISOS*, *SAYS*, and *WORLD OF BUZZ*. Entertainment or ‘humour’ media, such as MGAG which has over 200k followers on Instagram, have gained significant traction among Malaysians too.

However, with the growth of online platforms and use throughout Malaysia, overall distrust of news has also grown. The Reuters report notes that only 25% of their respondents trust the news most of the time, 31% trust the news that they personally “use,” and 17% trust the news on social media. Here, 24-hour TV news channel *Astro Awani* is one of the favourite sources of news among Malaysians due to their “sometimes critical approach to discussing news and current affairs.”

The larger phenomenon in Malaysia, in light of changing audience preferences and innovation within the media industry, is that new media platforms (online news portals, podcasts, online radio stations) and old media (TV, print, radio) co-exist, and could easily interact with each other. For instance, Malaysians access both the online news portal and the TV news programs from *Astro Awani*, *RTM*, and *TV3*. In other words, Malaysia is witnessing the continual expansion of convergence media, where different types and generations of platforms, old and new, can be accessed conveniently without much gatekeeping.

From the fieldwork, journalists have also observed that the younger generation in Malaysia don’t read news anymore. Even if they do, they often only read the headlines. This could be partly explained by the diversification of sources of attention-hacking. Indeed, this is also a threshold where news media, both online or print, are facing a possibility where the practice of media production has become widely and highly democratised. Malaysia is therefore also witnessing the rise of many independent media practitioners, especially with the use of social media. DataReportal highlights that, by January 2020, 91% of 16 to 64 years old Malaysians in their database “actively engaged with or contributed to social media.”



2.3. Social media. Independent media practitioners. Democratised media practices.

One example of an independent media practice would be *Between the Lines*, a Malaysian media startup, whose founders were interviewed during the fieldwork. They observed that traditional journalistic work has gradually been losing trust among the Malaysian public, not only because the people have become more aware about the ownership background of news outlets, but also because news stories today have become less well-rounded, less well-formed, and less well-researched.

With the use of digital, new, and social media, Malaysians have been building their own media stories. This is a fairly recent development in the media landscape (no longer just an ‘industry’) of Malaysia, where the distrust of traditional news sources and the rise of independent media practitioners (who may not have undergone professional training) have long and irrevocably disrupted the traditional boundaries between media producers and media consumers.

In Malaysia, the current favourite social media platforms are YouTube (93%), WhatsApp (91%), Facebook (89%), and Instagram (72%), according to [DataReportal](#) in 2020. In fact, WhatsApp has become one of the most actively engaged tools for group-building, information sharing, news links, gossiping, and discussion among the Malaysian grassroots.

Without much surprise, politicians no longer require the media industry to shape their public appearances or 'public image'. The ubiquity of social media would mean that politicians communicate with their electorates in the most direct manner, by tweets. In fact, many Malaysian parliamentarians today have their respective Twitter accounts, where they directly share, discuss, and debate their daily activities with the followers. As of 6 December 2020, Syed Saddiq, one of the founders of the youth-led political party Parti MUDA, has 273.6K followers on TikTok; the Democratic Action Party (DAP) has 3.77K followers on TikTok. Hannah Yeoh, parliamentarian for Segambut, hosts a six-episode podcast called Project Thought, where she narrates her professional development "in the world of politics." Politician Syed Saqqid has 1.8 million followers on Instagram. Former prime minister of Malaysia, Najib Razak, has 4.2 million followers on Twitter.

All these new possibilities and phenomena in the contemporary Malaysian media landscape would mean completely different implications for different stakeholders. In the context of promoting the freedom of religion, the right to factual reporting, and the opening up of spaces for healthy dialogue on religious matters, the expansion of convergence media and alternative media platforms might actually pave a bright way for exploring new participatory opportunities. On the other hand, questions regarding the future of journalism and the adaptation of the journalistic profession to the evolving media and technological scenes in Malaysia have become ever more difficult, urgent, but also unavoidable.

In light of the legal and economic constraints on the media industry, while taking into account the sharp rise of convergence media, what implications are there for local journalists, media practitioners, and various stakeholders who are committed to promoting religious freedom, inter-religious dialogue and expression, and the reporting of religious issues?



3) RELIGION IN THE MEDIA

One of the prime examples of reporting religious issues in Malaysia is the historic case of Lina Joy that lasted from 1990 to 2007. Lina Joy was born a Muslim and wanted to legally convert to Christianity. In 2010, two scholars of media and communication, in a research article titled ‘Covering Religious Conflict in Malaysia’, examined how *The Sin Chew Daily*, supposedly a Chinese vernacular newspaper, reported on the Lina Joy case, which was supposedly a Malay-Muslim concern. Their analysis reveals that, interestingly, *Sin Chew* drew from and included diverse perspectives, interpretations, and opinions in their coverage of the Lina Joy case: not only from politicians and faith communities, but also from “common civilians.” This diversity of viewpoints ensured that the “multifaceted nature” of the case was given due consideration and coverage.

Drawing a key lesson from the Lina Joy press coverage, the two scholars provided a recommendation that is particularly relevant to the context of this report:

“Instead of reporting on issues only when they arise, it would be good for journalists to write on religion and faith issues on a regular basis to try and bring about greater understanding.”

However, the present fieldwork would challenge that, despite the diversity and quality of discourses in *The Sin Chew Daily* in reporting that particular case, local reporting on religious issues, more broadly, often falls back into sensationalistic, dramatic, and/or sensitive terrains. It is equally fair to note that, because *Sin Chew* is a vernacular newspaper, it might not have garnered much unwanted and ungrounded national attention from outside the local Chinese community, as compared to, for instance, a Malay or English newspaper. This points to a question, that, whether an English-language or a Malay-language report, using the same ‘diversity’ approach, would have produced a similar effect of amalgamation as that in *Sin Chew*.

1

It is clear, firstly, religion remains a highly monitored topic both among political authorities and ordinary citizens due to an unresolved legacy of religious sensitivities.

2

Secondly, it has also become clear that the media and journalists are not entirely independent when reporting, writing, editing, and publishing, due to the regulatory roles of the media’s economic, political, and organisational backgrounds.

These two separate factors together explain why religion-related news stories and public conversations are particularly difficult to write, frame, and publish by the Malaysian mainstream news portals, journalists, and media practitioners.

To further complicate the issue, religious reporting in the media concerns the work, welfare, and safety of two broad categories of stakeholders: (1) the media and journalists, and (2) the faith communities. The series of needs assessment and interview sessions with both groups of stakeholders provides intimate insights into a collection of difficulties, challenges, and requirements for moving forward.

Samples of media reporting on religious festivities or events follow as screen captures:

From Malaysiakini



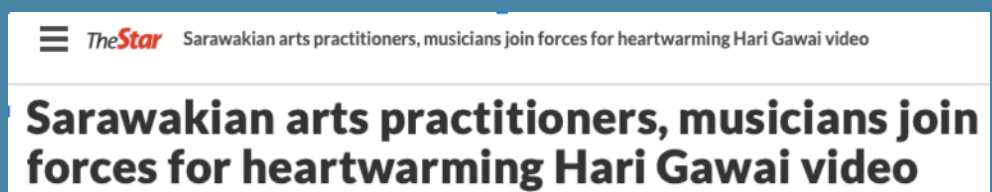
From Utusan Digital



From Bernama



From The Star





3.1. Journalists. Media. “Not much” an individual journalist can do.

Following are a summary list of all the key factors influencing religion-related reporting in Malaysia, as shared and discussed by key stakeholders during the needs assessment session as well as during the separate interview sessions. Although these may not make an absolutely exhaustive list, these might provide a useful overview about the difficulties faced by the media industry, especially when it comes to reporting religious and racial topics.

Ownership or editorial gatekeeping

The different agenda of the newsrooms, influenced by the preferences of the owners and editors, may affect how race and religion are reported. Thus, there tends to be self-censorship within newsrooms because most editors are reluctant to rock the boat or take risks. A case study would be *Malaysiakini*. According to an assistant news editor from *Malaysiakini*, it has always been a controversial media outlet. Prior to the Pakatan Harapan (PH) government ruling, it experienced persecution from the ruling government at the time. After the Pakistan Harapan government took over, people thought they were pro-government. Editors in the *Malaysiakini* newsroom are very on the ball with reminding journalists to be balanced in their reporting. Every story that comes in gets vetted.

Political influence

Many if not most media companies in Malaysia have a political affiliation, and editors and media workers should be loyal to the instructions, rules, and “loose structures” of the companies under which they choose to serve; and otherwise, “you should resign.”

Legal ramifications

Media workers are legally responsible for many things they do, and hence, there is a greater vigilance when reporting such sensitive topics as race and religion. “Even if it is just one individual, it can result in the media company losing its printing licence, it can result in many people losing their jobs.” Smaller online media portals, who may not need to worry about losing their print licenses, do not have the funding required to hire legal teams to deal with these ramifications.

A public service ethos, and the degree or the lack of it

Conditioned under a legacy of political patronage, how much political will and public service spirit do local journalists still hold in their work? How much are journalists and media practitioners willing to represent not just religious and racial diversity, but also socioeconomic diversity?

Sensitivity of the topic

It is challenging to differentiate between race, religion, and culture in Malaysia. Many non-religious or non-racial issues can be easily racialised and made religious. This raises the fear towards the possible outcomes of reporting actual religious and racial issues. “In the worst case scenario, it can result in racial conflict.”

Sources, knowledge, and research

The media lacks a basic knowledge of all the religions in Malaysia. And even those who do have the knowledge do not always have access to the right sources / contacts to quote in their stories. It can be difficult for journalists to know which sources to speak to when covering religion-related topics. Ultimately, this can result in stories that are perhaps one-sided. It's also especially difficult because there are many religions practised in Malaysia. And it can be a challenge to find someone who's well-versed with every single of them. At the moment, there is no one-stop portal for religious resources and existing journalist associations focus on more general issues. The International Association of Religion Journalists only recently developed a presence in Malaysia and currently only has one Malaysian spearheading its activities.

Major lack of funding, targeted training in religion-related reportage, (human) resources, and a normative ethical framework

The world of news in Malaysia is fast-paced and newsrooms are understaffed. Many of them do not have the capacity to train their journalists and also editors. What is more, while religion remains integral to Malaysian society, there is a surprising lack of resources dedicated to training and support in this area within newsrooms. Ultimately, newsrooms do not have a formal framework for consistently and effectively reporting religious issues. For example, one of the biggest issues at *The Malay Mail* is that the editorial team is very small. Thus, there is no one available to specialise on writing about religion even though it is so imbued in the Malaysian daily life. In the case of *Astro Ulagam*, whose content is catered to the local Indian audience, the team is small: three (3) full-time on editorial, who cannot do much hard-hitting news content which requires a much larger team and budget. Training that the *Astro Ulagam* team might also need are videography and multimedia editing.

East Malaysia, esp. Sabah

Religion is not a key issue in Sabah or Sarawak. While there have been cases of Islamic sermons with anti-Shia sentiment in Peninsular Malaysia, this has not been the case in Sabah. Sermons focus on unity, rather than deviance. While Peninsular Malaysia may be promoting tolerance, the East Malaysian states have gone beyond that into acceptance. This is also encouraged by the fact that there are a large number of mixed marriages in Sabah and Sarawak. In fact, it may be common for a Christmas family gathering to include Muslims, Christians and other folk religions. Nevertheless, journalists in both Sabah and Sarawak need more training in the areas of: 1) using new technologies; 2) critical thinking and resource gathering; and 3) legal training, especially with regards to slander, plagiarism, and security. Thus, the main issue for journalists in East Malaysia is not censorship, but workers' rights. Young journalists are not well-trained enough. Most get news delivered to them via Whatsapp, and they file these stories as-is, sometimes without follow-up research or fact-checking due to the lack of manpower.



3.2. Faith communities. Positive portrayal. Outreach.

Following is a list of requirements and standards as suggested by the faith communities during the fieldwork. It is suggested that these basic standards for reporting religious issues would effectively aid in promoting and elevating greater spaces for inter-religious interactions and diverse religious representation in the long run.

Accurate information about and basic knowledge of the religions

Journalists are often from “gentrified” backgrounds. Many have higher education, some with advanced degrees and were educated overseas. Because of their background, they may lack empathy and understanding of what someone from the B40 group (40% of the population with the lowest income) or faith communities may have gone through. Religion-related stories should include accurate information about the religion that is reported. At the same time, faith groups would welcome questions from journalists and media practitioners who would need better detail about specific issues.

Equal representation and presence

Some religions have far better coverage and representation in the media compared to others. Moreover, miscommunication sometimes occurs even within a specific religious community due to the age and generation gaps. (For instance, young people tend to be more progressive, while the older generation are reluctant to challenge the status quo.) News reports and media stories should ensure that specific arguments, perspectives, and ideas are equally represented and accurately presented.

Positive stories about religious or faith communities in the country

There’s a higher tendency for the media to cover religion-related topics in a negative light. There are hardly any positive stories, or the presentation of the notion that “it’s okay to disagree.” In other words, the media can portray issues in a positive manner. Events of inter-religious interactions, such as when non-Muslims were welcomed into the mosque to join the breaking of fast, could be sought, gathered, and reported.

Promoting mutual understanding, unity, and communications

Religion is usually played up by politicians during their election campaigns. But on the ground among citizens, interactions between races and religious communities are often not as divisive, dangerous, or risky as has been imagined or has been made to believe. Thus, mutual understanding and inter-religious communication should be further promoted, because communities would have something new to learn from one another. Journalists and media practitioners could help shape a public that discusses (religious) differences without having to silence each other.

Promoting constructive reflection

How do we finetune communications? Is unity only the absence of conflict? Should religion be kept in the private sphere? How can spiritual insights be used to address quotidian concerns? How will interfaith coexistence, harmony, and synergy be cultivated? One important thing to note is representation of minorities in Malaysian media, including local TV dramas and movies. The majority of local entertainment do not feature diverse casts, but rather focus on specific storylines that call within a certain community. The closest inter-racial narratives that have received generally wide-spread acceptance are the late Yasmin Ahmad’s movies such as *Sepet* (2005) and *Talenthime* (2009), which were produced over a decade ago. Advertisements produced by government-linked companies during festival periods also typically feature elements of diversity and inter-racial harmony. However, these only take place several times in a year and do not form a major part of the ongoing discourse.

4) LESSONS FROM THE ‘DIVERSE VOICES’ SERIES

In August and November 2020, Projek Dialog hosted a ‘Diverse Voices’ workshop series. This was prepared as an experimental training session, learning opportunity, and platform for knowledge exchange for local journalists and independent media practitioners. Specific activities in the series included:



- Search Engine Optimisation (SEO)
- Social media and news
- Press freedom and the Malaysian legal system
- Finding sources, balanced reporting, fact-checking
- Digital and physical security
- Interfaith panel discussion (two sessions)



The SEO and social media sessions provided a helpful update for the participants on contemporary communication technologies. A key lesson from the SEO workshop is that journalists, many if not mostly writing for online news portals today, should stay sensitised and up-to-date about how websites can get and stay on the top of search results in the Google search engine. This is especially crucial for the mainstream news media, because, in light of the most basic duty of public service, professional journalism and fact-based news media should always stay higher than fraudulent or sensational sites in the Google page rank. The social media session was organised as a seminar-style activity. Participants were active in sharing their experiences and ideas on every latest social media platform and trend, and the specific type of content that would usually acquire the better engagement rates in every platform. The speaker’s most stressed tips for the participants are that, firstly, “video is the thing” in today’s media consumption, and secondly, journalists and media practitioners should always adapt to the behaviour of their audiences, because one should not “assume that your users are super interested.” In another session on social media, participants were given best practices for developing social media campaigns, as well as provided with tools for quick social media content production.

The session on ‘Media and Law’ in Malaysia provided a lawyer’s expert overview of the Malaysian legal system and court system to the participants. The speaker designed the presentation in a way that connects this legal system to key concerns in the development of press freedom. Particular legislations that the speaker mentioned include the Sedition Act 1948, the Official Secret Acts 1972, and the Communications and Multimedia Act 1988. In addition, she provided practical, helpful, and standard advice for the participants on how to calmly and confidently address police or legal encroachment when a publication has been deemed unlawful or controversial. Two key lessons can be drawn from this session.

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The session on Finding Sources began with a fascinating question for the participants. Is there a difference between facts and truths? Or, what is objectivity? This is not a rhetorical question, but a question about the fundamental ethics of a professional journalist. Here, the speaker and facilitator is trying to lead the participants to the difficult terrain of journalistic work, and suggest that decisions are often not straightforward and easy in this domain. For instance, how many sources are 'enough' for a story? Who or whose agenda would benefit from the current angle in a story? What is considered a 'good story'? What is 'good' investigative journalism?



The speaker's main point must be understood in three steps. Firstly, "everyone is biased." Bias is natural, because it is necessary for self-protection. But bias may lead to discrimination and danger for the others. Thus, secondly, she provided a checklist for countering bias in reporting for the participants. In this seemingly simple checklist, three crucial items include (1) ensuring at least a diversity of voices and sources, (2) fact-checking every piece of information (e.g. number, picture, audio file, video, statement), and (3) avoiding loaded, sensationalistic, and ungrounded language choices and items. Thirdly, the speaker still warns that one can neither guarantee completely eliminating bias, nor rely on a checklist to produce a 'good report'. The task and goal of diverse and balanced reporting finally depend on the professional and ethical experience of the journalist him or herself. She also shared a BBC piece of investigative journalism, 'Cameroon: Anatomy of a Killing', which she treated to be a decent model for journalists. This session on the whole provided an interesting, helpful, and practical introduction to source gathering and research work in a usual journalistic routine.

The sessions on physical and digital security highlighted the specific ways in which journalists can protect themselves when on assignment.



On physical security, the speaker emphasised that journalists should (1) conduct comprehensive research on requirements, locations and environments as part of an assessment of potential risks, (2) always be aware of the situation and geography of where one is, and (3) pay attention to a list of self-protective practices such as securing valuable belongings, getting familiarised with emergency routes, conducting meetings or interviews in secure and neutral environments, *et cetera*.

On digital security, the facilitators conducted an interactive process, from a needs assessment and a case study on the public backlash against and police investigation into Al-Jazeera and migrant workers (i.e. sources), to a semi-structured, needs-based delivery session as informed by earlier sessions. Lessons included a clear understanding of local sensitivity on key issues, narrative angles and framing, anonymity for the sources, and where necessary, letting the source materials speak for themselves. Furthermore, identity management and account security were also discussed for protection against security issues such as online threats, identity theft, social media hacking, and doxxing. Finally, the facilitators suggest that digital safety protocols can only be decided when one has done a needs assessment (i.e. what does one need), a risk assessment (i.e. what risk might one face), and an evaluation of available budget resources (i.e. how much and what does one currently have).

The two interfaith panel sessions gathered different viewpoints from seven different speakers of different backgrounds, including an atheist. One apparent observation is the strong roles that religion still plays in the everyday life of many Malaysians. This was observed after both sessions invited the speakers to first describe the religious backgrounds from which they come. Following are seven key lessons from both interfaith events:

Religion in-itself

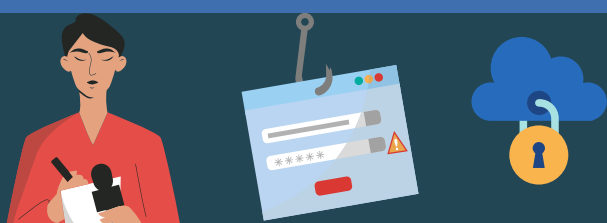
Although the religious backgrounds from which the speakers respectively come are different, a few have stressed that Malaysians should start looking at the commonalities between them. Both sessions discussed why religion needs to be separated from the local “political game,” and religion should be understood as allowing psychic stability and self-understanding in the private, and even more, as a foundation of community-building and community services. Further, speakers also shared that young Malaysians and their senior counterparts might practise religion differently. Furthermore, a few also shared that even within each religion, there are diverse schools of interpretation which should each be respected. The continuing relevance and great influences of religions in the Malaysian quotidian suggest that the mainstream media should continue to pay attention to reporting religious issues and to issues of religious freedom.

Religious sensitivity

Speakers from the sessions were well aware that religion has been a special category in Malaysia, because it remains difficult for politicians to not involve religion in their political “interpretation.” Race, religion, and culture are almost staunchly intertwined, and thus, the slightest provocation or disagreement may lead to public conflict. This sensitive attitude impedes healthier conversations on religion, and inhibits Malaysians from looking at the more interesting and innovative sides to each religion.

Religion and politics

Political use of religion, for the speakers, imposes a strong limit on what religion is. Religion in Malaysia is often overly power-laden. The speakers questioned the unequal gender relations and the unfettered authority of religious scholars that are entrenched beneath local religious discourses. Key questions included why Christians are often accused of trying to convert local Muslims, and why religious families often pay excessive attention to the clothing choices of their daughters.



Religion and human rights

An example of the political use of religion is how human rights issues can be made religious issues. Some of the speakers raised that when marginalised communities get discriminated against and receive hate speech or even death threats online, politicians resort to religion to justify human rights and why they should be protected. A question from the second panel to this type of discourse is why fundamental and constitutionally guaranteed human rights cannot be recognised simply as they are, and must be 'filtered' with an additional religious background.

Religion and the media

Many faith communities and organisations aim to promote the key message of coexistence, collaboration, communication, and friendship among Malaysians of very diverse backgrounds. This is one of the strongest findings out of the two interfaith panels. However, they do not possess the large-scale communicative reach, representation, and resources that their objectives might require. Some questioned whether local journalists have the adequate level of religious literacy to produce religion-related reportage. Most on the panel have actually welcomed and invited the mainstream media to seek clarifications and additional details from faith communities such as theirs, when reporting or writing on relevant stories. The speakers also recommended that religious issues should be reported in a way that goes beyond the categories of being sensitive, censorious, or intolerant.

Religion and community service

One speaker shared on how religious communities can organise community or neighbourhood activities for fellow citizens of different backgrounds. Recommended is that the United Nations' sixteenth (16th) Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) on 'Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions' could be "actualised" via community services of this type. For instance, activities such as mediation roundtables and conflict resolution have been organised within local neighbourhoods to promote harmony and collaboration among neighbours and communities, particularly in PPR Sri Sarawak (Kuala Lumpur) and PPR Desa Mentari (close to Sunway).

The lack of funding for under-represented projects

A few have mentioned that faith communities have themselves become independent media practitioners and they organise their own outreach and community activities. However, when it comes to media or publicity projects on under-represented stories of Malaysian society, such as a public arts exhibition, a niche website, or even mainstream journalistic projects, a prevailing concern is the lack of funding and resources.



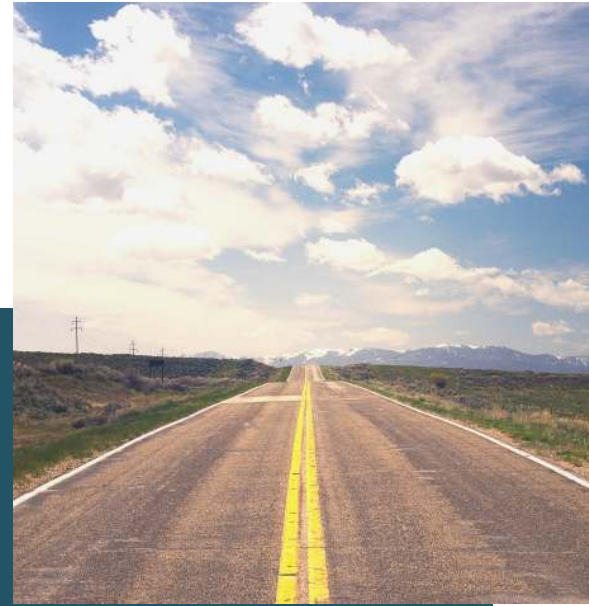
5) MOVING FORWARD

The journey of building a diverse, friendly, and never-authoritarian nation is long, often difficult, and most likely a grassroots and collaborative one. This fieldwork only provided a glimpse into what is possible, what is needed, and what is calling. In a nation where resources, attention, and cultural energy remain overly invested in a centralising and homogenising structure of development, Malaysia might risk overlooking real and under-represented stories and voices.

On the one hand, faith communities in Malaysia seem to constantly find ways to reach out to each other and to Malaysians who may not necessarily share their backgrounds. This already contradicts the assumption that local religions are often intolerant towards each other. Rather, what is required is a platform for dialogue, representation, and to use a term that a 'Diverse Voices' panellist used, mediation.

On the other hand, media practitioners and journalists have helped the fieldwork reflect on the material and political conditions in which local stories about religion are shaped. More importantly, going beyond the 'helicopter view', the project gradually learned what is actually going on from the ground. In fact, one of the journalists has described this constant anxiety over potential punishment, public backlash, and being dismissed as an "unspoken structure." The lesson is, journalists themselves called for empowering, training, and organising. Most journalists mentioned the lack of sustainable resources. **While there are existing journalist groups and unions, including the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) and Institute of Journalists (IOJ) in Malaysia, these are not focused on supporting the religious reporting process. Rather, they provide more general support for journalists.** However, one new development this year was the presence of the International Association of Religion Journalists (IARJ) in Malaysia. Its activities in Malaysia are currently being led by Zurairi A.R. from the Malay Mail.

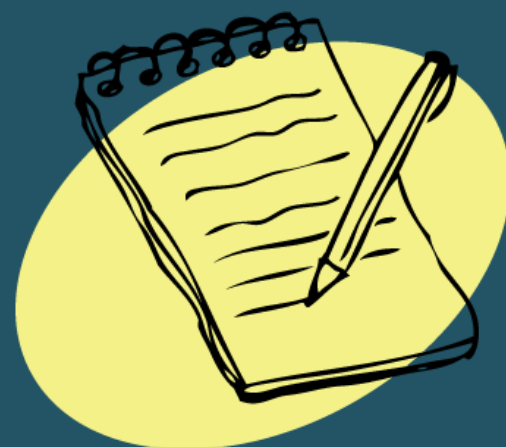
Media representation of religious and community issues, expanding platforms for interfaith discussion, and a broader understanding and spirit of friendship among different communities, ask for future endeavours. For these possible futures, the report concludes with a number of questions and recommendations.



5.1. Key questions.

- **How do we improve the quality of journalism in Malaysia, if most media companies continue to be backed by corporations and/or political party actors?**

Currently, the majority of mainstream media is owned by public-listed media companies, with the main shareholders being corporations and/or political parties. For example, the largest shareholder in Star Media Group Bhd — which owns The Star Newspaper, mStar, as well as magazines and radio stations — is the Malaysian Chinese Association, a political party in Malaysia that represents Malaysians of Chinese ethnicity. Smaller media companies do not have the same financial backing as these larger media companies. It's not surprising that there is a lack of investigative journalism in Malaysia as media ownership can sometimes have effects on freedom of expression. On the other hand, smaller media companies may not have the resources to fund these stories, or to deal with possible legal repercussions that may result.



- **How do we increase the communications between journalists, religious organisations, faith communities, and relevant governmental bodies, such as the Religious Affairs Ministry in the Prime Minister's Department?**

The needs assessments and interviews informed that the various stakeholders do have an interest to communicate with each other for the promotion of diverse religious reporting in the Malaysian media. However, each of these stakeholders faced different issues in the matter. Journalists do want to be in contact with religious groups and stakeholders for news sources. Religious stakeholders, in turn, also want to contact journalists more actively and more conveniently for media coverage. On a broader scale, the interview with the secretary to Religious Affairs minister in the Prime Minister's Department revealed that interreligious understanding and dialogue should be better fostered. Yet, the common question arises as to how a cross-industry platform for dialogue, debate, and collaboration would look like.

- **What would a journalism and media training program on reporting socioeconomic and religious diversities in Malaysia look like?**

Based on our interviews, we found that the majority of practising journalists are middle-class, university graduates who do not always have extended exposure outside of their socioeconomic class, race, or religion. Ethnic segregation still occurs at education institutes, which means Malaysians are unlikely to have friends outside their own ethnic groups. There is also a socio-economic gap that is sometimes used to create tension between races, as well as a lack of knowledge of other religions besides one's own that leads to disagreements between people of different religions.



- To what extent are the structural and technical predicaments in local journalism a part of the chronic lack of long-term investments and sustainable budget allocation in the local creative, arts, and media industries?

While the Malaysian Government allocates a sizable budget for the creative industry, this budget is often channeled into funding schemes that are focused on short-term initiatives, rather than long-term creative development. The bulk of the budget is typically focused on outputs and deliverables ie. “creative products”, with very little emphasis on continuous development such as training, infrastructure, and institution building.

5.2 Recommendations

1 Practice more strategic funding and budget allocation approaches

As previously mentioned, many of the available grants and budget allocations are focused on short-term initiatives. There is a need to increase the availability of funding sources to support long-form journalism and underrepresented stories – whether written, sonic, or audio-visual – in a more long-term manner, rather than by supporting one-off story production. In the age of new media, audience attention is also highly dependent on format, as well as scale of distribution. Funding and budget allocations should also take these things into account. For example, a video would require a larger budget compared to a written piece published in print format.



2 Strengthen local discourse and provide access to skill-building resources

One way to increase the focus on more long-term strategies is to promote more platforms for local discourse, through forums, roundtable sessions and content. It is not enough for these discussions to happen in small clusters; the content should also be amplified. This requires training on the latest digital media technologies, as well as on the basics of interfaith reporting in Malaysia. While many of the religions in Malaysia may also be practiced worldwide, there are nuances that are unique to Malaysia. There is a need to understand local contexts and thus, having a central resource portal for this information would be helpful.

3 Increase communication between journalists and marginalised communities

Journalists are trained to reduce bias and interview diverse sources in their reporting. However, this is not always easy to do, especially when it comes to marginalised communities who might be unwilling to go on the record. Besides being trained to ensure the safety of these sources, journalists first of all, need to be able to find them. There is a need for a safe and secure platform for journalists and representatives from these communities to communicate with one another.

