

Impact of COVID-19 on media freedom, journalist safety and media viability in Southeast Asia



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He is a veteran radio journalist and served as the Program Director of Radio Republik Indonesia (Indonesian public radio), Jakarta headquarters, from 2010–2012. He has published several books about the Indonesian broadcasting system and his articles have appeared in such scholarly journals as *GAZETTE*, *Journalism Studies*, *Journal of Digital Media & Policy*, and *Media Asia*. Masduki has a particular interest in media policy, journalism, comparative media, and broadcasting systems. His recent book is titled: *Public Service Broadcasting and Post-Authoritarian Indonesia* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2020).

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Janess Ann J. Ellao is a journalist for alternative online news *Bulatlat*, where she covers human rights, health, women and children, and other pressing issues affecting marginalised communities in the Philippines. She finished her communication degree at St. Scholastica's College – Manila, and her Master's in Journalism at the Asian Institute of Journalism and Communication. During the pandemic, she began her new podcast, *Media Matters with Ja Ellao*, where she tackles news literacy and other emerging media issues.

Kirsten Han

Kirsten Han is a Singaporean journalist and activist who runs *We, The Citizens*, a weekly e-newsletter covering Singapore's politics and social justice issues from a rights-based perspective. She also regularly freelances for international media publications; her byline has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, *Foreign Policy*, and more. She received an Honourable Mention in 2018 for the World Justice Project's Anthony Lewis Prize for Exceptional Rule of Law Journalism, and a Human Rights Press Award in 2019 for her commentaries on "fake news" and freedom of expression.

Outside of journalism, Kirsten is a member of the Transformative Justice Collective, where she advocates for Singapore to abolish the death penalty and move towards harm reduction and transformative justice approaches.

Jessada Salathong, Ph.D

Jessada Salathong, PhD, is a lecturer and Chairperson of the MSCM Programme at the Faculty of Communication Arts and a former Assistant to the President for International Affairs at Chulalongkorn University, Thailand. He is also a project manager of "Trusted Media Thailand", which focuses on capacity building for fact-checking among future journalists. Jessada is also a veteran international news commentator, news anchor,

radio host and bi-lingual MC. He has experience working with several media and news agencies including TNN World, MCOT, Nation Multimedia and Spring News in Thailand as well as NHK World in Japan. He holds masters and doctoral degrees in international studies from Waseda University, Japan, and a bachelor's degree in Environmental Science from Thammasat University Thailand.

Zevonia Vieira

Zevonia Vieira is Chairwoman of Timor-Leste Journalist Association. She has been a journalist for 18 years, having first began volunteering at the Sahe Media Popular production house to produce documentaries. In 2006, Zevonia was made Editor-in-Chief of the Weekly newspaper Kla'ak.

Zevonia has also worked in the field of media development in Timor-Leste, producing radio documentaries about the stories of women in guerrilla, clandestine and diaspora groups. She also works at Search For Common Ground as a media manager to provide training for community radio about youth for peace building, and empowering women to access formal justice and elections. In 2007, she received the Balibo Five Media award in the best print journalist category.

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She is also a trainer for digital and media literacy (digital safety and physical safety), journalism (peace journalism, gender and environment) as well as a researcher, focusing on education, women and media sector in Timor-Leste.

Dr Hang Dinh

Dr. Hang Dinh is currently working as an Associate Professor at the Academy of Journalism and Communication (AJC), and as the Director of the Center for Further Training of Vietnamese Journalists, Vietnam Journalist Association (VJA). Dr Dinh has extensive experience in professional training, including international capacity building projects as she worked with many international media development projects.

Earlier in her career, Dr Hang Dinh worked for Vietnam National Television's (VTV) News and Current Affairs Department for more than 20 years. She is the author of numerous books and journal articles in the field of media and journalism.

Anrike Visser

Anrike Visser is a media executive, journalist, trainer and media viability expert. In 2018, she founded Global Ground Media, an online publication for investigative journalism in Asia. In addition, a training centre was founded to support independent media and freedom of expression in developing countries in Asia. Global Ground Media offers training in investigative journalism, (digital) security and media viability and is supported by Deutsche Welle Akademie, International Media Support, Free Press Unlimited, Transparency International, Google News Initiative, News Impact Academy, and the Solutions Journalism Network.

In the past, Anrike worked with media organisations on developing sustainable business models and becoming donor-independent. In addition to working in media, she was a consultant and marketing specialist for early-stage startups in Europe and Asia. Previously, Anrike worked at the Netherlands Authority for the Financial Markets as a financial crime investigator. She is a recipient of the Dalla Lana Fellowship in Global Journalism.

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Therese Torres is the Director of the Research, Policy, and Advocacy Unit of the Asian Institute of Journalism and Communication (AIJC) in Manila, Philippines. She also teaches journalism, research writing, communication planning, and communication for development at the Miriam College Department of Communication, and serves as a Board Member of the International Association of Women in Radio and Television (IAWRT) Philippine chapter. Her studies in media and information literacy, mindful journalism, and the safety of journalists have been published in books by Nordicom, International Media Support, SAGE Publications, IGI Global, and UNESCO.

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Cecile C. A. Balgos

Cecile is a Manila-based writer and editor. She was with the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) for more than two decades and sat on its Board of Editors for several years. She has also been editor at the Inter Press Service, as well as for the Fellowship Program of the Southeast Asian Press Alliance (SEAPA). Balgos has written and edited books not only for PCIJ and SEAPA, but also for other organisations such as the Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation and Panos. She holds a Master of Arts (major in Asian Studies) and a Master of Journalism, both from the University of California at Berkeley.

J.B. Biswokarma

J.B. Biswokarma is a researcher, writer, and editor based in Nepal. He holds an MA in Journalism and Mass Communication, and leads the Dignity Initiative, a research organisation. He has worked with various national and international institutions including the UNESCO Office in Kathmandu, Kathmandu University, and the Governance Facility. He has authored a research-based book entitled “Dalit in Nepali Media: Contents and Participation”, and has written several journal articles, policy papers, book chapters, and newspaper articles on media, and social-political issues from the marginalised perspective. He is also an assistant editor of the Journal of Dalit Studies.

Foreword

By Guy Berger

*IPDC Secretary and Director for Policies and Strategies on
Communication and Information at UNESCO*

It's a common experience, but it's not always well recognised.

What is it?

The answer: it's today's reality that access to reliable and accurate information can be lifesaving. And it's also the reality, in turn, that free, independent and professional journalism is therefore vital.

Yet, there's also another side to this current reality. Media is under unprecedented strain. The COVID-19 pandemic has gravely impacted journalists' safety, and it has been exploited for new press freedom crackdowns. In addition, it has further challenged media viability – especially where advertising is a significant part of paying the bills.

So, there is a paradox today: one of intensified benefits – and intensified threats – to journalism.

Little recognised by policymakers or the public, this tension is highlighted in UNESCO's *2021/2022 Global Report: World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development*.

This is now complimented by this new research report from the Public Media Alliance (PMA). We have here a timely output that helps to highlight the paradox – and what can be done to preserve the benefits and reduce the existential threats.

Funded by UNESCO's International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC), this report provides a good understanding of the pandemic's impact on media freedom, viability and journalists' safety in Southeast Asia. The insights are based on a regional consultation involving nine Southeast Asian countries, and they draw from UNESCO diagnostic tools such as the Journalists' Safety Indicators, Media Development Indicators and Media Viability Indicators.

By analysing the impact of the COVID-19 global health crisis in this region, this research report commendably identifies appropriate solutions tailored to this context. The ideas for a regional recovery plan cover the need for sustainable and effective standards, and for innovative approaches during – and beyond – the COVID-19 crisis.

One of the key findings in the report points to the need for media houses to share good practices and innovative solutions, underlining that media collaboration at a regional level is essential to push back against media freedom violations.

These are ideas that resonate with the mission of IPDC, which is the UN's multilateral forum set up more than 40 years ago to mobilise the international

community to promote media development. As an intergovernmental committee operating at UNESCO, IPDC has financed several initiatives to respond to the current challenging trends.

In parallel to IPDC's work, in November 2021, the 193 Member States of UNESCO gave their support with acclamation to the principles of the Windhoek +30 Declaration. The Declaration, adopted at World Press Freedom Day, keeps current the need for media freedom, pluralism and independence – but also adds three new needs to the agenda. These are the imperative for steps to be taken to assure media viability, Internet transparency and the audience's literacy about digital communications.

I encourage PMA and its members to use your new research plus the Windhoek+30 Declaration to raise awareness of the need for an enabling environment for a sustainable, free and independent media system.

If no one knows the challenges facing media, society will lose the benefit of information as a public good. Together with the PMA report, we can sound the alarm before it's too late.

Introduction

Strengthening regional solidarity to promote free and fearless media

Laxman Datt Pant

Background

As the world reels from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, many news outlets are struggling to survive and media workers, notably journalists, have faced unprecedented risks to their physical and mental well-being amid unrelenting and intensified crackdowns on press freedom. News media organisations worldwide were already under significant pressure prior to the start of the pandemic. There are now¹ further major impacts on the media landscape.

Southeast Asia has certainly been no exception to this situation of growing concern regarding the strength and independence of media. In the face of rising authoritarianism across the 677 million-strong region, systemic problems and structural challenges confronting media environments have been exacerbated by the pandemic. In part this has been due to the passing of more repressive legislation that has made the work of journalists in the region even more difficult and access to information for citizens more daunting. This comes alongside steep revenue drops, making operations for many news outlets unsustainable. The resulting forced media shutdowns across many parts of Southeast Asia are a cause of deep concern, especially against the backdrop of the region's fragile democracies.

Creating a safe and enabling environment for media and journalists to be able to work independently is a prerequisite for democracies to flourish. The issues pertaining to the safety of journalists and media sustainability during a time of crisis, such as COVID-19, requires attention from all stakeholders, including both state and non-state actors.

While the issue of journalists' safety is important for any region or country, observations show that it is now especially critical for countries in Southeast Asia, as many authorities in the region have attempted² to suppress free and independent media during COVID-19 – by introducing laws that control independent voices and censor news. Labelling journalistic content as being 'fake news', or disinformation, in order to weaken the media's role in holding the state to account, and disregarding the international principles of a free press, are some of the common problems the region is currently facing.

From internet shutdowns and insecure online connections prone to government censorship, to restrictions on journalists posing uncomfortable questions during virtual press briefings, journalists and media workers experienced a multitude of attempts to restrict freedom of expression and access to information in their respective countries. While questions from the media were 'strictly vetted' during

daily press conferences in Brunei, journalists in Cambodia were reportedly ‘arrested, jailed, sued and fined’. A ‘stonewall’ culture has reportedly become more apparent in Thailand with information being withheld for ‘national security’ reasons and media reports on the vaccine roll-out being at risk of defamation suits or visa revocation.

Process and methodology

This report – *the Impact of COVID-19 on Media Freedom, Media Business Viability and the Safety of Journalists in Southeast Asia*, provides an assessment of the current regional media landscape and shares insights that may assist the building of regional solidarity for media stakeholders, including rights organisations and media houses. The aim is to help authorities realise ‘free press matters’ in order to foster democracy and media freedom.

The study was carried out over a period of seven months in nine countries: Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam.

Through desk-based research, regional and in-country virtual consultations with multiple stakeholders, and a mapping exercise via a PMA questionnaire, this report seeks to identify and recommend sustainable and effective standards, potential solutions, and innovations for media business viability; media freedom; and the safety of journalists in the Southeast Asia region during and beyond the current pandemic.

UNESCO’s Journalists’ Safety Indicators (JSI): National Level³ highlight the role of stakeholders in addressing safety and the issue of impunity. The first general indicator to assess the situation of journalists’ safety demands the availability of pertinent data on various aspects of journalists’ safety, whereas the second one emphasises an accurate understanding amongst stakeholders about the extent and nature of problems relating to the safety of journalists. By ensuring the participation of various stakeholders in virtual consultations and the questionnaire, as outlined by the JSI, this study has used both primary and secondary data and observations to highlight the pressing media safety and sustainability issues across the region.

This report was prepared by working closely with media stakeholders in the region. The draft report was also presented to media stakeholders for discussion and feedback via an online meeting followed by four virtual in-country meetings in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand.

The draft Regional Media Recovery Plan compiled as part of this report addresses key concerns regarding the safety of journalists, media business viability and media freedom and provides recommendations to better equip journalists, media houses and the wider media environment in the region with useful and practical ways of responding to the challenges during and beyond the COVID-19 crisis.

The third and key approach of this study consisted of a mapping exercise (see appendix) conducted by PMA via a questionnaire that gathered up-to-date observations from media stakeholders including journalists, media practitioners,

policymakers, press councils, academics, and media NGO representatives in the Southeast Asian region.

This study employs the research methodology envisioned by UNESCO's Journalists' Safety Indicators, Media Development Indicators, and the Media Viability Indicators. Hence, as per the nature of data, both the qualitative and the quantitative research approaches are used. Methodologically, this study employs mixed methods consisting of a desk review of relevant study corpus, interviews with key informants via a questionnaire, virtual regional and in-country expert consultations and insights from in-country consultation meetings.

Major findings

Safety of Journalists

Respondents to the mapping exercise in this study (see Appendix) considered protection from threats, harassment or surveillance, and freedom from self-censorship as the major factors in ensuring the safety of journalists. While almost half of all respondents (30/61 or 49.2%) agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased threats to the safety of journalists, most participants (38 out of 58 responses or 65.5%) disagreed with feeling physically and mentally safe while doing their job during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The top three factors that contributed to respondents feeling unsafe were the fear of contracting or spreading COVID-19 (36/41 respondents or 87.8%); trauma or stress (31/41 respondents or 75.6%) and job insecurity/financial problems (24/41 respondents or 58.5%)

Of key concern is that governments and politicians were considered the most prominent perpetrators of threats and attacks on journalists and media workers, accounting for 26 out of 61 respondents (42.6%). This was followed by the public (18 out of 61 or 29.5%) and the police or army (7 respondents or 11.5%).

An overwhelming 45.9% of respondents believe that threats and attacks on journalists tended to take place both online and offline. Almost a quarter of participants (24.6%) believe that attacks and threats took place online only, while 16.4% believe that they took place while reporting on location.

Regarding training and support for journalist safety, more than half of the respondents (33 out of 58 respondents or 56.9%) declared that they have never received any type of media safety training. Some organisations do appear to have policies or codes in place to protect and ensure the safety of staff online and while reporting in the field, according to 31 out of 56 (55.4%) respondents. However, one fifth of respondents (12 out of 56 or 21.4%) admitted to not having any safety policies or codes in place, while almost a quarter (13 respondents or 23.2%) admitted to not having any knowledge that such policies or codes might exist within their organisations.

Experts and stakeholders of the regional⁴ and in-country virtual consultations urged for unanimous regional solidarity from media rights organisations and media houses to help authorities realise 'free press matters' to foster democracy and freedom. They concluded that only through a strong and united front will the media

be in a better position to explore meaningful solutions to the deeply entrenched problems affecting them, including systematic attacks against media freedom.

The regional overview on the safety of journalists under this study found that the pandemic is having a major impact on different aspects of journalists' health and safety. Journalists in the region operate within an environment where harassment, threats, and attacks on the press and other forms of repression and violations of press freedom are reported year after year. While in Indonesia, most of the reported attacks on journalists in 2020 involved intimidation and physical violence, nearly 54 percent of media practitioners in Malaysia experienced security concerns. In the Philippines and Indonesia, physical forms of gender-based violence against women journalists have also been reported, including being touched, pushed, and hit.

Media Freedom and the issue of disinformation

Just over half of respondents (30 out of 56 or 53.6%) said that they were unable to freely cover stories during the pandemic, compared with 26/56 (46.4%) who said they could. Of those that faced restrictions, the main three factors included being denied access to information from public, government, or official health records (24 out of 34 responses or 70.6%); lack of access to sources for stories (23 responses or 67.6%) and police restricting journalists from reporting or broadcasting (14 responses or 41.2%).

An overwhelming majority of journalists and media practitioners said that they experienced the need to self-censor their reporting at some point during the pandemic. This ranged from 'very often' (6 out of 56 responses or 10.7%) and 'often' (7/56 or 12.5%), to sometimes (25/56 or 44.6%) and 'rarely' (8/56 or 14.3%).

A majority of respondents (98.4% or 60 out of 61) believe that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the spread of mis- and disinformation, and it was identified that social media was the main source of this spread, accounting for 57.4% or 35 out of 61 respondents, followed by government agencies (8/61 or 13.1%) and the public/community (7/61 or 11.5%).

Respondents shared various ways of confronting mis- and disinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic, including rigorous fact-checking tools; using clear and evidence-based reporting; challenging official statements and corroboration or de-bunking conspiracy theories related to COVID-19 and vaccines; launching fact-checking blogs or columns; engaging with specialists and reputable experts to verify information, and not running programmes or printing reports that could not be verified.

Similarly, the regional overview on media freedom observed that the nine Southeast Asian countries ranked in the bottom half of 180 countries surveyed, with only Timor-Leste performing considerably better than its neighbours in the 2020 and 2021 Reporters without Borders' World Press Freedom Index.

Media business viability

The last set of questions (see Appendix) focus on how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted media business operations and the future viability of media organisations,

in reference to UNESCO's Media Viability Indicators (MVIs). More than half of all media managers or owners (25 out of 46 responses or 54.3%) said that their organisation was losing income due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Other factors included reduced income for organisations that rely on public funding, such as income from licence fees or government subsidies; as well as decreased online subscriptions; decreased content licensing and studio, room, or equipment rental revenue.

Most of the journalist respondents stated that the COVID-19 pandemic had no financial impact on them (18 out of 50 respondents or 36%), nearly 1 in 4 experienced a salary decrease (12/50 respondents) and 14% lost their job. Others had their salary increased (8%) or employee benefits (6%), such as medical or travel allowances, frozen.

The three main threats facing media organisations due to the COVID-19 pandemic included having a limited budget and resources for investigative stories, which accounted for 33 out of 61 responses (51.4%); lack of journalistic expertise on health or science reporting (24/61 responses or 39.3%), and the political or legal restrictions imposed during the pandemic that repressed media freedom (23/61 responses or 37.7%).

The two most prominent changes that news organisations made to their output since COVID-19 included reducing the number of news stories produced (15 out of 53 responses or 28.3%) and reducing video content (14 out of 53 responses or 26.4%). This was closely followed by the reduction in investigative stories and a move from print or broadcast to digital only.

More than a third of media managers or owners did not receive any financial support because of their lost revenue (14 out of 34 responses or 41.2%). For those that did, NGO grants (9/34 or 26.5%), government grants (5/34 or 14.7%) and donations in the form of individual sponsors or crowdsourcing (3/34 or 8.8%) were the most popular types of support. Similarly, most journalists/media practitioners and editors did not receive any income or employment support (21 out of 46 responses or 45.7%). For those that did, NGO (9/46 or 19.6%) or government grants (5/46 or 10.9%) or employers (8/46 or 17.4%) were the main sources of income or employment support.

The media viability country reports of the nine countries concluded that the economic impact of the pandemic has been severe in the majority of the countries across the region. The in-country reports further recommend that countries seek to provide more support to media houses and news outlets look for alternative revenue sources.

Way forward

Observations suggest that countries across the region urgently require a uniform set of regulations, training, and support in order to improve and ensure journalist safety. And, given that bodies of authority – and even the public – tend to be the most common perpetrators for attacks and threats to journalists, there is a growing need to consider the development of a multi-stakeholder approach for journalist safety during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the respondents, the areas of focus recommended from the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic,

include enhanced psychological, digital, legal, and editorial support for journalists and media producers.

A key consideration resulting from this project and its findings would be for the sharing of best practices and innovations that address financial challenges among like-minded media organisations. These should build on existing relationships or create new partnerships and collaborations.

Enhanced collaboration between independent media at a regional level is essential in order to push back on the current regression of media freedom regionally. Media actors should enhance building industry networks to better enable quality exchanges, build solidarity, and share experiences and learnings in order to address the current challenges strategically.

It is essential to establish a regional coalition to facilitate this collaboration, carry forward the collaboration plan, and build further relationships among media and different democratic actors.

Country overviews encompassed in this study have proposed key recommendations that include repealing laws that put undue influence over local press (Singapore), ensuring freedom of the media through policy change (Vietnam), combating ‘fake news’ accusations (Thailand), providing legal assistance to protect journalists from attacks (the Philippines), establishing an independent media council to oversee media rights (Malaysia), amending a COVID-19 control law that criminalises free expression (Cambodia), providing physical and digital safety training to journalists (Timor Leste), the restoration of full internet access (Myanmar) and ensuring adequate public funds for quality news (Indonesia).

Endnotes

1. Media experts discuss the impacts of COVID-19 on the Southeast Asian media landscape <https://www.publicmediaalliance.org/media-experts-discuss-the-impacts-of-covid-19-on-the-southeast-asian-media-landscape/>
2. Media experts address challenges facing Southeast Asian media landscape <https://www.publicmediaalliance.org/media-experts-address-challenges-facing-southeast-asian-media-landscape/>
3. Journalists’ Safety Indicators: national level; based on the UNESCO’s Media Development Indicators <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000260893>
4. Media experts discuss the impacts of COVID-19 on the Southeast Asian media landscape <https://www.publicmediaalliance.org/media-experts-discuss-the-impacts-of-covid-19-on-the-southeast-asian-media-landscape/>

Regional Overview

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Overview

COVID-19

and Media Freedom in Southeast Asia

By Tess Bacalla

As the world continues to grapple with the COVID-19 crisis, human rights violations in many parts of the globe remain unrelenting. Extreme measures adopted by some states conveniently use today's global scourge as a pretext to strengthen their grip on power while dealing a huge blow to fundamental freedoms. The right to free expression and the media's right to report freely and independently have borne the brunt of many of these measures even if they're not manifestly targeted at the press.

Southeast Asia provides ample evidence of these glaring realities. Besides having emerged as a pandemic hotspot¹, with huge spikes² in coronavirus cases in the latter half of 2021, it has been the focus of a slew of reports highlighting intensifying crackdowns on independent media. Many of these use a combination of pre-existing legislation and newly minted laws, executive orders, and regulations to harness the power of authoritarian states leery of dissent. These same states are bent on pushing populist narratives or propaganda while the state of public governance weighs heavily on people's lives amid the pandemic.

Today's bleak scenario in the region has left many of its citizens struggling for survival as the pandemic has exposed weak and underfunded public health systems and the inability of some governments to provide strategic and carefully executed, rights-based responses to the pandemic.

Making matters worse is the censorship of information by governments while leveraging so-called anti-fake news and other legislation to keep a tight lid on the media.

Press freedom decline

In Reporters without Borders' (RSF) World Press Freedom Index 2021³, ten Southeast Asian countries were ranked in the bottom half of the 180 countries surveyed, with only Timor-Leste performing considerably better than its neighbours, ranking 71st, up 7 spots from the previous year. In contrast, Brunei placed 154th, Cambodia 144th, Indonesia 113th, Malaysia 119th, Myanmar 140th, Philippines 138th, Singapore 160th, Thailand 137th, Vietnam 175th, and Laos 172nd.

The rising authoritarianism⁴ in the region and alarming pattern of state repression of media freedom is seen even in countries like the Philippines and Indonesia, once known as bastions of democracy regionally. Even Timor-Leste has shown signs of moving along the same path as most of its neighbours. In June 2020, the Minister of Justice proposed to reintroduce the previously abolished criminal defamation law⁵, much to the consternation of the local media as well as regional and international media watchdogs.

Emergency powers and repressive laws

Soon after the pandemic broke, the use of emergency powers⁶ by leaders to handle the pandemic became a norm rather than an exception across the region. These measures have been systematically used by many authorities to make arrests or file charges against ordinary citizens and journalists over reports about COVID-19 deemed to instigate fear among citizens, undermine public trust, or threaten public order, even if there are no clear guidelines or definitions to warrant such actions.

Thailand⁷ and Cambodia⁸ are prime examples of countries in the region where such measures are used to stifle press freedom⁹ while further restricting the right to free expression.

A Cambodian journalist, Sovann Rithy, and director of the online TVFB news site, was arrested after he shared a quote from Prime Minister Hun Sen's speech, on his Facebook page¹⁰. He was subsequently charged with "incitement to commit a felony" under articles 494 and 495 of the Criminal Code. His case is one of many in Cambodia that illustrate the impunity with which legal attacks against media workers are pursued by the state.

Cambodia, too, revived plans from a decade ago¹¹ to enact a cybercrime law that criminalises vaguely defined 'fake news', specifically in the context of the pandemic. Amid the ongoing pandemic, media workers were either arrested over politically motivated charges or the licenses of independent media outlets were revoked¹².

Vietnam, one of the most repressive countries in the region, has similarly tightened their grip on the media or intensified state crackdown on so-called 'fake news', misinformation, or disinformation that could undermine public trust in the government. As of August 2021, 50 journalists are still incarcerated because of their work¹³. The country's "fake news" regulation¹⁴, which came into force in April 2020, ostensibly to curb coronavirus misinformation, has intensified repression of the media.

Malaysia, which fell 18 places in RSF's World Press Freedom Index 2021¹⁵, has been using pre-existing laws and anti-fake news legislation¹⁶ (enacted in March 2021 as part of the government's emergency powers to curb the pandemic) to prevent critical media coverage of the pandemic. Other laws used to curtail press freedom include the Official Secrets Act, Communications and Multimedia Act, and Sedition Act.

Myanmar's takeover by the military junta in early February 2021 has further endangered the lives of journalists. The sheer scale of crackdowns on the press under military rule is "unprecedented"¹⁷ as journalists are charged or jailed, and news outlets shut down. Among the laws used in Myanmar to muzzle the press are the Anti-Terror Law, the Official Secrets Act, and Article 505(a) of Myanmar's Penal Code. Amendments to the Penal Code made two weeks after the coup, empower the junta to arrest journalists for spreading 'false news'. The country has been described as "one of the world's worst jailers of journalists" by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ).¹⁸

Under the Philippines' Bayanihan (To Heal as One) Act, a law granting President Rodrigo Duterte additional powers to respond to the pandemic, spreading false information on social media and other platforms carries a fine and imprisonment¹⁹. The draconian Anti-Terror Law, passed in the middle of the pandemic and widely seen as violative

of press freedom among other basic freedoms, similarly sparked fears among media workers of a crackdown by the state²⁰. “Red-tagging” of journalists, or labelling them as communists or as having links with terrorist groups, is not uncommon in the country, which remains one of the most dangerous places in the world for journalists according to Freedom House²¹.

Indonesia, often dubbed one of two electoral democracies in Southeast Asia, sought to silence critics using an internal regulation issued by the police²² that empowers them to act against the spread of false information on COVID-19, including prosecution of acts defaming public officials’ ability to stem the coronavirus. This came in tandem with an alarming increase^{23 24} in attacks against journalists amid the COVID-19 pandemic, exacerbating already existing risks faced by the media. These include ongoing concerns over the highly controversial Law on Electronic Information and Transactions, specifically its defamation and libel provisions.

Thailand’s censorship laws, on the other hand, have been used to curtail critical reporting over the government’s response to the pandemic, including the controversy sparked by the government’s rollout of AstraZeneca vaccine, produced by a company owned by Thailand’s King Maha Vajiralongkorn, according to IFJ. The issuance of emergency power Regulation 29, which aims to “prosecute individuals responsible for communications that may ‘instigate fear’” has further restricted freedom of expression and press freedom in the country. According to Human Rights Watch, other regulations that similarly aim to suppress online freedoms include the Computer-related Crimes Act, lèse-majesté provisions, and the Criminal Code, particularly the provisions on insult and criminal defamation.²⁵

In Singapore, where the press freedom situation has been dubbed “very bad,”²⁶ the government continues to invoke the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act, such as over online posts relating to COVID-19²⁷ and false news published online by news organisations.

Criminalising Journalism

Without a doubt, further criminalising journalism amid an unprecedented crisis in a region that has, over the last decade²⁸, been on a downward path to authoritarianism, has compounded the myriad challenges that confronted the media pre-pandemic.

The foregoing examples clearly point to the continued criminalisation of journalism in much of Southeast Asia during the pandemic, with governments leveraging various tools in their arsenal of power to muzzle the press.

Even before the advent of COVID-19, numerous laws, including cyber-related ones, had been used to keep a tight grip on independent media across the region. This pattern has continued unabated even amid the pandemic. Governments who have always frowned on negative coverage, oftentimes labelling critical reports ‘fake news’ and prosecuting journalists, have sought to control the free flow of information, particularly on their mishandling of the pandemic.

To many observers, notably advocates of freedom of expression and press freedom,

the COVID-19 pandemic has provided authoritarian and illiberal states in the region a convenient way to continue silencing the media while consolidating their control.

Recommendations

Across Southeast Asia, the need to repeal repressive laws and similar measures that have been conveniently used to target journalists for simply doing their jobs has never been more urgent. This takes on greater urgency amid today's pandemic, which has disproportionately impacted independent media outlets as they contend with a confluence of challenges, not least of which is a sharp decline in press freedom across the region.

Continued monitoring of how these legislations have been used to curtail free speech and press freedom must be sustained not only to document cases of attacks and repression but also to call out erring governments.

Discussions with select journalists' associations in some parts of the region have highlighted the need for increased regional solidarity and more coordinated efforts among media organisations and those advocating press freedom. International and regional organisations looking to help the Southeast Asian media fight repression may well consider this potential initiative.

Governments enforcing emergency measures to deal with a crisis of massive proportions, such as today's pandemic, must see to it that these are time-bound and kept as short as possible. They must also not infringe on the role of journalists to scrutinise and hold power to account. Relevant sectors of society including the media, which often bear the brunt of disproportionate measures, must also demand accountability for how emergency powers are exercised and for how long.

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Overview

MEDIA VIABILITY

By Anrike Visser

Before COVID-19 hit Southeast Asia, many media organisations were struggling to compete in the digital world with advertisers fleeing towards “big tech” companies like Google and Facebook.

While Australia is trying to revert the problem by making big tech pay for news¹, the core of the matter is that traditional media are no longer the gatekeepers to audiences. Newspapers and magazines only accounted for around 8.5% of global advertising spend in 2020, while the Internet gets 54%². New business models appropriate for the digital age are long overdue.

On top of that, the pandemic has been called a media extinction event with newspapers losing an estimated US\$30 billion in revenue in 2020. United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres warned that “the financial decline of many public interest media organisations worldwide has been among the dangerous side-effects of the COVID-19 pandemic”³.

Still, media viability is a relatively new avenue of research in Southeast Asia where many of the established models do not apply. The region is incredibly diverse in terms of economic development, press freedom, and languages.

For example, Brunei’s GDP is 25 times higher than that of Timor-Leste⁴. In terms of press freedom, Vietnam occupies the lowest spot among Southeast neighbours at 175, while Timor-Leste is ranked highest at 71⁵. And it is not uncommon for one country to have 135 ethnic languages like in Myanmar, meaning that many people cannot read Burmese or English. This brings added challenges (and niche opportunities) in terms of reaching audiences.

Regarding advertising, the Asia Pacific is the second-largest market after the United States⁶. Print can still be profitable in some countries in Southeast Asia, while others are fully digitised. For example, people in the Philippines spend the most time on social media in comparison to other populations around the world.

When it comes to media viability, press freedom cannot be overlooked. Authoritarian regimes can highly impact the commercial success of media houses through unsubstantiated tax bills, pulling licences, or intimidating advertisers.

Jacqui Park, Fellow at the Centre for Media Transition, mentions that “[i]n many Asia-Pacific countries, traditional media had been made cautious by government pressure, unwilling to risk their long-term investments”⁷.

Journalism Fellow at the Reuters Institute, Peter Erdelyi, investigated business models for the remaining independent media in repressive regimes and found a number of causes disrupting their income⁸.

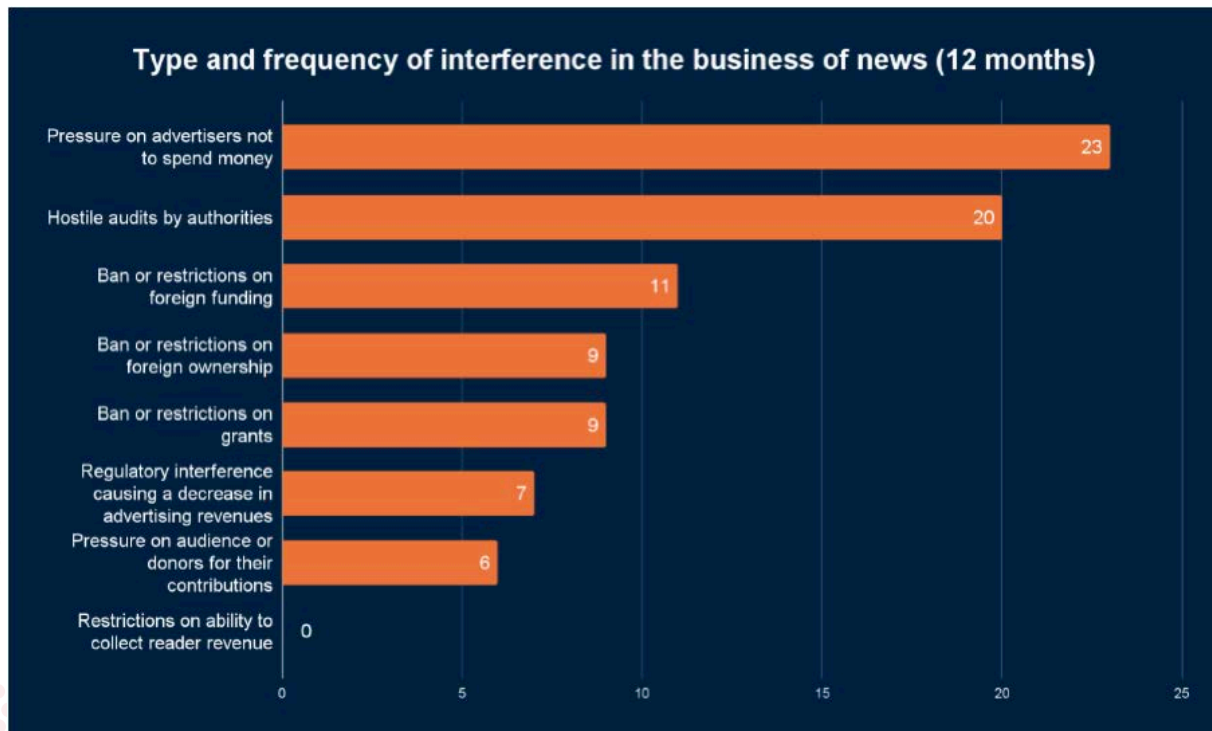


Chart showing audience revenue interference, as reported by 19 participating newsrooms in Peter Erdelyi's reader revenue study for the Reuters Institute (2021)⁹.

Unfortunately, internet freedom continues to decline in Southeast Asia, so these problems will not be over any time soon. The majority¹⁰ of Southeast Asian countries continued to descend or stagnated in Freedom House's 2020 Internet Freedom rankings (only the Philippines and Malaysia saw marginal gains) even after the region hit a low point in 2019¹¹. This trend continued in 2021 when only Thailand, the Philippines and Timor-Leste gained one point while the other countries declined or stagnated¹².

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, media organisations were trying to cope with the loss of income through the introduction of hybrid business models including advertising, subscriptions, and alternative sources such as events and training. These models were all affected by the pandemic and changed the revenue mix with a further decline of advertising, a decline in print and in-person meetups, but a rise in digital subscriptions.

Digital native media houses have been much more suited to handling the need for accelerated digital transition than legacy media, for example in Vietnam¹³. Nonetheless, both legacy and digital media coped by reducing costs as they adapted to the new normal. During the pandemic, there were salary cuts, layoffs, print closures, and media shutdowns across the region.

As we've seen in Timor-Leste¹⁴, media professionals are being enticed by higher paying sectors like PR or digital marketing. This leaves many traditional news media organisations at risk of losing qualified and highly trained journalists. It's imperative that media houses develop effective business models for the digital age.

To a limited extent, international developmental aid and government subsidies were made available to media organisations but not enough to compensate for the financial loss caused by COVID-19, like in Myanmar¹⁵. However, donor funding has often ended up in the hands of larger media organisations and local media has struggled to access these sources of income.

In Southeast Asia, there is often no safety net for people during an economic downturn. As a result, the economic impact of the pandemic is much more severe in countries without a welfare state. This, of course, also negatively affects the revenues media houses gain from their readers and subscribers.

Just like the rest of the world, media houses in Southeast Asia experienced a rise in website visitors due to COVID-19 as seen in Myanmar¹⁶, but this is expected to be temporary as pandemic fatigue sets in. In addition, there seems to be a broad increase in trust in news as seen in Singapore¹⁷. Disinformation by governments and private actors can reinvigorate the importance of independent news sources in the eyes of the public.

The increase in the demand of trustworthy news leads to more donations and subscriptions, but so far this hasn't compensated the loss of other revenue sources due to the wider economic impact of the pandemic. In addition, it is predominantly those media houses with existing online infrastructures which have been able to capitalise on this trend and even launch new online products like in the Philippines¹⁸.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are aimed at media companies and categorised according to the relevant UNESCO Media Business Viability Indicators.

The media labour market

Retrain journalists from print to multimedia and pay a competitive salary to avoid brain drain.

The financial health of media operations

- ▶ Adopt a digital first strategy and rapidly adapt to compete with larger big tech giants.
- ▶ Business models are not 'one size fits all' and even if the media organisation finds the right business model, it will need to change and adapt over time.
- ▶ There have never been so many ways to interact so cheaply with audiences. So, adopt the lean start-up mind-set to continuously improve and tailor your products to the needs of your audience.
- ▶ Diversification, diversification, diversification! Try to have multiple substantial revenue streams. Do not depend on one or two major income sources as those can be disrupted easily.

Capital environment for media operations

- ▶ Trust and independence are essential. These ensure that media houses are discernible from PR agencies or propaganda machines, and help to maintain audiences.
- ▶ If your organisation uses branded content, make it easily recognisable but do not let it affect editorial decisions.
- ▶ Have a separate sales team writing branded content rather than regular reporters. If there is governmental support, ensure that it does not come with an editorial price tag.

- ▶ If the viability of a media organisation increases exponentially, be prepared for government interference. Make sure there is always access to a media lawyer or consultant, digital security tools, liability insurance or contacts at international media development organisations (who cover legal fees), an IT expert in case of online attacks, a Code of Conduct and a Code of Ethics, and proper contracts with freelancers, and staff.
- ▶ When independent journalism becomes impossible because of the restrictive environment, consider (partly) reporting from abroad and/or set up a company in another country.

Organisational structures and resources

- ▶ Ensure that there is a business manager or business department within the organisation, alongside editorial and technical teams. There is often a lack of media executives with business acumen, so business staff should also have experience in other sectors.
- ▶ Continuously check and update your content, medium, distribution tools, payment methods, UI/UX, and marketing. Make sure that these are all in line with the changing demands of the intended audience.
- ▶ Online security of your firm and audiences must be taken extremely seriously. Digital surveillance and authoritarianism are on the rise, so protect your audiences as best as possible. Ensure that all websites use HTTPS and are protected against potential attacks.

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Impact of COVID-19 on the Safety of Journalists in Southeast Asia

By Therese Patricia S. Torres

This regional overview analyses the impact of COVID-19 on the safety of journalists in nine Southeast Asian countries: Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam. This section also discusses standards, solutions, and innovations for journalists' safety in the region during and beyond the COVID-19 crisis.

Safety issues Southeast Asian journalists face amid the COVID-19 pandemic

The pandemic is having a major impact on different aspects of journalists' health and safety. Apart from the risk of getting COVID-19, journalists continue to face the same challenges as they had before, but with some of these worsening during the global health crisis.

Amid the diverse cultural, economic, and political systems in the region, there are issues that cut across the countries under study. Journalists in Southeast Asia operate within an environment where harassment, threats, and attacks on the press and other forms of repression and violations of press freedom are reported year after year¹. During and even before the pandemic, attacks and methods of control have also gone digital². As journalists continue to endure these challenges, the pandemic has brought to the fore the mental health issues they experience and their need for psychosocial support³, among other things⁴.

Threats to physical and mental health

Journalists across the region risk their health as frontline workers. As of April 2021, the Geneva-based nongovernmental organisation Press Emblem Campaign (PEC) reported that over 1,208 journalists around the world had died from COVID-19; of these deaths, 254 were in 18 countries in Asia⁵. The number of deaths has continued to increase, as reflected in the online 'corona-ticker' PEC started in March 2020⁶.

According to PEC, some of these deaths were caused by the journalists' lack of access to adequate protective measures⁷. Inadequate access to personal protective equipment (PPE) by journalists has also been reported in Timor-Leste⁸ and countries in the Global South, as cited in a study covering Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, among others⁹. The shrinking budgets of media companies are not the only problem as global PPE shortages have also been reported¹⁰.

The pandemic has also affected journalists' mental health. In April 2020, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) conducted a survey on press freedom

and COVID-19 with over 1,300 frontline journalists in 77 countries/territories, including four Southeast Asian countries: Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam¹¹.

The findings revealed that more than half of the respondents were suffering from stress and anxiety amid the pandemic. According to another 2020 study, Filipino journalists were experiencing high stress levels, even as the National Union of Journalists in the Philippines (NUJP) lamented the lack of mental health support systems¹².

Killings and physical attacks

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) reported that globally, amid the pandemic, 'the number of journalists murdered in retaliation for their work more than doubled in 2020'¹³. At least 21 journalists were murdered during that year; of this number, three cases were from the Philippines, one of the countries described to have the 'most retaliatory killings'¹⁴.

While no retaliatory journalist killings were recorded by CPJ in other Southeast Asian countries in 2020, journalists in the region have not been safe from physical attacks.

The International Press Institute¹⁵ monitors physical attacks against journalists covering COVID-19. As of September 2021, such attacks on journalists—committed by authorities and the public—have been recorded in Asia and the Pacific. In Myanmar, two journalists reportedly suffered injuries by gunshot while covering protests, one sustained injuries after being beaten by the police during arrest¹⁶, and journalists in detention have allegedly been abused and tortured¹⁷.

In Indonesia, most of the reported attacks on journalists in 2020 involved intimidation and physical violence¹⁸, while in Malaysia, nearly 54% of surveyed media practitioners in 2020 said that they experienced 'security concerns', with 8.3% citing 'targeted attacks for their work'¹⁹.

In the Philippines and Indonesia, physical forms of gender-based violence against women journalists have also been reported, including being touched, pushed, and hit^{20 21}. In both countries, the gender-based attacks have come from news sources and fellow journalists. During a roundtable meeting hosted by the Cambodian Journalists Alliance (CamboJA) in 2021, journalists, unions and the Ministry of Information urged the government to pass an additional law that will protect women journalists from harassment, as they had reported incidents of 'sexual harassment, online threats and being treated roughly by authorities while covering recent protests'²². A 2015 report by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) pointed out that while there is a law against sexual harassment in Cambodia, 'the broad nature of it made it easy for perpetrators to go unpunished'²³.

Meanwhile, the Malaysia Media Report 2020 by the National Union of Journalists and International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) Asia-Pacific Region revealed that majority of survey respondents said that 'they had never experienced harassment, intimidation, or violence based on their gender'²⁴. The report noted, however, that the findings could be attributed to underreporting by women 'due to fear of retaliation, the bystander effect, and a masculine culture that permits sexual harassment'²⁵ – issues that were similarly cited in the Philippines and Indonesia^{26 27}.

While there has been limited research released since the start of the pandemic regarding gender-based physical attacks on women journalists in other parts of Southeast Asia, a 2018 study revealed that Vietnamese women journalists have also experienced attacks including groping and rape²⁸; the report has continued to be cited during the pandemic²⁹.

Digital harassment, threats, and attacks

Digital spaces have also been used to target journalists. Among the cyberattacks on journalists across the region are doxing or the hacking, retrieval, and sharing of an individual's personal and private information; offensive online posts; and threats via public posts and private messages.

During the pandemic, Indonesia has documented cases of online harassment, including alleged doxing and death threats through a messaging app^{30 31 32 33}. Filipino and Malaysian journalists have also experienced cyberattacks such as doxing and online posts containing abusive language and threats of physical harm^{34 35 36}.

Incidents of online violence against women journalists have increased amid the pandemic³⁷. Before and during the pandemic, Filipino women journalists have reported receiving comments on their social media posts and private messages from perpetrators of sexual harassment, particularly from news sources³⁸. Indonesian women journalists, for their part, have reported that male colleagues engage in 'improper' conversations and share photos of female reporters in chat groups³⁹. The situation in Malaysia has yet to be studied, as indicated in the Malaysia Media Report 2020, which noted the need to measure the increased risks of online gender-based violence and trolling as journalists have shifted to teleworking⁴⁰.

Restrictive legislation and legal attacks

Governments in Southeast Asia have passed legislation imposing undue restrictions on press freedom⁴¹, including 'vaguely worded laws open to abuse and politically-motivated prosecutions'⁴², resulting in legal accusations, detention, and arrests of journalists.

The Cambodian Journalism Situation Report 2020, reported cases of harassment against journalists from January to December 2020, showed that most of the 25 journalists who were harassed in Phnom Penh 'faced legal action and arrest', with most of their cases involving "charges related to reporting and commentary on politics and COVID-19 issues"⁴³. Moreover, the state of emergency law passed by Cambodia's national assembly, and which has been criticised by rights groups, includes provisions that allow the government to control the press and implement surveillance of telecommunications, on top of restricting freedom of movement and assembly⁴⁴.

The Malaysia Media Report 2020, which included a survey by the National Union of Journalists Malaysia (NUJ) of 240 media workers, revealed the respondents' concern over their personal safety due to the 'extremely bad' performance of their employers in 'handling security and safety issues, including legal issues and individual threats'⁴⁵.

In May 2020, a journalist was summoned by Malaysian police for questioning⁴⁶, while in August 2020, the police raided Al Jazeera's Kuala Lumpur offices, following its coverage of the government's treatment of undocumented migrants amid the pandemic^{47 48}.

There have also been arrests of Indonesian journalists who criticised the government's COVID-19 response⁴⁹, which has been reported to be unscientific⁵⁰. The arrests came after the directive from the Indonesian National Police in April 2020 on its monitoring and investigation of not only hoaxes on COVID-19, but also online criticism⁵¹ or 'hostile information' on the president and the government⁵².

In Thailand, media outlets have been prosecuted amid the COVID-19 pandemic and anti-government protests, and a journalist from an independent newspaper was arrested while covering protests against an emergency decree of the government^{53 54}.

In April 2021, the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) responded to a call for information from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) regarding the impact of government measures on the safety and work of journalists and media workers amid the COVID-19 pandemic. In its report on Vietnam, ICJ cited the detention of journalists and 'reports of detainees being held incommunicado for long periods, violations of the right to a fair trial, concerns about treatment in detention and convictions resulting in lengthy sentences for crimes against national security'⁵⁵. Among these cases are the convictions of three Vietnamese journalists, each sentenced to more than 10 years in prison under an 'anti-state provision' banning the production and dissemination of 'distorted information about the people's government'⁵⁶.

In Myanmar, even before the military junta seized power in the coup on 1 February 2021 and began arresting journalists and media workers⁵⁷, journalists were already being prosecuted and thrown in jail, with some of the cases linked to what appeared to be the government's efforts to control narratives on the pandemic and silence criticisms against the COVID-19 response⁵⁸.

Safety standards, solutions, and innovations for journalists in Southeast Asia during and beyond the pandemic

Before the pandemic, there were some initiatives in the region that sought to provide sustainable and effective standards, mechanisms, and innovations for the protection of journalists.

For one, the Philippine Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists⁵⁹, modelled after the 2012 UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity, was developed through an inclusive, participatory, and stakeholder-driven process where journalists, media organisations, government agencies, state security forces, academia and civil society representatives discussed the challenges faced by journalists, as well as possible solutions⁶⁰. Also in 2019, ten journalist organisations in Indonesia, with support from International Media Support (IMS), launched the Committee of Journalist Safety. The first of its kind in the country, the Committee was a result of a national risk-mapping workshop and stakeholder consultations⁶¹.

Journalists in the region, however, would benefit from more safety interventions and campaigns as they continue to navigate reporting amid the pandemic. One success story is how the National Union of Journalists and media activists in Malaysia were able to fast-track vaccinations of over 5,800 media workers in May 2021⁶². But the most common safety intervention in the region, as of this writing, is capacity-building for journalists on how to protect themselves as they report on the health crisis.

In 2020, UNESCO and the Myanmar Press Council conducted a series of training sessions for journalists covering the pandemic, with a focus on psychosocial well-being⁶³, while in the Philippines, UNESCO and the Mindanao Institute of Journalism implemented a training programme on precautionary measures for reporting amid the pandemic⁶⁴. The Myanmar Journalism Institute also received support from DW Akademie, International Media Support-Fojo, and the EU for a training series on reporting amid the pandemic⁶⁵.

UNESCO continued partnering with organisations in the region in 2021, providing capacity building related to journalists' safety. With support from UNESCO Jakarta and the Netherlands, the Asian Institute of Journalism and Communication (AIJC) organised the Online Training on Ethical and Professional Reporting and Election Coverage in the Pandemic, which included a session on safety.

The region has received support from multinational organisations and other countries in enhancing journalists' safety amid the pandemic. But addressing the impact of COVID-19 on the safety of journalists in Southeast Asia also requires strong political will on the part of governments, which play a central role in crafting and implementing policies on vaccine acquisition and rollout, appropriate health, and safety protocols and wage stability.

Members of the Southeast Asia Journalist Union (SEAJU) network are calling on governments in the region to provide more protection for journalists and media workers, as they continue to do their jobs and face increased risks as frontline workers amid the COVID-19 pandemic. SEAJU and the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) emphasised the urgent need to give journalists access to vaccines and PPEs, and to ensure wage stability⁶⁶.

On top of providing capacity-building programmes on journalist safety, media and civil society organisations need to continue monitoring COVID-19-related policies and protocols and hold the authorities accountable. Policies and protocols must be in place to ensure the safety of journalists during and beyond the COVID-19 crisis.

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CAMBODIA

Media Freedom and Journalist Safety

By Ou Ritthy

The little democratic space left in Cambodia got even smaller following the July 2013 national elections, when the government started using legal instruments to limit civil society activities and muffle individual voices¹. Four years later, the government began a media crackdown that has yet to stop. In 2017 alone, the government shut down independent newspapers and silenced 32 radio FM frequencies².

Cambodia is now in its fourth consecutive year of being seen as having deteriorating press freedom. The country was ranked 144th out of 180 countries in the 2021 World Press Freedom Index, which noted that Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen had launched a major pre-emptive offensive against the media, and that this had resulted in a devastated media landscape and a risky environment for journalists and media workers.

In 2020, the Cambodian government used the COVID-19 crisis to censor and arrest journalists, as well as block news sites. It proclaimed a state of emergency, which gave authorities absolute power to censor and spy on media³. The COVID-19 law promulgated on 11 March 2021 imposes a 20-year prison term and a US\$5,000 fine on anyone who has spread the virus and does not obey the law⁴. In its 2021 report⁵, Freedom House rated Cambodia as a 'not free' country, with a score of 24 out of 100 on political rights and civil liberties. For free and independent media, Cambodia also scored poorly (1 out of 4). Freedom House stated: 'The Cambodian government uses lawsuits, criminal prosecutions, massive tax bills, and occasionally violent attacks to intimidate the media.'

Media Freedom

Media freedom remains scant in Cambodia. In 2020, the Cambodian Journalists Alliance Association (CamboJA) recorded at least 35 cases of harassment against 72 journalists in 15 provinces⁶. The significant types of harassment were legal action, violence, detained for questioning and imprisonment. A study by the Cambodian Center for Independent Media (CCIM)⁷ meanwhile found that the majority (81.31 percent) of reporter-respondents experienced self-censorship. Most sensitive topics to cover were corruption scandals, deforestation, national resource exploitation, political issues and human rights abuses.

On 15 February 2021, the Information Ministry issued a directive stating that media institutions and organisations must officially notify and cooperate with it before conducting journalism training and workshops⁸. It said that this was to ensure proper education and training according to the rules and regulations of professional journalism ethics. Some local journalists and media professionals, however, think

the directive limits press freedom. In early August 2021, the Ministry created the 'Monitoring Committee for Journalism Ethics', which would review and evaluate media ethics, as well as monitor professional abuse and the behaviour of journalists. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has noted that the committee lacks independence, transparency and accountability as 11 out of the 15 committee members are Information and Interior Ministry officials⁹. Moreover, RSF pointed out, the committee has the right to summon and sanction any journalist or media.

Individual voices on social media have also been restricted and monitored. The government has expanded monitoring activities in social media and messaging applications, including TikTok, WhatsApp and Telegram. In 2020, Information Ministry allegedly found 1,343 cases of fake news, incitement, and insults on social media, leading to 200 Facebook accounts reported for removal¹⁰. On 1 May 2021, the Government Spokesperson Unit ordered a stop to social media reports and posts that would provoke and create social chaos amid the COVID-19 crisis¹¹. As of May 2021, the Fake News Monitoring Committee found 900 cases on social media supposedly related to incitement, government criticism, fabricating facts, insulting the king and leaders, fake news and exaggeration¹².

Rights groups assert that the government has used threats of false information on the COVID-19 pandemic to attack independent media and stifle the freedom of speech of political opponents and journalists¹³. Cambodian authorities have also repeatedly intimidated and stopped journalists who were merely carrying out professional duties, and have confiscated equipment and banned the taking of photos and videos¹⁴.

Journalist safety

The COVID-19 pandemic has strongly affected the media industry and journalists' routine work, livelihood, and health in Cambodia. Since the so-called '20 February 2021 Community Incident,' the exercise of fundamental freedoms, press freedom, and the safety and security of journalists have been put at even greater risk.

Siem Reap Breaking News online journalist Kouv Piseth was arrested on 14 July 2021 after he questioned the quality of China's vaccines in a Facebook post. He was charged with incitement and violations of the COVID-19 Law, which means he is facing the possibility of up to three years in prison, and a potential fine of about US\$500 to US\$2,500¹⁵. Another journalist, Shen Kaidong of *Angkor Today* online news, was arrested in February 2021. A Chinese national, Shen was deported for publishing allegedly fake news on COVID-19 vaccine fees¹⁶.

In 2020, at least 25 journalists were harassed regarding commentary and reports on political affairs and COVID-19 issues; most of them faced legal actions and arrests¹⁷. *Khmer Nation* newspaper publisher Ros Sokhet, for instance, was arrested on 25 June 2020 after he criticised Prime Minister Hun Sen as having no solutions for people struggling to pay off debts due to COVID-19 impacts, as well as his plan to transfer power to his eldest son¹⁸. On 11 November 2020, Sokhet was sentenced to 18 months in prison and fined US\$500. Earlier, in April 2020, a director of the online news outlet TVFB, Sovann Rithy, was also arrested and later sentenced to 18 months in prison.

His crime: He had quoted Hun Sen, who had said in a speech that motorbike taxi drivers should sell their vehicles if the COVID-19 crisis caused them financial distress¹⁹.

By the end of 2020, a survey by CamboJA²⁰ revealed that 63.2 percent of the journalist-respondents were concerned about being charged with incitement by the government, while 58 percent said that they were very concerned about their security and safety while reporting on COVID-19. The journalists feared contracting COVID-19, but they could not take a break from their work even as nearly half said that their salary was insufficient to cover the family's expenses (50 percent earned between US\$300–US\$600 per month). Worse, one-fifth of the journalist-respondents had their salaries cut, while some had become unemployed due to pandemic-related layoffs.

As of 15 August 2021, CamboJA²⁰ had recorded at least 33 journalists and media workers who became infected with COVID-19, including one who eventually died. While getting infected is an additional worry for journalists in Cambodia, local independent media and international human rights organisations have also observed that the Cambodian government has used the pandemic to intensify discrimination, intimidation, harassment and physical attacks against journalists, as well as an excuse to throw them in jail²¹.

The Cambodian authorities' treatment of journalists and media personnel goes against many aspects of the Journalists' Safety Indicators²². According to these Indicators, safeguarding journalists and associated media personnel means that they should:

- ▶ not be subject to threats, harassment, or surveillance;
- ▶ not be physically attacked, unlawfully detained, or killed because of pursuing their legitimate activities.
- ▶ not have their offices forced to close because of their pursuit of legitimate activities or threatened with closure.
- ▶ not routinely practice self-censorship because of fear of punishment, harassment, or attack.

Recommendations


The Cambodian government should stop labelling independent journalists as 'foreign agents' and discriminating against independent journalists who need to access information to do their job. It should also use the Press Law rather than criminal code provisions against journalists. In addition, the Monitoring Committee for Journalism Ethics should be managed by an independent body or an equal representation of government and journalists' associations.

As the pandemic continues, the Cambodian government should stop threatening journalists who report on sensitive COVID-19 issues, and individuals who express critical opinions or fears about the pandemic. The law on COVID-19 control should be amended so that it will not criminalise and restrict freedom of expression and information.

Media organisations meanwhile should establish and implement COVID-19 sanitary protocols and provide safety equipment and legal and health coverage for both their staff and freelancers who work for them.

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CAMBODIA

Media Viability

By Anrike Visser

Cambodia's press freedom was severely curbed in 2018, according to Reporters Without Borders (RSF)¹. "Alarmed at the prospect of losing the July 2018 general elections after more than 30 years in power, Prime Minister Hun Sen launched a major pre-emptive offensive against the media that devastated the journalistic landscape". Many radio stations and newspapers were banned while critical staff at other news organisations were laid off.

As a result of this clean sweep, Cambodians now only have access to news provided by major media groups directly linked to Hun Sen, such as the online news agency Fresh News, which "pumps out pro-government propaganda"².

But in late 2019 the Cambodian Journalists Alliance Association, or CamboJA, was created to provide "the country's journalists with small breathing space and represents a limited concession by the government"³.

In addition, Cambodia is the third poorest⁴ country of Southeast Asia, limiting the economic opportunities for independent media organisations. Nonetheless, Cambodia's economy was steadily increasing since 2010 thanks to a "[s]table macroeconomic environment, strong growth and ongoing structural reforms"⁵.

COVID-19 in Cambodia

Cambodia initially experienced COVID-19 infections in March 2020, after which infections stabilised until a year later. Since March 2021, the cases have been rising, especially those caused by the Delta variant⁶.

The pandemic has had a significant impact on Cambodia's economy. In 2019, GDP grew by 7% but in 2020 GDP decreased by 3.5%⁷. In 2021, the economy is expected to grow by 4.2% again.

RSF has mentioned that during the COVID-19 crisis the government imposed more censorship, blocking news sites, arresting journalists and proclaiming a state of emergency that gave it unprecedented power to censor and spy on traditional and online media⁸.

Impact on media viability

The Cambodian government uses financial tactics – including high tax bills and revoking licences – to harass, intimidate and shut down critical media. According to Freedom House, "a number of media outlets with an online presence have shut down due to high taxes"⁹. Online publications also saw their licences revoked due to their reporting, including that on COVID-19 coverage.

In May 2018, Cambodia's last remaining independent English- and Khmer-language daily newspaper, the *Phnom Penh Post*, was sold after receiving a tax bill of US\$ 3.9 million. "Media analysts expressed suspicion that the tax bill was used to coerce the paper's sale," Freedom House notes. Previously in 2017, the *Cambodia Daily* shut down after a US\$ 6 million tax bill, "which the publication claimed was a politically motivated retaliatory act for its critical reporting". The publication returned as an online-only news outlet¹⁰.

According to the Cambodian Center for Independent Media (CCIM), media organisations in Cambodia need to ensure self-sufficiency in order to maintain neutrality and independence. They add, that "[t]his can be done through the restructuring of [their] business portfolio and investing in innovative technological platform[s] other than depending on the traditional media"¹¹.

CamboJA is funded through its members comprised of working journalists, non-governmental organisations, and bloggers¹². They also offer training for reporters funded by media development organisations and embassies, such as online training in August 2021 on media laws and ethics supported by the Australian Embassy¹³. CamboJA also conducts research on media freedom with support from similar organisations.

In December 2020, CamboJA published the results of a survey among 28 media outlets in Phnom Penh. Journalists reported a significant impact of the pandemic on their livelihood caused by job loss or salary cuts¹⁴.

Of the respondents, 17.5% said their news outlet had laid off staff. Another fifth of the respondents (21.5%) had their salary cut. Nine of the 63 surveyed journalists took a 30% salary cut and two journalists experienced a 50% pay cut.

As a result, 47.6% of respondents stated that their wages were insufficient to support their families according to CamboJA. Consequently, 85.3% of surveyed journalists had reduced unnecessary costs, 17.6% borrowed money from friends or relatives, and 14.7% took microfinance or bank loan¹⁵.

The issue of financial sustainability was also raised by UNESCO during an online forum on the World Press Freedom Day on 3 May 2021. UNESCO presented recommendations to foster information as a public good in Cambodia in light of the pandemic. One of the recommendations was to "ensure financial sustainability of the media through incentives and the inclusion of journalists in the social-protection response to the effects of the pandemic"¹⁶.

The PMA questionnaire (see appendix) showed several instances of unavailable budget to pursue investigative stories or make video content. One respondent painted a grim picture of the business limitations for Cambodia media including barriers to get a licence and media ownership. Most notably, they state there is "[d]eclining public interests [sic] in news media, especially independent ones. Instead, they turn to entertaining and government affiliated media for faster information, "limiting the ability of independent media to fund itself and provide the public with independent information.

Recommendations

This study found that the government of Cambodia has imposed censorship on media institutions, blocking online news-portals, banned newspapers, and radio stations. Furthermore, journalists were arrested during the pandemic in the name of a state of emergency. Press freedom and freedom of expression have to be ensured for media viability. Therefore, the Cambodian government must ensure an enabling environment where media can operate freely and independently.

A strong national economy contributes to viable media institutions. Unfortunately during the pandemic economy of Cambodia has decreased, which negatively affected the financial viability of the media sector. On the one hand, media institutions lost part of their revenue, while on the other hand, some outlets received a higher tax bill. Overall, the state should include journalists in the social-protection response to the effects of the pandemic and offer tax breaks for media companies facing financial difficulties.

For media organisations, it is essential to have diverse revenue streams to ensure resilience in the face of future external challenges like a pandemic and editorial independence when faced with government repression.

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INDONESIA

Media Freedom and Journalist Safety

By Masduki

With more than 270 million inhabitants, Indonesia is the largest media marketplace in Southeast Asia¹. But as the novel coronavirus gained traction across the world in early 2020, concerns began to be raised about media freedom and journalists' safety in the country.

In early March 2020, President Joko Widodo announced Indonesia's first COVID-19 cases; by mid-July 2021, more than three million cases had been reported in Indonesia². This not only presented an unprecedented public health challenge, but also a major hurdle for media organisations and journalists in this so-called transitional democracy.

Just as in other countries, global Internet companies such as Google, Facebook and YouTube freely operate in Indonesia and serve as emerging sources for its population. Celebrating the growth of digital politics, politicians began using paid commenters and automated accounts to generate propaganda during and after the 2019 election, a practice that has continued during the pandemic. Such actions have been used to disseminate hate speech and disinformation over social media. Between January and July 2021, the fact-checking outlet Masyarakat Anti Fitnah Indonesia [Mafindo] identified more than 1,650 cases of COVID-19-related disinformation³.

Even before the pandemic, many of Indonesia's laws and policies had threatened press freedom. These included the Information and Electronic Transactions Act (ITE) No. 19/2016 and the Criminal Code. Since 2010, Indonesian authorities caught in media disputes have sued their opponents for defamation, an offence covered by more than 40 provisions of the Criminal Code.

In 2021, Reporters without Borders (RSF) ranked Indonesia 113th out of 180 countries in terms of press freedom⁴. Although this was a rise of six positions from the previous year, Indonesia remained within the 'red zone'. RSF found that the government has been taking advantage of the COVID-19 crisis to tighten its grip on journalists and media activists. Authorities have used not only the need to limit 'false' information related to the pandemic to control the media, but they have also taken to prohibiting the publication of information they deem insulting to the government, even when this is unrelated to the pandemic.

Media freedom during the COVID-19 pandemic

There are several indicators of Indonesia's ongoing press freedom crisis. *First*, the financial pressures experienced by media outlets. Several print media outlets have collapsed such as *Suara Pembaruan*, limiting the creation of quality journalism

products (Agus Sudibyo, personal communication, August 2021). The Central Press Company Union (SPS) survey of 434 mass media groups found that 71 percent of print media companies experienced a decrease in revenues; between January and April 2020, revenues in the print media sector decreased by more than 40 percent^{5 6}. As a result, media corporations have asked the government for financial assistance, but in various forms, such as advertising, tax credits and journalists' insurance, all of which threaten their newsroom independence.

Second, the classic issues that existed before the pandemic: concentration of media ownership among conglomerates and politicians in Jakarta and the increased politicisation of the Internet. Since 1999, Indonesia's most powerful media companies, owned by tycoons-cum-political leaders, have exerted political control in their newsrooms. Although a wide range of privately owned local media operate across Indonesia's provinces, both the broadcast and print media are dominated by only eight conglomerates, all of which are centred around the national capital, Jakarta⁷. Foreign ownership of broadcast media is banned under the 2002 Broadcast Act. Meanwhile, platforms provided by the likes of YouTube, Google and Facebook have become home to politically motivated buzzers that threaten critical media and journalists⁸.

Third, various government institutions have disseminated inaccurate COVID-19 case data, even as they have limited journalists' access to news sources and in-depth material in an effort to present a positive image for the government and maintain national stability. Media companies critical of the government continue to receive legal threats because of their news coverage. Indeed, media criticism of the government's controversial policies for tackling the COVID-19 pandemic is now considered an anti-government act, and thus fit to be countered by digital attacks from so-called cyber-troops. On 21 August 2020, for instance, hackers targeted two media sites, Tempo.co and Tirto.id, after these reported that artists and celebrities were being paid to promote the Job Creation Law. Of the 14 digital attacks identified by the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI), three have been reported to the police. As of this writing, however, no suspects have been named. This shows how Indonesian law enforcement authorities have not given serious attention to digital attacks and cyber-troops.

An assessment conducted by the AJI between 3 May 2020 and 3 May 2021 also noted the crises facing Indonesia's media due to the persistence of online and offline violence against journalists, as well as the inadequacy of the ITE Law⁹. Ignoring criticism from civil society, the Indonesian Ministry of Information has rejected efforts to revise the ITE Law, which has also been used to put media professionals and human right activists in prison. Abdul Manan, AJI's former chairman, describes Indonesia's press as existing in limbo (A. Manan, personal communication, November 2020)¹⁰.

Safety of journalists during the COVID-19 pandemic

With no end in sight for the COVID-19 pandemic, journalists know they are needed to inform and educate the public about the virus and the disease it causes. But journalists feel as though they are risking their lives to cover the COVID-19 pandemic because many media companies are ignoring safety protocols (Suwarjono,

personal communication, August 2021).

Many media companies have continued to require journalists to conduct fieldwork and to work in offices, thereby increasing the potential for COVID-19 exposure. Between March 2020 and April 2021, 401 Indonesian journalists tested positive for COVID-19, with nine of them eventually dying from the disease¹¹.

Yet many journalists have seen their wages and benefits reduced; some have gone without payment for months at a time, while others have been terminated by their employers. In a 2020 survey¹² of 792 journalists in Indonesia, AJI and IFJ found that 83.5% of the respondents had been affected by the pandemic, facing reduced salaries (53.9%), wage cuts (24.7%), layoffs (5.9%) and furloughs (4.1%). Journalists' labour rights were found to have been ignored as well.

At the same time, the multiple legal provisions regarding criminal defamation have made 2020 and 2021 challenging years for journalists. The Institute for Legal Aid for Journalists reports that throughout 2020, ten journalists faced criminal charges, eight of them under the ITE Law and following the protests against the Job Creation Law (UU Cite Kerja)¹³. This was the highest number of such cases in a decade. The issuance of Law No. 11 of 2020 concerning Job Creation, which changes workers' rights in several ways, also poses a threat to journalistic activities in Indonesia.

Even after President Widodo declared COVID-19 to be a national pandemic in early 2020, journalists have continued to face legal repercussions due to their work as authorities have sought to control the narrative or silence critical reporting. In a survey¹⁴ of approximately 125 journalists conducted in February 2021, 16 percent of the respondents said that they had experienced a digital attack; of these attacks, 45 percent were related to COVID-19 news. Additionally, 16 percent claimed to have experienced non-physical attacks, 60 percent of which were related to their COVID-19 coverage.

Mawel et al¹⁵. further recorded 90 cases of violence against journalists from May 2020 to May 2021, with acts of intimidation (28 cases) and destruction of tools and/or coverage results (22 cases) being the dominant forms of violence. Less common were physical violence (19 cases), terror (nine cases), and punishment (six cases). The most common perpetrators were members of the police force (58 cases), who ironically are supposed to protect journalists. Other perpetrators were unknown (ten cases), local residents (seven cases), members of the military (five cases), and government officials (four cases). Violence was most commonly reported in Malang (16 cases), followed by Jakarta (15 cases). Much of this violence was committed by the police, who were not prosecuted because of the culture of impunity.

Finally, it was also reported¹⁶ that 25 journalists claimed to have experienced sexual violence, often in the course of reporting on COVID-19. Most of the victims were female, while the perpetrators included public officials, informants and co-workers.

Recommendations

As the pandemic continues and the economic fallout of the crisis fully comes to bear, newsrooms in Indonesia face an uncertain future that could impede their

ability to conduct their duties, and by extension preserve high-quality journalism and freedom of expression. Overall, this report recommends that Indonesian authorities better protect journalists and strengthen media autonomy.

There is the need for a measurable regulatory scheme to protect journalists, to end impunity and to manage press freedom during the pandemic. Rather than revising sectoral media regulations (press, broadcasting, Internet) that are often contradictory in practice, it is necessary to pass an integrated communication law that establishes a single and strong independent media regulator. It is particularly necessary to immediately create an anti-disinformation law and to revise the ITE law that, among other things, could then properly handle digital attacks such as doxing and hacking.

Moreover, adequate public funds are necessary to ensure that quality news continues to be produced. The Indonesian Press Council (*Dewan Pers*) could lead the initiative to create an autonomous funding agency for sustaining media that are critical yet balanced in their reports.

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INDONESIA

Media Viability

By Anrike Visser

Indonesia is a “regional model for press freedom”, according to the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism¹ after the resignation of the authoritarian President Suharto in 1998 and the passage of the landmark 1999 Press Law.

Indonesia is ranked the second highest on the 2021 World Press Freedom Index in Southeast Asia after Timor-Leste, at 113th². The country rose 6 places compared to 2020. Unfortunately, censorship does still occur. Since the fall of Suharto, media companies owned by tycoons have replaced the state as the primary source of censorship³. The Indonesian media landscape is dominated by eight large commercial entities.

In addition, according to RSF, President Joko Widodo “failed to keep his campaign promises about respect for press freedom during his first five-year term”⁴. After his re-election in May 2019 rioting occurred during which many journalists were targeted.

Additionally, in West Papua, media face far more drastic restrictions and violence against local journalists keeps growing. Journalists trying to document the Indonesian military’s abuses or cover humanitarian issues are “liable to be arrested and prosecuted”⁵.

Covid-19 in Indonesia

Indonesia is experiencing “one of Asia’s worst epidemics”⁶ with almost 4 million infections and 127,000 deaths as of 23 August 2021⁷. Indonesia’s economy contracted during the pandemic from a growth of 5% GDP to a decrease of 2.1% in 2020⁸.

Nonetheless, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Indonesia has responded with comprehensive policies to reverse the impact of the pandemic. The economy rebounded in the third quarter of 2020, and the economic recovery is projected to strengthen in 2021 and 2022⁹, but this heavily depends on the success of the vaccination programme and resulting increase in mobility.

Impact on media viability

Indonesia is the largest market in Southeast Asia with a “lively and diverse media sector”¹⁰ catering to 1300 different ethnic groups. A wide range of privately owned local publications operate across Indonesia’s provinces, but the print sector is dominated by two media conglomerates, the Jawa Pos Group and the Kompas-Gramedia Group.

Television remains the most widely used medium, with major national commercial networks like TV One and Metro TV, and state-owned Televisi Republik Indonesia. Much of the television content is not made available online and foreign ownership of broadcast media is banned under the 2002 Broadcast Act¹¹.

The year 2020 was challenging for media companies due to economic pressure and increasing repression. The government took advantage of the COVID-19 crisis by banning the publication of any “information hostile to the president or government”¹².

Media were especially affected by a loss of advertising revenue. In April and May 2020, the association for digital media, AMSI, conducted research among 319 member organisations¹³. While online readership increased by 40%, revenue declined “drastically” by 30–50%. Given the uncertainty about the duration of the pandemic, several media companies were forced to cut costs. Some laid off their employees, cut salaries or shut down entirely.

Koran Tempo and Indo Pos stopped publishing print editions of their newspapers in 2020, and Suara Pembaruan followed in February 2021. Other publications, such as Tempo magazine, Kompas newspaper and The Jakarta Post, strengthened their online paywalls¹⁴.

Tempo also stopped its print edition on 31 December 2020, journalist Abdul Manan states (A Manan, personal communication, August 2021). Due to the pandemic, Tempo has implemented a 25% salary cut for all employees, which still continues. Manan adds, “in my opinion, in Tempo Magazine, the most noticeable impact of the decline was in the sales of print editions compared to the decline in advertising. This decline in print has been felt since before the pandemic. The decline in advertising and sales was more pronounced after the pandemic due to the decline in people’s purchasing power and advertising cuts by companies and institutions”.

Data from the national private radio association PRSSNI highlights that the situation for radio is even worse than print¹⁵. Among the 600 members, on average 70–90% of revenue was lost. As a result, 30% cut staff salary and 60% cut down on their broadcasting hours even though demand for content increased during the pandemic.

In line with these findings is the severe impact of the pandemic on the livelihoods of individual journalists. The Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) conducted a study in 38 cities across Indonesia¹⁶. The study revealed that 83.5% of respondents were affected economically by the pandemic. The impact was caused by reduction of contributor fees (53.9%), pay cuts (24.7%), layoff (5.9%) and suspension (4.1%).

As companies reduced marketing budgets, local governments increased spending on media, especially in the provinces. According to the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, “[m]ost ministries allocated funds to promote their activities through the purchase of advertising, thus helping to keep media businesses afloat”¹⁷.

According to Manan, “[b]efore the pandemic, only media published in big cities could still get advertisements from private companies. In small cities, dependence on government advertising spending is very large and is the main source of income. This dependence is even higher during the pandemic because private institutions reduce their advertising spending”.

In addition, several financial incentives for media companies were announced by the government. The government will abolish the value added tax (VAT) for newsprint and VAT on raw materials used for print media will be borne by the government. Also, electricity charges and premium healthcare payments for media

workers will be suspended, corporate tax payments decreased by 50% during the pandemic and the income tax for employees who earn up to 200 million Indonesia Rupiah per month will be waived¹⁸.

The Indonesian Press Council (Dewan Pers), an autonomous press regulator has initiated a special task force for media sustainability¹⁹. This ad-hoc agency organised public discussions in 2020 and 2021 especially around handling the impact of digital platforms. One result of the task force is the collaboration with telecommunication provider PT Telekom Indonesia in launching new programmatic digital advertising options for media organisations²⁰.

There are also examples of publications utilising new online opportunities. A niche legal publication moved events online, the Media Development Investment Fund (MDIF) notes. "Although the number of attendees dropped, reduced set-up/operating costs led to higher margins"²¹. And the PMA survey showed that one publication created a new fact-checking channel and bot "for distributing the fact-checked articles and to collaborate with platforms and other publishers".

Recommendations

While media in Indonesia experience greater press freedom and freedom of expression in comparison to other countries in the region, there is still significant censorship, restrictions, and violence towards media workers, especially in West Papua. During the COVID-19 pandemic, some publications were banned due to their critical coverage of the government. The government should create a conducive environment for media institutions for the benefit of democracy and the public's access to essential information during a crisis.

During the COVID-19 crisis, journalists worked as frontliners to inform the public about the pandemic and health care. However, many journalists lost their jobs, took pay cuts, and some media institutions were closed. In many cases, the revenue of media institutions decreased during this period. The financial incentives offered by the government are a good start but not sufficient to compensate the lost revenue during the pandemic. Such efforts have to be solidified for there to be media viability in the country.

The pandemic also showed the need for media to embrace digital transformation. New online products and initiatives were created in some instances with a higher profit margin than offline products. These initiatives have to be embraced by more media organisations in the country as the pandemic has shown.

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MALAYSIA

Media Freedom and Journalist Safety

By Kamles Kumar

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought on unprecedented challenges to media operations and media workers in Malaysia that require new solutions.

Prior to the pandemic, self-regulation had been the norm in Malaysian journalism. Media companies practiced self-censorship to avoid getting into trouble with the authorities. While there had been no direct attacks on the media, there were instances in which journalists were pressured against pursuing a certain topic or issue. Malaysian media had also practiced a very bare minimum of safety standards, including on matters pertaining to the welfare and insurance of journalists. Furthermore, there had been little emphasis on safety training, ethical reporting and crisis management before COVID-19 emerged in Malaysia.

The lack of safety awareness has put journalists in danger, especially during protests, rallies and even political party gatherings. During the Bersih 3.0 rally in 2012, there was police violence against journalists covering the rally, which was condemned unequivocally by the media fraternity¹.

The safety situation for media workers has deteriorated since the start of the pandemic, particularly in the earlier days where there were fewer means of protection available and very limited resources like facemasks and protective gear. This was made worse by uncertainties surrounding the viability of media operations in Malaysia.

Malaysia's press freedom ranking has recorded a sharp decline since 2020. The lack of commitment to reforms, coupled with COVID-19 restrictions, is expected to further tarnish the country's media freedom record.

As journalists continue to face safety challenges, the pandemic has exacerbated existing unresolved issues. While spared from direct physical threats, Malaysian journalists have been on the frontlines to report on the pandemic without any protection, safety measures or even remuneration.

The industry has also been badly affected by budget cuts, as well as by investors and advertisers pulling out. This has resulted in many media companies downsizing, shutting down or retrenching staff to survive the pandemic and the economic crunch that it has made even worse.

The absence of a direct force used against journalists in Malaysia has not spared them from being hit by legal weapons. Reporters have been arrested under the Sedition Act; some have also been investigated under Section 504 of the Penal Code² (for intentional insult with intent to provoke a breach of the peace) for writing legitimate articles with known sources.

Previously, too, authorities would put pressure on media houses to dissuade them from pursuing a particular issue or topic that would paint those in power in a negative light. Today Malaysian media owners and journalists continue to face 'unseen pressures' from authorities, the government and politicians in power. This has been on top of new forms of public harassment brought on by increased online exposure, as most press conferences or events during the pandemic have shifted to online platforms.

Media freedom

Previously, under the Barisan Nasional administration, most online media outlets were not recognised and had trouble applying for media passes from the Communications and Multimedia Ministry. Journalists from certain media outlets – such as Malaysiakini, The Malaysian Insight, Free Malaysia Today and Malay Mail Online – were also barred from covering official government events and official press conferences including then Prime Minister Najib Razak's address³.

Some organisations were also unfairly treated and could not access proper working accreditation for official government engagements and party assemblies⁴.

During the pandemic, journalists have found themselves faced with increased restrictions in terms of access, even when physical events were moved online. Previously, access to physical events, especially government functions, was allowed only for OMO (Official Media Only); online organisations like Malaysiakini and The Malaysian Insight were refused access⁵ as they were perceived to be 'opposition-friendly' news portals. These days, public institutions, including courtrooms and the Parliament, have also imposed a limited-access rule, which often favour state-owned or selected media organisations⁶. This has made access to information and news more difficult during the pandemic, especially regarding matters of public interest like corruption cases and policy announcements. There have also been restrictions for journalists to even enter Parliament in 2021⁷, where only a select number of organisations have been allowed to cover the proceedings.

Another example of restricted access involved Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob. As then Defence Minister under the previous Perikatan Nasional administration, he was tasked to hold daily press conferences on COVID-19 non-health updates. But access to these sessions was restricted, leaving out a larger number of online news portals seen as critical of government policies. This has had a significant impact on media freedom, already under threat through legislation that affects both print and online media⁸.

Under the pretext of countering disinformation related to COVID-19, in March 2021 the Malaysian government adopted the Malaysian Emergency (Essential Powers) (No. 2) Ordinance 2021, also known as the 'Fake News Ordinance'⁹. In a legal analysis on compliance of the law to international standards, the UK-based organisation Article 19 noted how the Ordinance revives the draconian provisions of the Anti-Fake News Act 2018, which was repealed in October 2019 by the Malaysian Parliament¹⁰.

Malaysia also gained a black mark in media freedom when authorities raided Al Jazeera's Kuala Lumpur office after the broadcaster ran the documentary 'Locked Up in Malaysia's Lockdown'¹¹. The documentary highlighted the mistreatment of foreign workers in Malaysia during the pandemic. Then Communications Minister Saifuddin Abdullah told Parliament that Al Jazeera was being investigated for making an unlicensed, inaccurate documentary about migrants. This resulted in a debate on licensing for media in Malaysia, during which authorities said that they might pursue a registration drive that would include all media outlets including social media.

Malaysia also has not updated or revamped the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984, an archaic law that still governs over most publications, and which falls under the Home Affairs Ministry¹². This issue has made the government particular on the selection of media houses obtaining licences and has enabled it to issue threats of licence revocation if it perceives any news as unsavoury or unfavourable to the state and to government officials.

Safety of journalists and impunity

Early in the pandemic, the Malaysian government had severely underestimated the crisis. Media owners were also relatively unprepared to respond to restrictions brought on by the pandemic¹³. There was no physical distancing and journalists were still going about their daily duties covering government functions and political events.

In the context of the pandemic, media safety is a primary concern as journalists have to be on the frontline to do their reports. As the country went into a lockdown on 18 March 2020, the media remained a primary source of information despite some newsrooms scaling down their operations. On the ground, Malaysian journalists were not provided adequate protection or access to carry out their duties in a safe manner¹⁴.

In a National Union of Journalists Peninsular Malaysia 2020 survey of working conditions, 45.4 percent of 240 members of the media said that their salaries had been affected because of the health crisis. More than 83 percent of the respondents' also felt that their employers were complacent in dealing with the pandemic, especially regarding safety and security aspects¹⁵.

Unlike in many other countries in the region and beyond, Malaysian journalists had not been among those prioritised for COVID-19 vaccines. It was only in May 2021 that the government finally responded to urgent demands by various press associations for the media to be vaccinated^{16 17}.

That foot-dragging has had serious consequences. In September 2020, a large number of journalists from Malaysia's capital, Kuala Lumpur, were assigned to cover the Sabah state elections, along with their local colleagues, despite being unvaccinated. The easing of lockdowns in Sabah to facilitate a two-week campaigning period and voting eventually led to a third wave of infections. In Kuala Lumpur and other states, journalists were also exposed to politicians who returned from campaigning and contracted the virus¹⁸.

There has also been a huge debate over whether media companies should cover medical bills or provide insurance should journalists be exposed to the virus. In the

meantime, several reporters and photographers have been infected with the virus and have ended up being admitted to the hospital, with some even put on life support¹⁹.

Malaysian journalists, however, have other worries. In the same NUJM survey, nearly 54 percent of respondents said that there were security concerns in their line of work, such as facing threats for their articles²⁰. These included editors receiving calls from ministry officials asking to alter or “spike” a story, as well as facing restricted access to events and even to ministers.

Recommendations

Improving Malaysia’s media landscape would need:

- ▶ Widespread awareness that media practitioners are frontline workers;
- ▶ Better employee welfare from media companies in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic;
- ▶ More transparent approach in the way politicians deal with the media;
- ▶ Media companies that do not need to self-regulate through fear of persecution; and
- ▶ Media companies forming an independent media council to enforce, protect and promote the rights of media workers.

For these to happen, media employers must ensure that all staff, especially journalists who are frontline workers, are always safe, which includes being vaccinated during virus outbreaks, among other things. Editors must also use their judgement to only send out journalists for assignments that are important and that they adhere to safety standard operating procedures (SOPs).

In addition, employers should protect journalists from potential harassment from outside parties, including the executive. There should be an independent media council to oversee media rights and reporting without the interference of people with interest.

The Malaysian government should also repeal the Malaysian Emergency (Essential Powers) (No. 2) Ordinance 2021 to allow the local press to report issues freely. Other pieces of legislation that stifle journalists and prevent them from doing their job properly should also be abolished. These include the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984, which has long been a threat to print media. Abolition of these laws would pave the way towards self-regulation of the industry based on a new law offering protection to journalists and press freedom.

Government-linked personnel, moreover, should refrain from attacking the media, and should avoid using the terms ‘spin’ and ‘misquoted’ in describing press reports. Instead, they should exercise their right of reply and use proper channels to address matters rather than resorting to using authoritative pressure.

Finally, the Malaysian Media Council, which has long been mooted, should be set up for a better understanding of media policies and to address the struggles of press freedom and the industry. There should be an open discussion on policies and protection to future-proof the Malaysian media to survive changing times.

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MALAYSIA

Media Viability

By Anrike Visser

Prior to the 2018 elections, most private news publications and television stations were controlled by political parties or businesses allied with the political front Barisan National, and state news outlets similarly reflected government views.

Freedom House noted a reduction in political pressure and harassment after the Pakatan Harapan came into power in 2018¹. Unfortunately, a change of government in March 2020 brought again “increased government pressure on private media”².

Independent media were excluded from official COVID-19 briefings and parliamentary sessions. Several reporters and media houses were investigated or prosecuted for alleged crimes including sedition and defamation³.

COVID-19 in Malaysia

After Singapore and Brunei, Malaysia is the third-largest economy of Southeast Asia⁴. Malaysia has had several waves of infections peaking in January and May 2021 and is currently experiencing a large third wave⁵. In 2020, GDP decreased by 5.6% after a growth of 4.3% in 2019⁶.

According to the IMF, Malaysia entered the pandemic from a “robust economic position but has nonetheless been significantly affected”⁷. A “synchronous fiscal, monetary and financial policy response”⁸ has limited the economic impact of the pandemic. If the pandemic is controlled in 2021, the IMF forecasts a strong rebound with GDP growth of 6.5%⁹.

Impact on media viability

Like in other countries, Malaysian media had already been facing financial difficulties before the Covid-19 pandemic due to the “decrease in news subscription and advertising revenues”¹⁰. Media veteran Tan Sri Johan Jaaffar said in September 2019, that the Malaysian newspaper business is to be given the last rites for the dead¹¹.

The financial issues became more severe with the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and led to “major downsizing” of the media industry in Malaysia¹². Several media companies downsized or closed entirely. The National Union of Journalists Malaysia (NUJM) saw its membership reduce by 50% between March 2020 and April 2021. According to a joint statement from NUJM, the Centre for Independent Journalism and Gerakan Media Merdeka, “[a] total of 400 journalists had lost their jobs in 2020”¹³.

The government does have COVID-19 stimulus and recovery packages, but these haven’t concretely addressed the dire economic impact faced by media, the Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ) states¹⁴. CIJ recommends the government to

establish a Media Resilience Fund. "The Fund can offer small grants for individuals or small media organisations to offset or recoup financial losses or to adapt their practices and explore new operating models in this time of disruption and economic crisis"¹⁵, said CIJ.

In April 2020, The Edge Financial Daily ceased its print operations citing "the double onslaught of the shift to digital news and the current lockdown of the economy because of the Covid-19 pandemic"¹⁶. The Edge Weekly continues to operate in print while its website The Edge Markets also continues.

Well-known publisher BlueInk Media, which published Her World, Harper's Bazaar and Marie Claire, shut down entirely in April 2020 for similar reasons.

In March 2020, Media Prima group laid off 543 employees at the New Straits Times Press followed by an additional 300 in June 2020¹⁷. China Press and sister company Sin Chew Daily temporarily stopped printing the evening edition in April 2020¹⁸. The morning newspaper is still published and the evening edition was moved online.

Other media outlets resorted to cost cutting. Chinese daily Kwong Wah Yit Poh cut the monthly telephone allowance and The Sun, part of Berjaya Corporation Berhad, implemented pay cuts and mandatory annual leave¹⁹. Video on demand service Iflix laid off 50 employees and offered free membership for a few months to attract new users²⁰.

Despite the global digital transformation most online portals in Malaysia still provide free access. Only some media houses like The Malaysian Insight and Malaysiakini have adopted a subscription-based model.

Malaysiakini, an online-only news site, saw a change in their revenue mix during the pandemic. In 2019, advertising was about 70% of revenues with subscriptions netting about 30%²¹. Due to the pandemic though, advertising dropped by 40% and subscriptions increased due to the high demand for news regarding the change in government²².

Overall during the pandemic, revenue declined a bit compared with 2019 with advertising and subscriptions now contributing 50% each at Malaysiakini. So far, Malaysiakini has been able to weather the pandemic with limited pay cuts and by not re-filling vacant positions²³.

Malaysiakini's management aims to reduce advertising revenue while increasing subscriptions over time. "We don't want to be tied to advertising revenue, it's politically dangerous", CEO and co-founder Premesh Chandran said in 2020²⁴.

Malaysiakini is also focused on increasing skills and knowledge around subscriptions. Chandran adds that lessons learned from large international news media are not always so relevant. "Some subscriptions systems and other digital tools developed for high-income countries are premised on other things that aren't widely available in a country like Malaysia (like credit cards)"²⁵.

In the PMA survey (see appendix), Malaysiakini adds that they do not expect the pandemic to have a long-term impact on the organisation. They saw a small impact

from lower advertising numbers as stated above and responded by re-strategising the business model and increasing audience engagement.

In addition to the economic impact of the pandemic, the political pressures also impacted the business side of media houses as the Centre for Independent Journalism notes: “Misguided and disproportionate actions against media institutions and reporters were not counterproductive [for authorities] as [they] shut down the flow of information and crucial public discourse in dealing with public health issues. Furthermore, [they] created a need for media self-censoring and toeing the government’s line to remain viable and to survive the ongoing economic challenges”²⁶.

The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism also notes that “[p]olitical actors have again stepped in to own and control the Malaysian media environment in anticipation of an early general election in 2022”²⁷. Online news portal The Vibes launched in September 2020, is supposedly backed by the opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim.

Media Prima, the biggest media conglomerate, came under the spotlight when the former member of parliament Johari Abdul Ghani purchased shares. Two years ago, Media Prima was struggling financially until an “injection of funds by prominent Malaysian tycoon, Syed Mokhtar Al-Bukhary”²⁸.

Reuters notes that “[t]hese manoeuvres point to a familiar pattern close to general elections where the dominant political parties consolidate their control over the media. It has also been reported that online media are being targeted this time around”²⁹.

Recommendations

The state is responsible for ensuring access to information and the freedom of expression. In a critical situation like a pandemic and other crises, journalists and media professionals should have easy access to information pertaining to the crisis. In the context of Malaysia, independent media were excluded from official briefings and parliamentary sessions on COVID-19. Moreover, journalists and media institutions were investigated for alleged crimes including sedition and defamation. This shows that the state had created barriers in media operation in the COVID-19 crisis. The state must be responsible and accountable in ensuring access to information and media freedom, which is necessary for media viability in the country.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a large number of journalists lost their jobs and several media institutions were closed. Thus, the state must establish a Media Resilience Fund. The state can support highly vulnerable media institutions and provide an incentive to highly affected journalists through the fund. Such funds must be established as soon as possible by the government. However, while government support is helpful during crises, they should not negatively influence editorial independence. To counter external influence, media organisations should not solely depend on government support and have a range of different revenue sources.

The pandemic accelerated the transformation from traditional to digital media

in Malaysia. The state has to support this transformation by creating appropriate policies and developing the needed digital structures. At the same time, media institutions also have to be updated to professional digital media institutions with the expertise, digital infrastructure, and human resources for creating and disseminating trustworthy content in the digital space, which is important for media viability going forward.

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MYANMAR

Media Freedom and Journalist Safety

By Anrike Visser

This report focuses on the impact of the pandemic on media in Myanmar. The safety situation for media workers has deteriorated significantly since the coup d'état of 1 February 2021. Since the coup, Myanmar has become one of the worst countries for journalists in terms of imprisonment¹, making sources regarding the 2021 situation hard to come by.

Nonetheless, for comparison purposes, this report will mainly focus on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on journalists' safety and media freedom.

Impact on safety of journalists

Journalists continue to face safety challenges in Myanmar and existing issues have been exacerbated by COVID-19. Early in the pandemic, the crisis was severely underestimated by the Myanmar government. An official spokesperson stated that Myanmar citizens would be protected against the virus because of their "lifestyle and diet"².

Nonetheless it was difficult for news media to counteract the official narrative for fear of arrest. Editor Zaw Ye Htet at Dae Pyaw, an online news agency, was tried and sentenced for reporting underestimated infections in Karen state when Myanmar migrants returned from Thailand³. In April 2020, he correctly identified a person who had died from COVID-19 – which was initially denied by the state – but sentenced to two years in prison, nonetheless.

In other instances, the pandemic provided cover for the government to tighten control on the media regarding other contested topics, such as the conflict with ethnic armed organisations and the ethnic cleansing⁴ of the Rohingya population.

On 24 March 2020, the government declared the Arakan Army, an ethnic armed organisation in Rakhine state, a terrorist organisation and unlawful association. Subsequently, media workers were arrested and charged for talking to members of the Arakan Army.

On 30 March 2020, police arrested and detained the editor-in-chief of the Voice of Myanmar for 11 days, under Myanmar's Counter-Terrorism Law for conducting an interview with the Arakan Army⁵. The police also raided the home of the editor-in-chief of Khit Thit News and the office of Narinjara media while briefly detaining three journalists⁶. The Democratic Voice of Burma reported that the editor-in-chief of Narinjara was also charged under the Counter-Terrorism Law⁷.

Wire agency Reuters was also sued by the military for covering civilian deaths after

shelling in Rakhine state⁸. They withdrew the complaint against Reuters, but not against the local lawmaker who provided information to the media company⁹.

Under the increased repression of media freedom, journalists have also reported an increase of intimidation and threats of violence¹⁰. Media in conflict areas or reporting on the Rohingya crisis have especially expressed increased harassment¹¹.

To a lesser extent, the coverage of COVID-19 has also triggered increased harassment of state and non-state actors. For example, operating entertainment venues demanded the removal of critical coverage accompanied by threats of lawsuits. This created pressure to self-censor about sensitive topics¹².

Finally, there was widespread dissemination of COVID-19 misinformation¹³. In one instance, a media worker stated that “mirror sites” were using their company’s name to discredit their organisation and spread misinformation¹⁴.

Impact on media freedom

COVID-19 lockdowns severely restricted the ability of Myanmar media to do their job and severely impacted media freedom. This was mainly caused by the government not deeming journalism to be an “essential business”¹⁵. This mainly affected privately-owned media in major urban areas, with journalists facing up to three years in prison if they violated the lockdown measures¹⁶.

Internet freedom in Myanmar declined dramatically during the pandemic. The government has shut down mobile internet access in parts of Rakhine and Chin states since June 2019, affecting more than a million people¹⁷. Free Expression Myanmar reports that users on social media are hesitant to discuss “sensitive topics such as gender, the Rohingya ethnic group, and conflicts in Rakhine, Shan, and Kachin”¹⁸.

In March 2020, during the first wave of COVID-19 infections and ahead of the November 2020 elections, the government shut down 67 websites for allegedly spreading fake news¹⁹. COVID-19 was cited as justification for the action. The closures included independent news outlets and websites of activists like Narinjara, Development Media Group, Mandalay In-Depth News, Mekong News, Voice of Myanmar, Karen News and The Stateless, whose founder documents human rights abuses against the Rohingya community in Myanmar²⁰.

In May 2020, telecommunication provider Telenor reported that an additional 22 websites were ordered to be blocked for “fearmongering” and “misleading” people about COVID-19²¹.


The government previously announced a draft Prevention and Control of Communicable Diseases bill in February 2020²². The bill imposes fines and a possible six-month prison term for health officials disseminating information causing fear or panic. The authorities state the law seeks to prevent public panic or the spread of intentionally false information²³.

Another draft law caused similar worry among civil society and human rights organisations. In April 2020, the Directive on the Prevention of Incitement to Hatred and Violence was announced. Free Expression Myanmar warned that the directive

is vague and could be used to violate freedom of expression²⁴.

Recommendations

To improve the safety situation for media, the following recommendations are made in line with UNESCO's Media Development Indicators 3.13 and 3.14.

- ▶ Stop the arrest and detention of journalists for correctly reporting on the pandemic or political topics.
 - ▶ Do not persecute sources for speaking to media.
 - ▶ End impunity for harassment and violence towards journalists and media workers.
 - ▶ The government must deem media an essential business and allow reporting during lockdown periods and other crises.
 - ▶ Full internet access must be restored across Myanmar.
 - ▶ Vague laws and directives that can be used to violate media freedom must be reformulated.
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MYANMAR

Media Viability

By Anrike Visser

Previous and current military rule has contributed to limited freedom of expression which has severely impaired media viability in the country.

Following the coup d'état, eleven independent media organisations were banned and 93 journalists arrested between 1 February and 30 July 2021²⁵. The removal of licences severely restricts revenue as advertisers drop banned media, even if they continue to report in exile, for the fear of getting into trouble themselves²⁶. Nonetheless, the main focus of this analysis will be the impact of the pandemic on media viability as opposed to the coup for comparison purposes.

A starting point for media viability is the economy and the ability of people to pay for media consumption. Myanmar is the second poorest country in Southeast Asia (GDP US\$ 1400.20 in 2020)²⁷, with the highest levels of illiteracy other than Timor-Leste (24% illiteracy in 2016)²⁸.

Nonetheless, cell phone usage²⁹ and Internet access³⁰ have boomed in the past decade since affordable sim-cards became available and the rise of new digital media organisations, particularly in ethnic areas. The brief opening up of the country in the last decade enabled greater access to the internet and social media³¹, allowing opportunities for new digital media companies to rise. Formerly exiled media companies started to return to Myanmar³² and available international funding for media development increased³³ until the recent coup.

In October 2020, the Media Development Investment Fund (MDIF) published a map of private local media in Myanmar, totalling 86 ethnic and community media organisations³⁴. In addition, national media includes independent media organisations like Myanmar Now, Mizzima, Frontier Myanmar, Democratic Voice of Burma, Mawkun Magazine, Irrawaddy, The Voice, 7 Day Media and state-owned media organisations MRTV and The Global New Light of Myanmar.

COVID-19 in Myanmar

Initially the outbreak seemed to be "limited"³⁵ in Myanmar with a small wave in March 2020 and a second wave at the end of August 2020. Still, the pandemic slowed GDP growth from 6.8% in 2019 to 3.2% in 2020³⁶. The downward trend is expected to continue due to the negative economic impact of the coup and a new wave of infections.

A new wave since May 2021 has severely impacted the country³⁷ with testing coming to a virtual standstill and health care workers striking against the military junta. The availability of oxygen is limited, and the number of deaths is increasing. The International Monetary Fund predicts a GDP decline of 8.9% in 2021. The junta has

been accused of effectively weaponising COVID-19 by hunting doctors, limiting access to oxygen and refusing patients at military-run hospitals, according to reports³⁸. The decline in the economy has particularly impacted media institutions in Myanmar.

Impact on media viability

Media organisations were already struggling in Myanmar prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Of 19 national privately owned print media launched in 2013, only seven were left in 2018, “[n]early all of them are in bad shape due to factors ranging from a drop in circulation to shrinking ads and high production costs, among others.”³⁹

In June 2020, MDIF surveyed the impact of the pandemic at 36 Myanmar media outlets⁴⁰. By then, even though the country had only experienced the first small wave of infections, about half of the respondents reported more than a 75% drop in income.

“Thirty-two of the 36 respondents had advertising revenue prior to the start of the pandemic, and all of them reported that it was negatively affected. All 19 media with print products were obliged to either reduce or even halt production.”

The good news that 21 of the 31 respondents that sought emergency funding during the survey period obtained it, is tempered by the reality that the impact of COVID-19 has been deep and will be long lasting.

In response to collapsing revenues, 31 of the 36 survey respondents initiated spending cuts between March and May 2020, which included cutting salaries and staff in some cases.

Yet the impact of the pandemic has not been entirely negative. In common with media in other countries, one bright spot in this bleak picture has been audience growth. MDIF’s survey found that almost all media saw both their digital audiences, and audience engagement, increase. This had a positive knock-on effect for many media organisations, with 30 respondents reporting that during this period they were able to strengthen their digital skills and knowledge due to the increased focus on their online content.

Myanmar Now saw, for example, an increase in donations via their website. Other outlets are exploring YouTube advertising or selling content to other media. “Even during March through May, 20 of the 36 survey respondents said they had already identified new potential revenue sources”, said the independent news agency.

Another noteworthy development is by Frontier Myanmar, the first media outlet to launch a membership programme in Myanmar, just before the start of the pandemic⁴¹. Nonetheless, Frontier lost between 51-75% of income during the pandemic due to loss of advertising, events, workshops and public funding. The media company was forced to cut salaries and department budgets. Yet despite having to cut costs, the company saw an increase in paid and unpaid community members.

Recommendations

A robust economic and business environment is important for fostering independent and professional media institutions. In the context of Myanmar, the political situation as well as the COVID-19 pandemic has had an adverse impact on overall media viability. The state is responsible for creating a conducive environment to ensure the viability of free and independent media and should allow journalists to report independently.

Organisational capacity building is a focus area for media in Myanmar (referring to UNESCO's Media Business Indicator F. Organisational structures and resources). Only a small number of media houses have media professionals with experience with digital business models like memberships and online donations. The state, media institutions, and international development agencies must contribute to enhancing the digital and business skills of media personnel.

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PHILIPPINES

Media Freedom and Journalist Safety

By Janess Ann J. Ellao

The Philippine news industry is facing challenging times. The pandemic has exacerbated decades-old problems, many of which are rooted in the inability of the country's leaders to deal with a press that holds them to account. As a result, more Filipino journalists have been killed, slapped with trumped-up charges, and threatened in the course of their work during the pandemic.

Even when the government provides daily briefings, journalists lament that information remains scant. Verifying information has proven to be difficult, especially since journalists are not provided the protection they need.

Media freedom

Even before President Duterte was inaugurated to the highest post in the land, he had already launched several attacks against the media. His very public attacks against journalists and media outlets have been deemed to stem from his 'low tolerance for the adversarial press'¹, forcing media owners to sell their news agencies² or take down stories deemed offensive to the powers-that-be (R. Olea, personal communication, 2021).

The attacks have not ceased even during the pandemic. According to Ronalyn Olea, Secretary General of the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP), eight of the 23 journalist killings under President Duterte so far have happened during the pandemic. Other journalists have been put in danger when they were either "red-tagged" or accused of "aiding terrorists by spreading lies" after they ran stories that went against the official narrative³.

Among the biggest attacks to media freedom was the denial of radio and TV network ABS-CBN's franchise licence renewal⁴, which resulted in a 'freezing effect' across the news industry⁵ and hampered the flow of information⁶.

The dangers of red-tagging have been seen in the arrest of journalist Lady Ann Salem⁷, the continuing detention of a Tacloban-based journalist⁸ and the confiscation of copies of community newspaper *Pinoy Weekly* after the police claimed it was illegal⁹¹⁰. Cyber-attacks also continue against alternative media, with a recent wave traced to the Philippine military¹¹.

Verifying information has become challenging as well, with the 'gatekeeping' of question-asking during online government briefings (Name withheld, personal communication, 2021), even as other questions are ignored¹². During the first months of the pandemic, alternative news outfits also had their accreditation to cover

briefings denied¹³.

Libel and cyber-libel also remain threats. The NUJP said that 20 of the 37 libel and cyber-libel charges against journalists so far were filed during the pandemic; the 20 include charges against journalists who reported a police order to shoot activists critical of government pandemic response¹⁴, as well as the now dismissed cyber-libel charges against Rappler CEO Maria Ressa and reporter Rambo Talabong¹⁵.

The guilty verdict against Ressa and former Rappler researcher Reynaldo Santos Jr. was also handed down during the COVID-19 crisis. There remain seven tax-related charges against Rappler and Ressa.

There were also journalists charged for allegedly spreading false information per Republic Act No. 11469 or the Bayanihan to Heal as One Act. The journalists had reported the lack of government aid¹⁶. Two served jail terms¹⁷, while a campus journalist was publicly shamed¹⁸ as the Philippines is among the four Southeast Asian countries that penalises such acts¹⁹.

But media workers have not been taking all this sitting down. Protest actions have been held to assail the 'grim situation' in the news industry – all while strengthening the organisation of unions²⁰. During the pandemic, the NUJP-ABS-CBN chapter – now the media union's largest chapter – has been revived²¹. A legal defence aid for journalists under attack has also been put up²². Too, a complaint has been filed before the Commission on Human Rights and the Office of the Ombudsman on the red-tagging of journalists.

Journalist safety

The pandemic has exacerbated long-running issues and concerns on journalists' safety in the Philippines, which has been repeatedly labelled as one of the most dangerous places for media workers²³.

More than a third of the 23 journalist killings under President Duterte were documented during the pandemic (R. Olea, personal communication, 2021) while the rest who had been critical of the government's pandemic response were either routinely red-tagged^{24 25}, slapped with cyber-libel or for violating the penalised spreading of false information amid the pandemic, or arrested based on trumped up cases^{26 27}.

Meanwhile, the reduced earnings of journalists during the pandemic have put them in a more vulnerable position, especially as many journalists are having to pay out of their own pockets for protective gear, according to a recent NUJP survey.

A third of Filipino journalists who participated in the same NUJP survey²⁸ said that they were not provided with personal protective gear whenever they were sent out on field for coverage, even if these areas had active COVID-19 cases. At the same time, the survey revealed that some journalists have suffered as much as a 50-percent pay cut (R. Olea, personal communication, 2021).

Nearly 40 percent of the survey's 200 journalist-respondents also did not have their

own health cards before and even during the pandemic, while more than half did not have holiday and hazard pay²⁹. The concept of holiday and hazard pay, according to a Mindanao-based editor, is actually 'unheard of' in the news industry even before the pandemic hit the country (Name withheld 1, personal communication, 2021). But even journalists entitled to receive hazard pay may have a hard time claiming it, as they must prove that they have either contracted the virus or been exposed to it (Name withheld 1, personal communication, 2021).

Though now earning less, Filipino journalists tend to work more, with their limited mobility during data gathering making it more difficult to validate information. As journalists experience high levels of stress, are forced to undergo self-quarantine every so often and sometimes even contract the virus, their physical and mental wellbeing has taken a toll³⁰.

One journalist, however, observes that fewer layoffs are taking place as the pandemic continues, and that journalists are putting forward their safety concerns in newsrooms where there are more established unions (Name withheld 2, personal communication, 2021). Media organisations have also solicited donations for protective gear and launched fund-raising efforts for journalists who have contracted the virus or are in other emergency situations amid the pandemic.

Recommendations

Union organising and advocacy work on issues affecting media freedom and journalist safety must be strengthened and supported through capacity-building, education campaigns, legal assistance, to name a few possible measures. Concrete programmes such as legal and technical assistance to protect journalists from attacks must also be provided.

In addition, a study must be conducted to revisit how these attacks are affecting journalists in their work. More safety training, especially those focusing on digital security and mental health resilience, must be provided to more Filipino journalists. Moreover, given the current health crisis, media owners must ensure that journalists are provided due protection. This should cover journalists and media workers conducting fieldwork, as well as those in the office or working from home.

Apart from protective gear, media workers must be provided with hazard pay, paid quarantine leave, and other health benefits. They should also be tested regularly for the virus and provided with an efficient contact tracing system.

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PHILIPPINES

Media Viability

By Anrike Visser

The Philippines is “one of the most dangerous places in the world for journalists” according to Freedom House¹. While being sworn into office in June 2016, President Rodrigo Duterte said: “Just because you’re a journalist, you are not exempted from assassination if you’re a son of a bitch”². Four Philippine journalists were killed in 2020³.

Nonetheless, the constitution provides for press freedom and freedom of expression. Private media are “vibrant and outspoken”⁴ and state-owned broadcast media cover controversial topics⁵.

Noteworthy is that Filipinos spend the greatest amount of time online in the world: almost 11 hours daily including more than 4 hours on social media⁶.

COVID-19 in the Philippines

The Philippines is experiencing the second largest outbreak of COVID-19 in Southeast Asia after Indonesia⁷. In August 2021, the country was “battling a renewed surge in infections and deaths, partly driven by the more contagious Delta variant, overwhelming hospitals and healthcare workers”⁸.

The economic impact of the pandemic has been severe with a decline in GDP of 9.5% in 2020⁹. Nonetheless, the economy has recovered to an extent in 2021 according to the IMF thanks to “a comprehensive set of policy responses that have helped to mitigate the socio-economic impact and maintain financial stability”¹⁰. Economic recovery slowed down in the first half of 2021 due to the second wave of COVID-19 infections, but the real GDP growth for 2021 is still estimated at 6.9%.

Impact on media viability

The outbreak and prolonged lockdowns led to “significant downsizing”¹¹ in the media sector. Malaya Business Insight and Manila Standard Today temporarily ceased printing. The Philippine Daily Inquirer (PDI) offered early retirement to staff, laid off some columnists, shut down a section, and reduced the total size of the daily paper. The pandemic forced PDI to launch digital subscriptions in March 2020 which it hadn’t done until then. PDI also decided to discontinue its free paper Inquirer Libre and make tabloid Bandera online only.

At least eleven publications (three from Mindanao, seven from Luzon, and one from the Visayas) have ceased printing temporarily and shifted since then to digital formats. These are: Mindanao Times, Mindanao Gold Star Daily, Mindanao Observer, Baguio Chronicle, Mabuhay, Pahayagang Balikas, The Northern Forum, Palawan News

Sun.Star Baguio, Ilocos Times, and Negros Daily Bulletin. Two multi-awarded community papers, Baguio Midland Courier and Visayan Daily Star have resumed publishing printed editions but with a reduced circulation and fewer pages¹².

According to the newspaper association Philippine Press Institute (PPI), “community newspapers are bearing the brunt of the coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) pandemic”¹³. PPI decided to support community papers by paying for some of the stories they republish on their website¹⁴.

A PMA survey (see Appendix) respondent mentioned they were also significantly affected. “We earn from production deals, and during the pandemic and the first lockdowns, many of our contracts were delayed or postponed indefinitely. It has also made business development very difficult”.

Unlike the shutdowns in print media, broadcaster ABS-CBN shut down when its licence wasn't renewed in May 2020. President Duterte had accused the network of bias against him and openly threatened to close it down since the 2016 campaign. ABS-CBN was the oldest and largest media network used by 38% of the Philippine television viewing population¹⁵. After its licence was pulled, ABS-CBN moved online and continued on a number of paid television channels. Nonetheless, they laid off roughly 5,000 of its 11,000 employees, including a third from its news staff, and registering a loss of US\$ 150 million.

GMA Network profited off the changes at ABS-CBN with a 79% profit increase¹⁶. GMA gained advertisers who were previously with ABS-CBN, but digital ads also grew by 36% signalling it was better prepared for the digital shift than ABS-CBN¹⁷.

Digital media were also hit by lowering advertising revenue. Digital-first media organisation Digital News Exchange reduced its advertisement rates to small businesses to attract new advertisers. Media associations like PPI also struggled to navigate the pandemic as they depend on donations and grants. Workshops and conferences continued online which required new technological skills.

Digital news site Rappler has also been successful with content tailored to the pandemic and the digital transformation. During the pandemic, social media as a source of news rose to 72% in 2021, up from 65% in 2020¹⁸. A Facebook Live interview¹⁹ with a human rights lawyer discussing the rule of law in a pandemic in April 2020 has been viewed more than 250,000 times.

Rappler also used the pandemic to launch a platform tailored to the segment of users mainly consuming their content via mobile phones. The platform, called Lighthouse, is a content delivery and community engagement platform which “enables faster loading, taking into account slower connections as well”²⁰.

Recommendations

Publications that are not digital-first significantly struggled during the pandemic. Becoming digital-first can cushion the blow of future external events. This includes offering digital payment methods, moving content online and implementing digital workflows for the newsroom to continue operating. Media has moved into a digital

medium; therefore, the state must formulate appropriate policies to enable these online entities to flourish. At the same time, media institutions need to provide training and build the capacity of employees to operate digital media effectively.

Media organisations also need to adjust their price points of advertising and subscriptions during economic downturns to reach a new kind of advertiser and user. Alternatively, it can make sense to offer different tiers depending on the size of the advertiser without diluting the perceived value of the product. Experimenting with new digital products to increase audience engagement, loyalty and trust can retain readers as well.

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SINGAPORE

Media Freedom and Journalist Safety

By Kirsten Han

Singapore's media landscape is dominated by Singapore Press Holdings (SPH), which owns the country's mainstream newspapers and a large stable of magazines, and MediaCorp, which operates local TV and radio stations, as well as the regional news network CNA (formerly known as Channel News Asia). MediaCorp is wholly owned by the state investment company Temasek Holdings¹. Singapore Press Holdings is not government-owned but has been described as 'closely supervised by the political leadership'².

In May 2021, SPH announced that it would spin off its media business into a not-for-profit entity named SPH Media Trust, to make it easier to seek public and private funding³. The Singapore government has indicated that it is willing to fund SPH Media Trust⁴; former Cabinet Minister Khaw Boon Wan, who belonged to the ruling People's Action Party, has been named its chairman — a decision that included the involvement of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong⁵.

There has been a proliferation of online media in recent years. Financial sustainability is an issue, however, and outlets that count government agencies among their advertising partners might be wary of publishing work that is too critical of the ruling party. In a short documentary distributed by the Freedom Film Network⁶, individuals who have been involved in starting or running independent media outlets say that there is reticence among investors or funders in Singapore to give money to such outfits, out of fear of repercussions.

Media freedom

Singapore ranked 160th in the 2021 Reporters without Borders (RSF) World Press Freedom Index, a fall of two spots from the previous year⁷.

Various pieces of legislation contain clauses that affect or restrict press freedom. The Newspaper and Printing Presses Act and the Broadcasting Act both require traditional media outlets to obtain government licences before they are allowed to operate. Newspaper companies are also required by law to issue management shares to establishment institutions that are trusted by the government⁸.

The Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act, also known as POFMA, was ostensibly passed to address hostile misinformation campaigns and other forms of 'fake news'. The law allows government ministers to issue executive orders demanding publication of government-issued 'corrections', take-downs, or access blocking of online content⁹. POFMA has been used more than 80 times since November 2019¹⁰, including against mainstream media platforms such as CNA,

as well as independent and alternative media outlets such as The Online Citizen and New Naratif¹¹.

The Public Order and Safety (Special Powers) Act relates to 'serious incidents' and gives the police the power to issue 'communications stop orders' that can ban the making, exhibiting and communicating of relevant media. Any individual who refuses to comply with police orders can be punished with a fine of up to S\$20,000, two years' imprisonment, or both. While the law was framed as being anti-terror, its definition of 'serious events' includes large-scale peaceful protests. However, such bans on communications have yet to be issued.

In October 2021, Singapore's Parliament passed the Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act, or FICA. While the law has been justified as necessary to defend Singapore's national interests and political sovereignty, it has also been criticised for being overly broad and circumscribing judicial oversight¹². Like POFMA, FICA allows the government to issue orders demanding the removal or blocking of access to online content, and to declare websites 'proscribed online locations', upon which the financing of the outlet would be a criminal offence. FICA also allows the authorities to designate individuals and organisations as 'politically significant persons', requiring them to submit to the government regular reports related to their funding and foreign affiliations. There are no exceptions or specific protections granted to journalists and the media within this law. There is yet no timeline as to when FICA will come into force.

Independent media and journalists have been investigated for a variety of offences. For example, in September 2020, the police confirmed that they were investigating the Southeast Asian platform New Naratif for the alleged illegal conduct of election activity¹³. New Naratif's managing director, Thum Ping Tjin, was questioned twice, and had his electronic devices seized. The police eventually issued him a stern warning¹⁴.

Members of the ruling party are also known for suing critics and opponents for defamation. In recent years, this has affected bloggers and alternative media outlets. On 1 September 2021, the court ordered The Online Citizen's chief editor Terry Xu and a Malaysian-based writer for the website to pay Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong a total of S\$210,000 in damages. Lee had separately sued Xu and the writer for defamation over an article that referenced allegations made by the Premier's estranged siblings. The court also granted an injunction sought by Lee to prevent Xu from further distributing the defamatory allegations¹⁵. Xu was later also ordered to pay Lee S\$87,000 in legal costs for the case¹⁶. In addition, Xu and another contributor to The Online Citizen were found guilty of criminal defamation in relation to another letter to the editor published on the website, and will be sentenced at a later date¹⁷.

Safety of journalists and impunity

General and physical safety is not a significant issue for journalists in Singapore. There are no documented cases of journalists imprisoned, assaulted, or killed for their work in the city state. There is therefore no serious effort to document or develop strategies to address such threats against journalists working in Singapore.

There is no independent association or organisation that focuses on issues of media

freedom and the safety of journalists. While Singapore has both a Press Club and a Foreign Correspondents' Association (Singapore), these two organisations operate largely as networking groups. The Creative Media and Publishing Union, registered in 2015, is an amalgamation of the Singapore National Union of Journalists and the SPH Employees' Union¹⁸. As with all unions in Singapore, however, it has been co-opted by the government and cannot be considered an independent defender of press freedom and journalist safety.

Psychological security, though, is an issue for Singapore-based journalists. Foreign journalists are known to have had trouble renewing their work visas¹⁹; although the general lack of transparency into how visa applications are handled makes it difficult to provide evidence that this is due to their work, it has left some journalists apprehensive about jeopardising their ability to remain in Singapore. As such, most of the evidence of this is anecdotal. Former journalists in local mainstream media outlets have also written about political interference in their coverage, as well as fear for their own jobs²⁰. Self-censorship is a common and long-standing problem.

Although there are laws that provide some protections to informants who report offences to the authorities – such as those on drug trafficking, terrorism financing, corruption, and workplace safety violations – Singapore has no overarching legislation that would protect whistleblowers²¹. There are also no laws allowing journalists to protect their sources. Instead, laws like the Criminal Procedure Code and FICA grant the authorities the power to demand information, which would include the identities of sources. When questioned by the police, journalists have been asked to reveal sources of information, with no regard for confidentiality of sources. This lack of protection for confidentiality not only deters sources from speaking to reporters, but also requires journalists to assume risks upon themselves when working on potentially sensitive stories.

Under Singapore's expansive Official Secrets Act²², individuals who obtained information while working for the government are allowed to communicate such information only to authorised persons. Furthermore, individuals, including journalists, can commit the offence of wrongful communication if they receive confidential information from a government source and pass it on without authorisation. *Receiving* information can also contravene the Official Secrets Act, if the recipient has reason to believe that the information is secret and confidential. The amount of information that falls under the Official Secrets Act is extremely wide; for instance, if anyone is in possession of a document that they obtained due to their position as someone in government service, then the law will apply. The penalty for the wrongful communication of information is a fine of up to S\$2,000 and imprisonment of up to two years.

Even though cases of civil servants being prosecuted under this law for leaking information to the press are rare, it has been used even in situations where the information being communicated was not a sensitive matter of national security. In 2017, the authorities launched an investigation after a journalist for the local broadsheet *The Straits Times* approached the Housing Development Board with questions based on information about a public housing resale portal that had not yet been announced to the public. The journalist had heard of the portal from a civil servant she had met through a dating app. Two journalists were questioned, and

the main journalist working on the story was detained at the police headquarters overnight. She was not released until she named her source, who had at that point already been taken into custody²³. Although the investigation of its journalist took place in August, The Straits Times did not reveal this until November the same year, after the civil servant was charged²⁴. The civil servant was eventually fined S\$2,000; no further action was taken against the journalist²⁵. Media practitioners and experts at the time expressed concern about the effect of such strict enforcement of the Official Secrets Act on journalism²⁶.

Singapore Press Holdings has gone through waves of retrenchment in recent years, including job cuts in 2017 that affected newsroom staff across its multiple publications. That round of retrenchment was reportedly poorly handled, with some journalists discovering that they had lost their jobs only after they reported for work and then were unable to log into their work accounts^{27 28}. In August 2020, the company, citing the impact of the pandemic on advertising revenue, said that it would lay off 140 employees in its media sales and magazine operations²⁹. The laid-off staff each received one month severance pay for every year of service with the company; this is the standard practice in Singapore and not taxable, a pro-rata bonus and training grant. As with other local workers, there is generally limited social protection for journalists, with unemployment insurance among the missing safety nets.

Recommendations

The Singapore government should repeal laws like the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act that allow it to exercise undue influence over the local press. Other legislation, such as POFMA and FICA, should also be removed, while a Freedom of Information Act should be introduced to allow journalists to be in a better position to do their work.

The government should also introduce legislation that would allow journalists to protect the confidentiality of their sources, so as to reduce the amount of risk that journalists need to take when reporting. Legislation like the Official Secrets Act should also be tightened and clarified so that they do not apply to a wide range of information, and instead be limited to information with serious national security implications.

Moreover, government authorities and members of the ruling party should refrain from opening investigations and filing defamation suits against independent journalists.

Finally, journalists should be allowed to set up an independent association that would monitor and document press freedom issues.

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SINGAPORE

Media Viability

By Anrike Visser

While Singapore might be the wealthiest country in Southeast Asia¹, it was downgraded to the worst tier of Reporters without Borders' World Press Freedom Index in 2020². Singapore is currently ranked 160 out of 180 countries.

Press freedom is not enshrined in the city-state's Constitution³.

COVID-19 in Singapore

Singapore detected its first case of COVID-19 in January 2020. Although the country was at first successful in controlling the spread of the virus without implementing a lockdown, regulations for travellers were gradually expanded until the borders were completely shut to short-term visitors on 23 March 2020⁴. For a city-state positioned as a regional and global hub, the closure of its borders was described by *Fortune* as an 'economic and existential catastrophe'.⁵

As a result, Singapore endured its worst recession⁶, and its government spent US\$100 billion (20 percent of GDP) to keep the economy afloat. Singapore's economy decreased 5.4 percent in 2020, but it is expected to grow again in 2021 by 5.2 percent⁷.

Impact on media viability

Political control in Singapore is coupled with an 'economic straitjacket' for media companies⁸. Two major business groups control all of Singapore's print and broadcast media: MediaCorp, which is owned by a state investment company, and Singapore Press Holdings, which is privately owned but subject to close supervision and influence from the government⁹. A respondent to the PMA survey mentioned an increased consolidation in media interests because of the pandemic.

As a result of the political and economic pressure, self-censorship is widespread and includes independent media according to RSF. One independent media company fighting political pressure by being financially independent from the government is New Naratif. Observatory Southeast Asia Ltd in the United Kingdom is the parent company of New Naratif.

New Naratif is co-financed by members who contributed 30 percent of its operating expenses in July 2021. It aims to be solely funded through memberships by 2025 and membership is up during the pandemic. New Naratif itself admits on its website that long-term financial sustainability remains a 'major challenge'¹⁰. Nonetheless, from March until August 2020, membership increased 56 percent to a total of 1,303 members, thanks to a fundraising campaign. The digital publication asks readers to support the young media organisation by donating or becoming a member.

New Naratif has faced harassment from the government since early 2018¹¹. Most recently, in September 2020, the Elections Department filed a police report for the online platform's alleged 'illegal conduct of election activity' because it published five advertisements on Facebook without written authorisation from a candidate or the candidate's agent during the election campaign. New Naratif noted, however, that 'the Singapore government-controlled media organisation AsiaOne boosted a total of 240 elections-related posts during the election period, of which around 150 were directly related to the elections, but no inquiry has been made against them'¹².

The pandemic also affected other segments of the media sector. A survey by the Singapore Association of Motion Picture Professionals published in February 2020 revealed that 53.2 percent of media practitioners said that they had been 'heavily impacted' by COVID-19¹³. Of the respondents, 75 percent stated that existing assignments were either cancelled or postponed.

In September 2020, Singapore Press Holdings laid off 140 media employees, citing the loss of advertising due to COVID-19. Eight months later, it announced the restructuring of the media business into a not-for-profit entity¹⁴.

SPH's profit from its media segment had dropped to S\$3.1 million, down 70.9 percent compared to the same period in 2020. Excluding grants from the government's Jobs Support Scheme, pre-tax loss would have been S\$9.7 million. Over the past two years, monthly unique visitors nearly doubled to 28 million, greatly surpassing print. Nonetheless, the income from digital subscriptions and advertising was not enough to compensate for the loss in print advertising and sales.

SPH publishes most of Singapore's local newspapers, including *Tamil Murasu* in Tamil, the Chinese-language *Lianhe Zaobao* and the Malay *Berita Harian*. The other major business group Mediacorp manages all the local television and most radio stations.

Explaining why SPH decided to turn its media segment into a non-profit venture instead of selling or closing it, chairperson Lee Boon Yang told *The Straits Times*: 'In the context of Singapore's multiracial society, SPH serves a crucial function by providing news and information in vernacular languages to serve Singapore's diverse ethnic communities'¹⁵.

To protect media workers from a loss of livelihood during the pandemic, the Infocomm Media Development Authority launched an SGD8-million Public Service Content Fund in collaboration with Mediacorp, SPH and Viddsee¹⁶.

Grants for freelance media workers to get skills training are also available. And as part of the Capabilities Partnership Programme, major media companies will pair with local media houses to create new content. Between 80 and 100 local media houses can join the programme that, according to the government, 'will generate meaningful content for new markets, make local companies more competitive and stimulate long-term business growth'¹⁷.

Interestingly, trust in media increased significantly in Singapore during the pandemic. MediaCorp's CNA is trusted the most at 79 percent, closely trailed by the newspaper *The Straits Times* published by SPH at 77 percent¹⁸.

Recommendations

Editorial independence depends very much on non-governmental income in countries like Singapore. This can include reader revenue like memberships and donations.

The SPH example shows that high online readership does not always translate into digital revenue. New technological skills, audience engagement and digital products that match the demand of readers are some areas that can be focused on to help increase income. If digital readership still fails to translate into digital revenue in the form of advertising or subscriptions, other forms of digital revenue can be explored, such as monetising audience data or e-commerce.

Journalists seeking greater editorial freedom in Singapore may also find it worthwhile to report in exile or register a holding company abroad to limit some governmental pressure.

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THAILAND

Media Freedom and Journalist Safety

By Jessada Salathong, PhD

In the 2021 World Press Freedom Index, Thailand ranked 137 out of 180 countries and territories. Reporters Without Borders¹, which compiles the index annually, noted that Thailand is still under the total control of Prayuth Chan-o-cha's government, who has been the country's Prime Minister since the 2014 coup. The threat of a *lèse-majesté* charge also continues to hang over the heads of Thais. The *lèse-majesté* law, the violation of which can mean a 15-year jail sentence, is still used as a weapon of mass deterrence against dissident journalists and individuals.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, any criticism of the government could lead to harsh reprisals, facilitated by a draconian justice system and legislation. A cyber-security law adopted in February 2019, has given Thai authorities more power and control over online information and content. And since late 2019, 'fake news' has been used as a tool by the government against its critics. One of the government's movements is the establishment of the Anti-Fake News Centre². Not surprisingly, the enforcement of such rules and other laws has been arbitrary; the Computer Crime Act, for example, has been seen as a tool to target political opposition and government critics³.

The pandemic, then, can be interpreted as another excuse for expanding authoritarianism in Thailand. Thailand has been under a State of Emergency since March 2020; this has been repeatedly extended to bring the pandemic under control. On 29 July 2021, the Prime Minister imposed Emergency Regulation No. 29 by virtue of an executive decree on public administration in an emergency situation. The new regulation banned dissemination of 'fake' and distorted news and fearmongering – with a threat of Internet censorship if violations are found^{4 5}. These moves by the government can be seen as attempts to create a 'chilling effect' in order to make media and the public feel insecure and refrain from criticising the government, especially during the pandemic.

Media freedom

With the COVID-19 pandemic heavily politicised, 'fake news' and creating a 'chilling effect' have become state tools to control criticism, especially regarding the government's COVID-19 policies. Supinya Klangnarong (personal communication, August 2021), former Commissioner of National Broadcasting and Telecommunications (NBTC), and Head and Co-Founder of Cofact Thailand, comments that the authorities' bringing up 'fake news' in their efforts to pass recent decrees can be viewed as an attempt to discredit the media with a view to protecting themselves from criticism of their mishandling of the pandemic.

On 6 August 2021, Thailand's Civil Court issued an injunction to suspend Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha's ban on dissemination of fake and distorted news and fearmongering; it said that such an order is unlawful and restrictive in terms of rights and freedoms. The injunction came just four days after human rights lawyers, media organisations and reporters submitted to the court a petition against Emergency Regulation No. 29. The regulation has been considered cancelled as of 10 August 2021. But other restrictions on freedom of expression remain, with previous regulations by virtue of the executive decree on public administration in an emergency situation together with the cyber-security law still in effect (Rawee Tawantharong, personal communication, August 2021).

The government's intended 'chilling effect', however, is not going as planned. While in general there is palpable reticence among Thais in discussing government policies freely, journalists themselves say they can still do their job with little qualms so long as the information reported is verified (K. N. Blauw, personal communication, August 2021). In the beginning, Thai media were passive. But as the government stepped up its use of emergency decrees against the media, traditional and online media outlets banded together and grew more confident in solidarity.

Journalist safety

Based on UNESCO's Media Development Indicators (*MDI*), which focus on the definition of safety relating to physical and psychological security, Thai media might not get affected much in terms of physical threats, but the 'chilling effect' that the government has tried to create through a series of laws and regulations might trigger stress and psychological insecurity to journalists in Thailand⁶. On 4 August 2021, the National Press Council, the News Broadcasting Council, the Thai Journalists Association, the Thai Broadcast Journalists Association, the Society for Online News Provider Association and the National Union of Journalists Thailand held a webinar⁷, which explored whether or not there has been such a chilling effect. The participants criticised the government for 'controlling people's freedom of speech under the authority of the Emergency Decree'.

UNESCO's Journalists' Safety Indicators: National Level⁸ enumerates a broad set of factors relating to safety. These include 'Journalists and associated media personnel are not subject to threats, harassment or surveillance' and 'Journalists do not routinely self-censor because of fear of punishment, harassment or attack'. Moves taken by the Thai government before and during the pandemic, however, can be questioned based on what UNESCO says is the state's role in promoting media safety. According to UNESCO, the 'State's responsibility for journalists' safety is inherent in general State obligations to uphold human rights' and 'the State respects, and ensures respect for, freedom of expression and privacy, through international standards of transparency, proportionality and legitimate purpose'. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe also says in its Safety of Journalists Guidebook that 'it is necessary to ensure that national laws, administrative and judicial systems protect and promote freedom of expression and safeguard the lives and professional rights of journalists'⁹.

As the COVID-19 pandemic spreads across Thailand, only the NTBC has broadly adopted safety standards for all kinds of production nationwide, including news production. But these have proven very loose in that their focus is the number of participants in production; individual media organisations are also given leeway in implementing their own safety procedures. Thailand's Society for Online News Providers Association Chairperson Rawee Tawantharong (personal communication, August 2021) says that each media company in Thailand must ensure the safety of their respective personnel. This is exemplified by vaccine procurement, which has been left to each media outfit to do on its own. Rawee's company, the Nation Broadcasting Company (NBC), has been procuring as many vaccines for its journalists as possible. This is also true for Thai PBS, which also provides COVID-19 testing for its staff who come to the office every week, as confirmed by Kiratikorn Naksompob Blauw, editor at Thai PBS World (personal communication, August 2021). It is worth noting, however, that these initiatives can only be taken by major media companies in Thailand. Smaller-scale media outlets have been lagging in implementing such measures due to a lack of resources. Consequently, inequality ensues.

Similar to standards established by international organisations, journalists in Thailand are reminded constantly about the need for proper social distancing and constant mask-wearing during coverage. Journalists are also encouraged to conduct interviews online. For interviews with government officials, journalists are asked to send questions to the agency's designated coordinator and listen to the answers through online press conferences on Facebook. This approach has been used by the Bangkok Metropolitan Area Data Center. These safety standards, however, are applied mostly on press conferences conducted by government agencies. For other news coverage settings, journalists have to keep themselves safe by relying on personal knowledge and referring to advice from their companies¹⁰.

While the Global Investigative Journalism Network and UNESCO actively encourage the use of personal protective equipment (PPE) or hazmat suits while reporting in high-risk areas, this has yet to be echoed in Thailand. There is no official advice either from the government or private sector as to what journalists should wear to protect themselves and how they should handle their equipment while reporting from infected locations or at-risk areas. There are no universal guidelines for journalists when they are visiting sites that are subject to high virus circulation, such as health facilities, markets, or farms. For example, to ensure personal sanitation in case there is no water, UNICEF¹¹ highly recommends the use of wet wipes, followed by an alcohol-based sanitiser. This standard has yet to be widely promoted in Thailand. Also missing is advice on any hygiene measure that journalists should take after returning home from fieldwork.

According to ex-NBTC Commissioner Supinya (personal communication, August 2021), it is the responsibility of media organisations and associations to negotiate with the government to get all journalists vaccinated and protected because they are frontliners, like doctors and medical personnel. But this has not happened in Thailand, where most media organisations procure vaccines in informal ways, such as by lobbying or using connections with the government. Thai PBS World Editor Blauw (personal communication August 2021) says that journalism professionals

have been overlooked and marginalised in Thailand as most people have yet to recognise the risks journalists face and the frontline roles they play while doing their job. Rawee (personal communication, August 2021) of NBC meanwhile casts doubt on journalists ever being considered as frontliners, noting that medical staff in Thailand themselves have found difficulties accessing adequate vaccine and protective gear. As a result, journalists in Thailand are in an 'at-your-own-risk' basis whenever they have to go in field. The same situation can be seen in other developing countries, highlighting the gap between rich and poor nations that also affects the health and safety of journalists.

Recommendations

Fact-checking holds the key for media in Thailand to fight against 'fake news' accusations and keep their freedoms secure. Caution and accuracy are needed by journalists all the more to avoid being blamed by the government and pro-government supporters of spreading so-called 'fake news', and this means fact-checking and double-checking, even on breaking news. While it is tempting to get ahead of the competition in breaking news, there is also the risk of making mistakes and running into 'fake news' accusations that no number of corrections can erase. This is, however, a big challenge for journalists and news agencies in Thailand. While major international news companies have invested heavily on capacity-building for their personnel to ensure they deliver correct and accurate information, such a concern is usually not seen as important in Thailand. This has limited many journalists' interest in asking questions, especially critical ones. So far, in fact, most Thai journalists have been doing passive reporting on the government's handling of the pandemic, leaving crucial questions to be posed by activists, influencers, media critics and academics.

Media solidarity, however, has emerged as essential during this pandemic. The movement by media groups in Thailand – such as an online seminar joined by six key media organisations aiming to criticise the government for “controlling people's freedom of speech under the authority of the Emergency Decree” – can be a foundation for media alliances and solidarity in the future¹².

Later, the alliance should be expanded to the regional level as well. In the meantime, media organisations and associations should come up with universal standards or code of conducts – such as safety guidelines – for all journalists in Thailand to follow.

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THAILAND

Media Viability

By Anrike Visser

In March 2019, Thailand held its first election since the 2014 military coup. “The election process was widely considered to have been designed to prolong and legitimise the military’s dominant role in Thailand’s governance,” Freedom House states¹.

Under military rule, the government constantly restricted independent media, especially during the election campaign period in 2019. But this repression didn’t come to an end after the 2019 election. In March 2020, Thailand criminalised publishing information about COVID-19 which was deemed “false or capable of causing fear in the public”². However, this regulation has since been revoked.

COVID-19 in Thailand

Rigorous containment policies were among the measures that helped to flatten the spread of COVID-19 in 2020. Nevertheless, “the pandemic has taken a large toll on the economy, potentially inducing long-term scarring and increasing inequality,”³ IMF notes. GDP declined 6.1% in 2020⁴, but Thailand nonetheless remained in the top four wealthy countries of Southeast Asia⁵.

In March 2021, the IMF stated that a “nascent recovery is underway in Thailand following the COVID-19 downturn”⁶. Unfortunately, since then, infections have risen exponentially in the kingdom⁷.

Impact on media viability

Thailand hasn’t only been affected by the pandemic. Since the 2019 election, which the Diplomat described as “widely seen as rigged”⁸, anti-government protests have sprung up around the country. While covering the protests, several reporters were arrested, and the government shut down four news outlets⁹. Khaosod English was disbanded in March 2021 and its reporters moved to the parent company’s Thai-language publications¹⁰.

The government pressure led to a gap in traditional media and new digital media outlets emerged. According to the founder of Thisrupt, Voronai Vanijaka, the mainstream media “rel[ies] on corporate advertising which is tied to politicians, there is a lot of self-censorship — both in Thai language and English media”¹¹.

Vanijaka is not a fan of advertising and has declined investments so far. “Early next year, we [are] doing a crowd-funding campaign to launch new products. Moving ahead, we will use the contribution model. Perhaps in the future, if we are able to

come up with new products, then we can use the membership model”¹². In either case, he is prepared to continuously pivot to become financially sustainable and maintain editorial independence down the line.

Other new digital media in Thailand rely heavily on advertising, financial support from their mother company, investors, grants, philanthropy, or crowdfunding¹³.

The financial situation also leaves media vulnerable to buyouts and shutdowns. Among the victims was independent newspaper The Nation, which was purchased by a group of businessmen in 2019 who then shuttered its English-language print edition. The Nation is now online only¹⁴.

In 2020, the media faced challenges brought on by the pandemic. As in other parts of the world, ad spending declined significantly which is still an important source of income in Thailand. Research by the Media Agency Association of Thailand showed a reduction in ad spending of 14% in 2020¹⁵.

A report in PR Newswire states that “[t]he situation prompted media agencies to adjust their business operations and content formats to survive and attract readers”. The decline of advertising and print revenue during the pandemic also saw publishers expand the scope of their business to “organising events, seminars and offering public relations services”¹⁶.

An assessment by the Thai Journalists Association (TJA), published in March 2021, also shows that media is severely affected by the pandemic and “many media organisations almost were bankrupt going into 2021”¹⁷. TJA notes that every media company experienced a negative impact on revenue, leading to salary cuts, withholding annual bonuses, and a salary freeze.

Thairath Newspaper allowed early retirement and laid off 3 employees at the politics news department. At Channel 7 HD, editors were temporarily not paid for overtime when working from home. And at Matichon network, which publishes the Matichon daily newspaper, Prachachart Turakit and Khaosod, no annual bonus was paid and salaries were not increased in 2021¹⁸.

In the PMA survey, one respondent noted a decline in advertising, which was especially concerning due to it being their dominant source of income. In that instance, less than three months of operating budget was available leading to reduced video and broadcast production, salary cuts and job loss.

Recommendations

Journalists have been arrested while covering the anti-government protests and four news outlets were shut down in Thailand in 2020. The Thai government has also accused media outlets of spreading disinformation. Freedom of expression and access to information is essential for operating independent media houses and sustaining them. Therefore, the government must ensure freedom of expression and access to information, which is essential for media viability.

The national economy of Thailand has been heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in significant financial challenges for media organisations. Many outlets have faced bankruptcy. Many journalists have also lost their jobs and some

media organisations were closed. Yet, the government hasn't made any provisions to address these financial challenges. The state should take the initiative to address these concerns and media institutions should develop robust strategies to mitigate against the impact of future pandemics and other crises.

One way to futureproof the media sector is to develop closer relationships with audiences which is easier and more affordable in the digital space. Engaging with digital audiences, experimenting with new products and continuously improving product offerings ensures that media companies are not left behind in the fast-paced digital world.

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TIMOR-LESTE

Media Freedom and Journalist Safety

By Zevonia Vieira

Politics in Timor-Leste remain divisive, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, with quarrels and posturing often obscuring and muddling messages about the virus to the public.

In April 2021, people were treated to the spectacle of former President Jose Alexandre 'Xanana' Gusmao quarrelling with authorities over the body of a man who had tested positive for COVID-19 right before he died. Gusmao wanted the body released to the man's family; the authorities insisted on following set protocols for COVID-19 fatalities. In protest, Gusmao slept on the sidewalk in front of the health centre where the body was being kept¹.

In the end, the body was released to the family for the traditional wake and burial. But the incident showed the importance of staying on message, especially when it comes to health issues. While Gusmao's stance was about whether or not the protocols should be observed in that particular case, many people thought he was questioning the man's COVID-19 diagnosis. In fact, many concluded that Gusmao was saying COVID-19 was a hoax. In a country with high vaccine hesitancy and a persistent belief that the pandemic was just made up, that made for a rather dangerous situation.

Journalist safety

While it may not have helped that those covering Gusmao's 'protest' were not strict in observing the COVID-19 protocols, many were simply eager to cover Gusmao due to his infamy. It could be that their media company employers had not drilled into them the need to observe basic health protocols while out in the field. As they jostled to get quotes and photos, many of the journalists obviously failed to observe social distancing, even though only a few of them wore face masks.

As in other parts of the world, the pandemic persists in Timor-Leste. Prime Minister Taur Matan Ruak has even said that COVID-19 has hampered the implementation of his government's development programme². The Ministry of Health meanwhile continues its prevention work and the Crisis Management Centre is still providing the public with information about COVID-19 cases and on the importance of COVID-19 prevention. The government's public campaign on COVID-19 prevention has included asking journalists to take care of themselves, especially when they are doing fieldwork.

Yet despite this, the professional rights of members of the media are being overlooked by the journalists themselves, as well as by their employers (G. Virgilho, personal communication, August 2021). This is even as the Press Council of Timor-Leste says that a journalist's safety is of utmost importance and key to their performance.

Virgilho also said for the Press Council, a safe and healthy environment is among a journalist's rights; nobody can do such work in an insecure environment (G. Virgilho, personal communication, August 2021).

Monitoring by the Journalists' Association of Timor-Leste (AJTL) has revealed that journalists on the frontline are not well prepared in avoiding coronavirus infection. To date, Timorese journalists rely only on face masks and hand sanitisers that come mainly from international aid agencies (AJTL Press Conference, March 2020)³. Lack of knowledge about health security has also contributed to their unsafe behaviour while they cover news in isolation centres and public spaces such as hospitals, health clinics, markets, restaurants and even out on the streets. Some journalists have thus ended up infected with the virus, which in turn has affected media businesses. Many journalists believe, however, that media companies are simply failing to take care of their employees. When a journalist fainted recently while covering news at the Presidential Palace, there was no assistance from the journalist's company-employer (Santina L. da Costa, a witness to the fainted journalist, personal communication).

Media freedom

The International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) states clearly in Article 19 that 'everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference', and 'everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers'⁴. Timor-Leste ratified this Convention in 2003. It is also enshrined in the Timor-Leste Constitution (2002), particularly in Articles 40 and 41, which are on freedom of the press and freedom of expression⁵.

In 2014, Timor-Leste passed the Media Law (Law no. 5/2014)⁶. Also known as the Law of Social Communication, it aims to ensure freedom of the press and freedom of information. The law has some limitations; nonetheless, it protects the work of journalists, as well as the right to access and impart information. According to the law, violation of journalists' duties could mean a fine of up to US\$1,500.

In 2020, while the country was in COVID-19 lockdown, the Ministry of Justice proposed a law on criminal defamation⁷. Among other things, the draft law says that defamation could mean a penalty of up to three years' imprisonment or a fine. Journalists' associations, academics and rights activists have been at the forefront of protesting against the proposed law.

A petition from the Movement Against the Criminalisation of Defamation and Injury (MKKDI) says that the draft law will destroy freedom of the press and expression; impede the implementation of the witness protection law; deter witnesses from providing testimony; and fortify the culture of silence and discourage victims of gender-based violence (GBV) to truthfully report their case through the formal justice system⁸. The draft law has not been discussed further at the time of writing, but civil society organisations are keeping watch in case there is any development.

A draft cybercrime law has also been submitted to the National Parliament as the pandemic continues⁹. Debates on social media and television suggests that the public disagrees with the draft law. Some civil society organisations have also

sent petitions to cancel the proposal to the Ministry of Justice, National Parliament, President of the Republic and President of the Council of Ministers. They argue that the proposed law will limit freedom of expression and media in the digital world. The law's critics are also questioning why the government is rushing to have this law during a pandemic.

A journalist who works for the government media says that there is no limitation on press freedom in Timor-Leste. The journalist concedes that while the government always attempts to control newsrooms, journalists can be firm and remain committed to the profession's code of ethics (J. Reis, personal communication, August 2021). Editors echo this view, saying that they firmly defend press freedom by not allowing political or economic influences into the newsroom.

The privately owned GMN TV, however, has taken another stance. GMN TV actually expects payment for requested news coverage. According to GMN TV, its operations depend on funding from those who request news coverage; without this, it cannot cover all the costs of running the company (Cidalia Antoninha Fátima da Conceição, personal communication, August 2021).

Notably, GMN TV is among the media companies that have been cutting their journalists' salaries. Many companies had followed through on their threat to do so after the President declared a state of emergency. Many journalists in Timor-Leste were earning only US\$150 a month at the time¹⁰. Freedom of the press, however, can only be sustained with proper remuneration of the journalists' work. A media company's lack of funds also has an impact on the scope of its news coverage.

Francisco Almeida, a journalist of online news media Neon Metin, stated that journalists who work for alternative media say they have never experienced limited press freedom, with their newsrooms free of political influence. But they have a harder time accessing information from the government, which is notorious for red tape. To gain access to a potential source in government means going through many bureaucratic steps. This means a considerable time investment, which is not practical in a sector that is deadline-dependent (Francisco Almeida, Neon Metin, personal communication, August 2021).

Most journalists interviewed for this study also said that there has been no limit to press freedom during the pandemic; they have been free to move around to cover news stories. But NGO activists and academics do not necessarily share this view. One journalist said in the PMA questionnaire that during the lockdown in particular, the state media produced more information than the independent media.

Recommendations

In general, media companies should provide their employees with physical and digital safety training. They should ensure their journalists' well-being by providing information and protection equipment against COVID-19. In the 26th Session of the Intergovernmental Council of the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) in 2008, it was mentioned that media organisations should

'have policies for protecting the health and safety of their staff'¹¹. This certainly has not happened yet to most media organisations in Timor-Leste.

All journalists' associations should promote and endorse campaigns about press freedom and freedom of expression during the pandemic and publicise trustworthy information. For this to happen, capacity-building needs to be provided to media workers, including those engaged with journalist associations. This point is covered in Category 4 of the Media Development Indicators decided in the IPDC 26th Session meeting¹².

The government must ease access to state sources of information. The Media Viability Indicators (MVIs) specifically point out that government officials should be available to provide information to news media organisations on a fair and equitable basis¹³.

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TIMOR-LESTE

Media Viability

By Anrike Visser

Timor-Leste is ranked highest in Southeast Asia for press freedom in the 2021 Reporters without Borders' (RSF) World Press Freedom Index at 71 out of 180 countries¹. According to RSF, no journalist has been jailed in connection with their work in Timor-Leste, with the country's constitution guaranteeing free speech and media freedom. However, various pressures such as public denigration and legal proceedings have been used to limit journalists from working freely².

Timor-Leste's population of 1.3 million³ experience the lowest GDP⁴ in Southeast Asia per capita, posing significant economic challenges to media.

COVID-19 in Timor-Leste

According to the IMF, Timor-Leste has progressed in many areas since its independence, but it still faces significant medium-term challenges. The country has "pressing development needs, young institutions, and is highly dependent on oil"⁵. Its dependence on oil is especially worrisome as active oil fields are drying up. Subsequently, the non-oil private sector is underdeveloped, and high youth unemployment is a serious concern⁶.

Because of COVID-19, the President of Timor-Leste declared a national emergency in March 2020⁷. That year GDP shrunk by 6.8% due to the pandemic and mobility restrictions⁸ despite a limited number of infections.

In April 2021, amid the pandemic, the country experienced its most severe floods in 40 years⁹. According to the government 25,000 households were affected or about 10 percent of the population. After the floods, the government relaxed COVID-19 restrictions leading to a rise in cases¹⁰.

Then in early August 2021 authorities found the first cases of the Delta variant¹¹ and infections have been rising ever since. By late August the health system was facing collapse and pleas for international aid were made¹².

Impact on media viability

One of the major challenges in terms of media viability is the reliance of government support. Freedom House notes that "domestic media outlets are vulnerable to political pressure due to their reliance on government financial support, in a small media market with limited nongovernmental sources of support"¹³.

During the pandemic, this dependence increased. The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) notes that several print media have cut salaries caused by a "steep

decline” in revenue during the pandemic¹⁴. Newspapers focused on stories in the capital Dili, which was hit hardest by COVID-19 and had little space for stories from reporters in regional areas.

The PMA questionnaire we sent as part of this project also noted large financial consequences among several news organisations. One respondent even noted a decline of income between 76% and 90%. Two others clocked a 26-50% and 51-75% decline of revenue.

According to observations by the Oekusi Post¹⁵, a number of print media owners have cut salaries of journalists as revenue declined. One reporter from a major newspaper even told the Oekusi Post that salaries were cut by 50%¹⁶. In addition, the Timor Post has reduced its newspaper by two pages since 2 April 2020.

Even before the pandemic, journalists struggled to make a living in Timor-Leste. Journalists receive an average monthly salary of US\$150 “which is insufficient to make a decent living and provide for a family”¹⁷.

In 2019, IFJ exposed how journalists were forced to take on work after hours to supplement their income¹⁸. IFJ also said low wages affect professionalism and independence, “as journalists are more likely to be paid by sources for their services”.

Another consequence is that reporters leave journalism for public relations, government jobs or advisory media positions with politicians. According to online publication Tempo Timor, “private media has extreme difficulty in retaining good staff”¹⁹.

Tempo Timor was founded by Jose Belo, the former editor of newspaper Tempo Semanal, which folded in 2017. The outlet was broadly viewed as the main source of investigative journalism in Timor-Leste.

In Belo’s opinion, it is not just state-owned media that is vulnerable to government influence. He estimates that the majority of advertising income and more than half of all newspaper subscriptions stem from the government²⁰. Belo adds, “[i]f you do a good story here you go broke. The ministers and their departments will hate you and the money will stop”²¹.

Freedom House also notes the media’s “reliance on government financial support” due to “limited nongovernmental sources of support”²².

Another example of financial influence constitutes the payment of accommodation and “per diems” for journalists traveling with official parties. The Timor-Leste Press Union views the practice as “potentially compromising to political and business reporting”²³. As a result, they undertook action to end these arrangements and reached agreements with state and private media²⁴.

Recommendations

Editorial independence is essential for credible journalism and maintaining public trust, which is a core pillar of media viability. In the context of Timor-Leste, the editorial independence of the press has been limited with the government being

a main source of income through advertisements and subscriptions. In order to maintain editorial independence, news organisations should explore alternative ways of making an income that match the skillset of reporters, such as conducting research for non-governmental organisations or selling content to international media.

Financial independence, and frankly more income, will hopefully result in higher wages for reporters. In the meantime, news organisations should offer relevant training and skills development to retain staff.

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VIETNAM

Media Freedom and Journalist Safety

By Dr Hang Dinh

In Vietnam, national media belong to the government; no private media are allowed. As stated in the Media Law, the media are ‘the mouthpiece’ of the Party and state organisations, the ‘Tribune of the People’¹. Vietnam’s media organisations are divided into two levels: the central media houses owned and directed by ministries, professions, trades, unions, professional and political associations; and the local (provincial) media houses owned by provincial authorities.

By December 2020, there were 779 media organisations licenced to operate in Vietnam, 71 fewer than in 2019². The reduction is due to the government’s National Media Development and Management Planning Project 2025, with an aim to restructure the media system in association with effective media leadership and management³.

In terms of media businesses, there are currently three models. Under the first are the Party’s newspapers, which are either fully or partially subsidised by the state budget. The second model is a hybrid type in which media organisations are partially subsidised, with self-balancing revenue and expenditure. Under the third type are the media houses that are fully financially autonomous⁴. All media houses are allowed to run advertisements and sponsorship.

Due to the increase in social media and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, revenues from sales and advertising for most of Vietnam’s media houses have dropped by 40% to 50%; some have lost up to 80% of their advertising and sponsorship revenues⁵.

Media freedom

Vietnam’s media are regarded as ‘not free’ by some international organisations. Freedom House rated the country as only 22/100 for freedom in 2020⁶. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) also listed Vietnam as 175th out of 180 countries and territories in its World Press Freedom Index 2021⁷.

Yet theoretically, according to the country’s Constitution and legal documents, the State of Vietnam works to protect and promote fundamental human rights, including the right to freedom of speech, press freedom, and the right of access to information. The amendment of the 2016 Press Law also contains specific provisions to ensure freedom of expression. That is, citizens have the right to express their opinions about the country and the world; and participate in the formulation and implementation of guidelines and policies of the Party and laws of the State. Organisations and individuals also have the right to comment, criticise, recommend, complain, and denounce in the press.

Moreover, in 2016, Vietnam's National Assembly passed the Law on Access to Information. Article 3 of the law stipulates: All citizens are equal, without discrimination in exercising the right to access information; the information provided must be accurate and complete; the provision of information must be timely, transparent, and convenient for the public⁸.

In practice, however, the current Vietnamese media are still trapped in the traditional communist style of the press, and are seen as the 'sharpest weapons' of the ruling power, the Communist Party. The terms 'free press' and 'freedom of speech' as used in Vietnam are operational only for 'the people's and the nation's interests', in the sense that information needs to be aligned with the Party's orientation⁹. Accordingly, anyone – journalist or otherwise – who produces and publishes information criticising the Party and the government, is regarded as being against 'the interests of the country', and for this they will be punished.

In early August 2021, many newspapers in Vietnam reported that five people in a Facebook Fanpage group called 'Clean Newspaper' were arrested for 'abusing democratic freedoms to infringe upon the interests of the State, the rights and interests of the State, legitimate interests of organisations and individuals'¹⁰. Before that, a prominent ex-journalist, Mai Phan Loi, who ran the Fanpage 'The Press–Citizen's Perspective', was arrested on the charge of 'tax evasion'. This was widely reported by newspapers in Vietnam and overseas. But according to a journalist who requested to remain anonymous, the 'charge of tax evasion' to Mai Phan Loi was a 'convenient' accusation and that this was not a new method used for arresting dissidents.

Self-censorship is a normal practice in Vietnamese newsrooms. In a number of interviews conducted for this research, journalists said that self-censorship is embedded in their professional instincts¹¹. According to these interviewees, topics related to the country's leadership, diplomatic relations, and national security issues, among others are classified as 'politically sensitive' and are often avoided by journalists. Types of self-censorship manifest from the very first step in the news production process, such as finding ideas for stories, news topics and news selection, and can lead to conclusions like 'this topic idea will not be approved by the editorial managers'; 'this topic is not suitable for the purpose of the newspaper'; or 'this topic is not allowed to be published by the agency'. The range of possible stories to tackle is therefore limited right away. One interviewee, for instance, says that she once saw a large group of protesters in front of an embassy. She says that she did not file a report on it because she thought it would affect the foreign relations of the two countries. She also says that even if she filed the report, it would not have been approved for publication by her managers (Anonymous, personal communication, 2021).

Another challenge to media freedom in Vietnam is misinformation and disinformation due to business concerns of media organisations and journalists. Competition for advertising revenue among media agencies has a strong impact on news content. Promotional information for enterprises and organisations published as 'news' in return for sponsorship to the media houses, can be seen regularly in the news pages. This type of information is often one-sided, hiding or ignoring wrongdoings done by sponsored companies (Anonymous, personal communication, 2021).

Safety of journalists and impunity

Vietnam's Media Law states that the media and journalists operate within the framework of the laws and are protected by the State¹². Article 13 further says: 'No one is allowed to abuse the right to freedom of the press, the right to freedom of expression in the press in order to infringe upon the interests of the State, the legitimate rights and interests of organisations and citizens; Press is uncensored prior to printing, transmission, and broadcasting.' Clause 12 in Article 9 says as well that prohibited acts include 'threatening the life, insulting the honour and dignity of journalists; destroying or seizing devices and documents, (and) obstructing journalists from carrying out lawful professional activities'. In recent years, however, there have been recorded cases of journalists encountering obstacles while performing their job. According to a report by RED Communication¹³, there were on average about 40 cases of serious obstructions – such as threats or physical assaults on journalists – annually between 2011 and 2016.

In 2020, the Vietnamese government updated a decree that seeks to ensure that the press follows the Media Law while at the same time addressing the sanctioning of unlawful obstructions of press activities. Accordingly, anyone who infringes on the honour and dignity of journalists, or destroys or intentionally damages equipment of, and documents obtained by, journalists will get fined up to VND 60 million, which is equivalent to US\$2,500¹⁴.

Since the decree was passed, however, more media organisations have been fined under it than those who had obstructed journalists' activities. For instance, in September 2020, the Communist Party-owned newspaper Nhan Dan reported that two magazines were sanctioned for improper implementation of the principles and purposes stated in their operating licence, and four newspapers were sanctioned for false information¹⁵. Meanwhile, authorities have yet to act on cases involving abuses against journalists during their fieldwork, despite pleas from the Vietnam Journalists Association and other media organisations. On 20 September 2021, the Vietnam Lawyers Journal reported that when it sent two journalists to cover an incident in which local bodies and officials could have violated pandemic protocols, the journalists were aggressively prevented from doing their job and were even handcuffed by the police. So far, however, the publication has yet to get any reaction from local authorities¹⁶. A journalist from the Elderly Magazine was also threatened and assaulted while working at a pagoda in Vinh Phuc Province on 7 Dec 2020, but the matter has yet to be resolved by local authorities¹⁷.

The safety of journalists in Vietnam can be compromised due to several reasons. The first is related to media freedom and freedom of speech in the context of Vietnam. Vietnamese journalists might have to face political challenges should they go over their 'limits' of self-censorship, such as getting fined and/or getting arrested (Anonymous, personal communication, 2021).

Secondly, journalists risk assault and attack when they investigate companies and enterprises polluting the environment, producing low-quality goods or fake products, and the like. In order to gather information, journalists have to ask people, take photos or videos out on field; these are the instances during which they are often

attacked. According to one interviewee, he rarely received cooperation from organisations, enterprises or individuals when he investigated possible business misconduct or malpractices. From the start, he says, he had difficulty in accessing information. He was also aware that he could get threats and be assaulted at any time if he was not careful (Anonymous, personal communication, 2021).

In 2016, two reporters from VTV24 Television Channel embarked on an investigation on tea producers. Acting on a tip that the tea producers were using chemicals to prevent mould and fungus on their products, the reporters posed as tea buyers. But they were found out and were slashed as they were secretly recording the tea production process at a household in Thai Nguyen Province¹⁸. They were unable to complete the story, but VTV24 was able to do a similar one a year later, in another province¹⁹.

Thirdly, authorities have physically attacked journalists doing coverage for supposedly not following set rules, which some senior journalists in turn attribute to lack of experience (Anonymous, personal communication, 2021). One example, a 2016 incident in which a Hanoi police officer assaulted a Tuoi Tre Newspaper reporter at a crime scene, received wide coverage by Vietnamese media. According to the police, the reporter did not observe set rules and went too close to the scene. But journalists present at the incident – including the reporter who had his camera pulled from him and was punched in the head and left with a bloody mouth – said that there were no marks or barriers to identify which area was off-limits, and that there were no signs prohibiting filming and taking pictures²⁰.

During the fourth wave of the pandemic in Ho Chi Minh City in May 2021, the city's Department of Information and Communications advised journalists that they must absolutely comply with the regulations on epidemic prevention and control of the health sector. This was an official warning to journalists after an incident in an ambulance that was transferring 6 patients and accompanied by 3 other people, including a working journalist who wore an open-neck protective, and carried an unwrapped camera²¹. To help journalists access official information, at the start of the first outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in Ho Chi Minh City, the Press Center was established by the City People's Committee. This is the daily workplace for journalists in Ho Chi Minh City to receive information related to the pandemic, attend press conferences and official information addresses conducted by the City's authorities²².

Recommendations

In any circumstance, the media should serve the public interest. This remains among the goals of Vietnamese media practitioners, despite the obligations given to them by the Party and the State. But there are still avenues that media organisations and journalists can explore even in the context of the Vietnam's controlled media so that they can take initiatives towards positive changes.

Ensuring freedom of the media and journalists' safety depends mainly on changes in institutions and policies. The fact, however, is that the Vietnamese political system will remain unchanged, and therefore the country's media system is unlikely to change as well. But there can be improved mechanisms and policies for a media environment that would allow different voices of people from all walks of life to be

heard and appreciated. This can be done by engaging in the practice of grassroots journalism, providing access to the public and portraying a wider picture of the people by giving equal chance for different voices to be heard and discuss what the people in the community are concerned about.

Journalists should also be encouraged to keep updated on laws and observe professional ethics. Lastly, media houses and journalists should be provided with more professional training. The contradiction between Party ideology and market principles is inevitable and requires new educational and training approaches that would provide journalists with alternative ways and means to move from the Party's centred and subsidised model to one with a commercialised media, with more grassroots-focused journalism.

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VIETNAM

Media Viability

By Anrike Visser

For decades, Vietnam has been a one-party state, dominated by the Communist Party of Vietnam. Theoretically, independent candidates are allowed but in practice most are banned¹. Vietnam is the lowest scoring country in Southeast Asia for press freedom according to Reporters without Borders (RSF), at spot 175 out of 180 countries in their 2021 index². It has occupied that spot since 2013. RSF mentions that national media organisations follow the Communist Party's orders and guidelines. As a result, the only source of independent news and information is sourced from international journalists, freelancers and bloggers. Repression of media workers has increased significantly since General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong took over leadership of the ruling party. In January 2021, his control was confirmed for another five years.

In 2020, several members of the Independent Journalists Association of Vietnam were arrested and three were given prison sentences from 11 to 15 years. Online repression is also increasing due to the creation of a 10,000-strong military cyber-warfare department targeting dissidents³.

COVID-19 in Vietnam

Despite COVID-19, Vietnam's economy has remained resilient, expanding by 2.9 percent in 2020—one of the highest growth rates in the world. For 2021, GDP growth is estimated at 6.5% thanks to "strong economic fundamentals, decisive containment measures and well-targeted government support", according to IMF's latest assessment in March 2021⁴.

In 2020 and early 2021, Vietnam was mostly free of COVID-19 cases. Entry restrictions, quarantines, contact tracing, and localised lockdowns were used to limit exposure to the virus⁵. According to the General Statistics Office of Vietnam, the whole country has 9.1 million people aged 15 and over who have been negatively affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Out of this group, 540,000 people lost their jobs, 2.8 million people had to temporarily stop or suspend production and business; 3.1 million people said they have had their hours cut or been forced to take time off, and 6.5 million workers reported a reduction in income⁶.

Unfortunately, since late July 2021 the Delta variant has overtaken the country and Vietnam reported high infection rates. In total, 263,543 of the country's 358,456 infections were reported from late July to late August 2021. Furthermore, 8,296 of the country's 8,666 deaths from COVID-19 occurred in the same 4-week period⁷. In light of the recent severe outbreak, the economic impact is also expected to be more significant compared to the previous small waves.

Impact on media viability

According to a representative of the Ministry of Information and Communications, news agencies have lost close to 50% of the advertising market share to so-called big tech over the past 10 years⁸. Before the pandemic, print sales and advertising continued to decline in 2019. The total revenue of print was 3,508 billion Vietnamese Dong (down 3.9% compared to 2018) including advertising revenue of VND 1,227 billion (down 5.6% compared to 2018). However, the revenue of digital media increased 13% in 2019 up to VND 1,415 billion, of which advertising revenue increased by 13.2%⁹.

According to the Vietnam Journalists Association income from print sales and advertising decreased by 40% to 50% due to the pandemic¹⁰. At the same time, the expenses of journalists working in epidemic areas increased, affecting the financial sustainability of newsrooms further as well as the lives of journalists. In March 2020, the Vietnam Journalists Association issued a letter to the Prime Minister asking to consider supporting media agencies and journalists due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to some proposed changes to tax payments in mid-August 2021, including tax payment extensions and reduction in corporate income tax¹¹.

Vietnam News, a state-owned English-language daily, temporarily suspended¹² its print edition after a journalist got infected. Another four publications also suspended print editions hampered by strict physical distancing measures. An editor at an online publication said that salaries were cut from March 2020 (Anonymous, personal communication, 2021). Then in 2021 they were temporarily reinstated only to be cutdown again a few months later when a new wave of infections reared its head.

Despite Vietnam's initial success in responding to the pandemic, the resulting economic slump has left many media companies facing significant challenges. Saigoneer, a lifestyle and human-interest English-language publication, states on their website that its "content has and always will be available for free" but asks its readers to donate in "these trying times"¹³.

Even though Vietnam aims to become a digital economy by 2030¹⁴, most media companies don't charge for digital content. In June 2018, the VietnamPlus – an electronic newspaper of the Vietnam News Agency – became the first Vietnamese press agency to charge for online content¹⁵. It was the only media company to do so until March 2021 when Today's e-magazine launched, becoming the first e-magazine in Vietnam to charge readers.

According to the Deputy Editor-in-Chief of Today's magazine, Pham Huu Quang, implementing payments for e-newspapers still faces many difficulties. "Currently, we plan to implement payment by text message (SMS) but are very stuck by regulations of carriers and telecommunication providers", said Quang¹⁶.

One respondent to the PMA questionnaire mentioned they moved to digital-only because of the pandemic. Two respondents mentioned they invested or experimented with new innovative platforms highlighting the digital acceleration caused by the pandemic.

Recommendations

As part of digital transformation in the country, media companies should invest in the required digital infrastructure to maintain a digital publication, including accepting online payments and audience engagement tools. Without the proper digital infrastructure, it is impossible to set up viable digital revenue streams.

Subsequently, news organisations should analyse the segment of their audience that subscribe and ask them which other products or digital offerings would appeal to them. Considering the limited wealth of many Vietnamese people, sources of income other than reader revenue have to be considered as well.

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15. Đỗ, P. (2021a, 21 June). *Thu phí đọc báo điện tử, cơ hội nào cho thành công? Giao thông*. [online] Available at: <https://www.baogiaothong.vn/thu-phi-doc-bao-dien-tu-co-hoi-nao-cho-thanh-cong-d512435.html> [Accessed 26 October 2021].
16. *ibid.*

Summary

This Situation Report on the “Impact of COVID-19 on Media Freedom, Media Business Viability, and the Safety of Journalists in Southeast Asia” offers an insight into the key impacts of the pandemic on the media across nine countries.

The report proposes recommendations for enabling sustainable and effective media standards to improve media freedom and the safety of journalists. It also explores potential solutions, and innovations for media business viability in the region.

The publication comes at a time when news organisations have been forced to accelerate their move to providing more extensive digital services due to various lockdown restrictions, with some not having the resources to make this transition successfully.

These additional financial pressures caused by COVID-19 are happening against a backdrop of broader threats to media freedom and the safety of journalists. Another challenge facing media freedom in the region is the introduction of laws purporting to combat the spread of disinformation and misinformation. While such laws have been introduced under the guise of protecting the public, they are more often used as tools to limit the ability of journalists to hold power to account. As countries geared up to fight COVID-19, a crackdown on independent journalism and critical reporting ensued.

Many news outlets and media workers, notably journalists, have faced unprecedented risks to their physical and mental well-being, amid unrelenting, and intensified crackdowns on media freedom.

Creating a safe and enabling environment for media and journalists to be able to work independently is a prerequisite for democracies to flourish. The issues pertaining to the safety of journalists and media sustainability during a time of crisis such as COVID-19, require attention from all stakeholders, including both state and non-state actors.

Appendix

Questionnaire Results & Analysis

Demographics

PAGE 118

Journalist Safety

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Media Freedom

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Media Viability

PAGE 63

Beyond COVID-19

PAGE 63

Overview

This project was informed by a questionnaire for journalists, media workers and other stakeholders based in 9 countries: Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam.

The questionnaire accepted responses from 27 June until 22 August 2021 and was produced using Google Forms and shared with Public Media Alliance (PMA) members and partner organisation networks. It was also advertised via the PMA website and social media channels. There was a total of 57 questions but for the benefit of this analysis, only a selection of key findings has been used. A total of 61 responses were received.

Responses were collected via Google Forms and analysed by the Public Media Alliance for use by the authors.

While this research is not wholly representative of the Southeast Asian media sector, especially given the small scale of responses, it serves to provide a snapshot of the current situation facing media stakeholders in the region in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. The following Appendix contains the results and analysis of the data collected based on demographics and the report's key themes: journalist safety, media freedom and media business viability.

While the questionnaire received a response from each target country, there was an uneven number of participants from each. This inevitably means some countries are better represented than others. This shortcoming is taken into consideration and highlights the need for more quantitative and qualitative data as well as further discussions with media stakeholders in under-represented countries.

1. Demographics

1.a. Location

4) In which country in Southeast Asia do you work or operate?

61 responses



Source: PMA / Google Forms

Most participants were from or based in Thailand (15 out of 61 or 24.5%) (**see Chart 4**). This was closely followed by 13 from Cambodia (21.3%); 7 responses (11.5%) from Timor-Leste and 6 (9.8%) from the Philippines. The remaining countries had four or less participants, which include: four from Vietnam (6.6%); three from Brunei Darussalam (4.9%); three from Indonesia (4.9%); three from Malaysia (4.9%); three from Myanmar (4.9%) and only one participant from Singapore. The three remaining participants lived and worked in areas beyond the scope of our research criteria but were included in this analysis due to their relevant regional insights. This includes one from Lao PDR (initially included as a focus country but later excluded); one from Nepal and one response which stated that they 'work in almost every SEA country' but did not specify which country they were based in. This might indicate that foreign correspondents or international media organisations participated in the questionnaire.

1.b. Occupation

A variety of media stakeholders responded to the questionnaire (**see Chart 1**), although most responses came from journalists or media practitioners, which accounted for 35 out of 61 responses (57.4%). This was followed by 11 (18%) media owners/senior managers; nine (14.8%) media association representatives and four media academics (6.6%). One respondent specifically stated that they were a retired editor and another respondent stated that they were a media freelancer.

1.c. Employment Status

Respondents also varied in terms of their employment status (**see Chart 2**). Most participants (41 out of 61 or 67.2%) were employed on a full-time basis, while 15 participants (24.6%) were freelance or temporary workers. Two work part-time (3.3%),

while one participant (1.6%) works part time and as a freelancer. One respondent (1.6%) declared that they freelance with international outlets and works part time for local media. There was only one (1.6%) intern or volunteer.

1) What best describes your current role in the media?

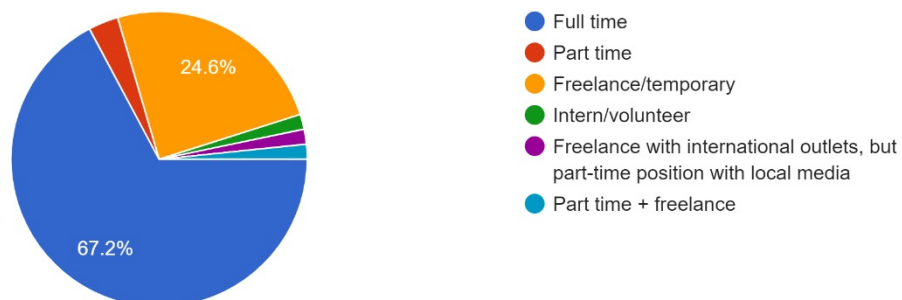
61 responses



Source: PMA / Google Forms

2) What is your employment status?

61 responses



Source: PMA / Google Forms

1.d. Gender

Most respondents identified as male, which accounted for 68.9% (42 out of 61 responses). 17 participants identified as female (27.9%), while two (3.3%) preferred not to say. There were no participants who identified as non-binary.

1.e. Experience

The survey was well represented by participants with various levels of experience in the media. Most participants (21 out of 61 or 34.4%) have 15 years or more of experience in the industry. A fifth of participants (13 out of 61 or 21.3%) have 11-15 years of experience; almost a third have 6-10 years of experience (19 out of 61 or 31.1%), and 8 out of 61 participants (13.1%) have 1-5 years of experience. No participants had less than one year of experience.

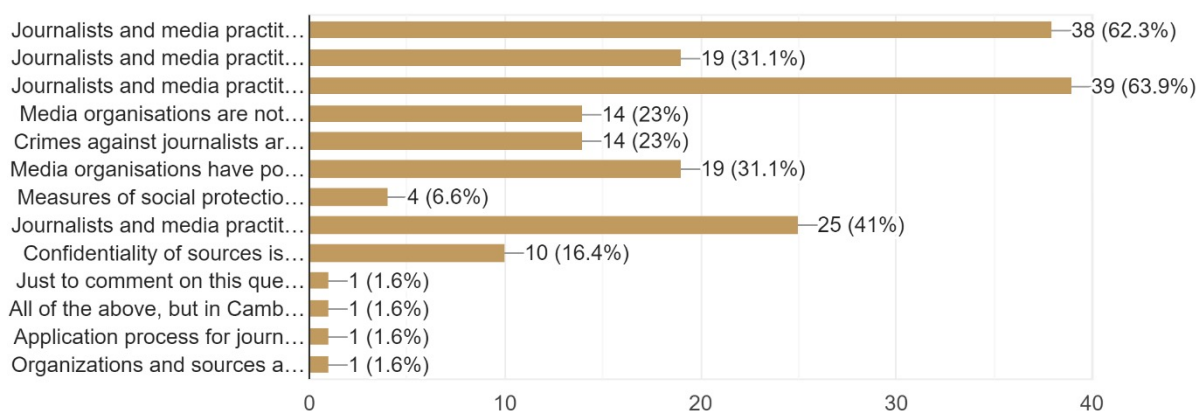
2. Journalist Safety

2.a. Priorities

Respondents were asked to choose their three main safety priorities (**see Chart 6**) in relation to UNESCO's Journalist Safety Indicators (JSI)¹. The top three priorities were: Ensuring that journalists and media workers are not unlawfully detained or killed because of their journalistic work (39 out of 61); protection from threats, harassment, or surveillance (38 out of 61), and freedom from self-censorship (25 out of 61).

6) In your opinion, which 3 factors are priorities for journalists and media practitioners to work safely? Please select 3 answers:

61 responses



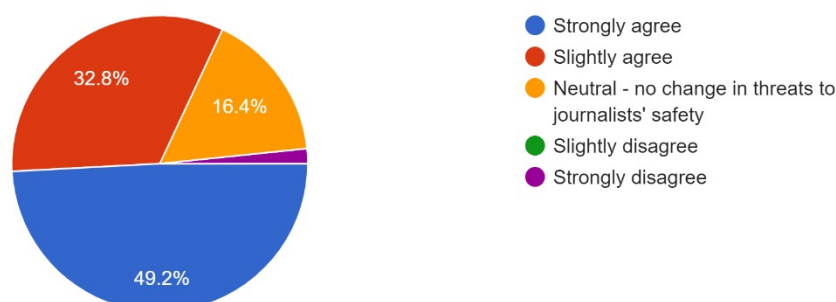
Source: PMA / Google Forms

2.b. Multi-pronged attacks and threats

Alarmingly, almost half of all respondents (30 out of 61 or 49.2%) strongly agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased threats to journalist safety (**see Chart 12**). Almost a third of all respondents (20 out of 61 or 32.8%) 'slightly' agreed with this trend, while 10 respondents (16.4%) believe that there have been 'no changes' to the threats to journalists' safety. Only one respondent 'strongly disagreed' with the statement.

12) How strongly do you agree with the following statement: "The COVID-19 pandemic has increased threats to the safety of journalists" (whether physical, verbal or digital)

61 responses



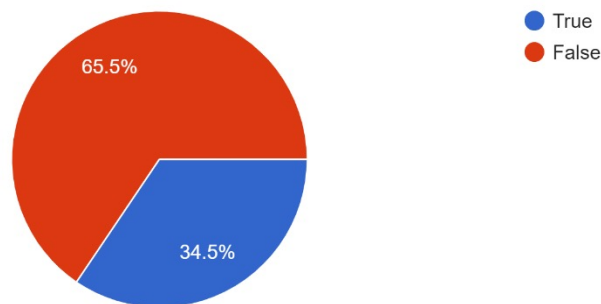
Source: PMA / Google Forms

¹<https://en.unesco.org/themes/safety-of-journalists/journalists-safety-indicators>

When asked about personal safety (**see Chart 14**), most participants (38 out of 58 responses or 65.5%) disagreed with feeling physically and mentally safe while doing their job during the COVID-19 pandemic. 20 out of 58 (34.5%) stated that they did feel safe.

14) If you are a journalist/media practitioner, editor or a media manager/owner, please answer the following statement 'True' or 'False': "I have pers...ysically and mentally doing my job during COVID-19"

58 responses

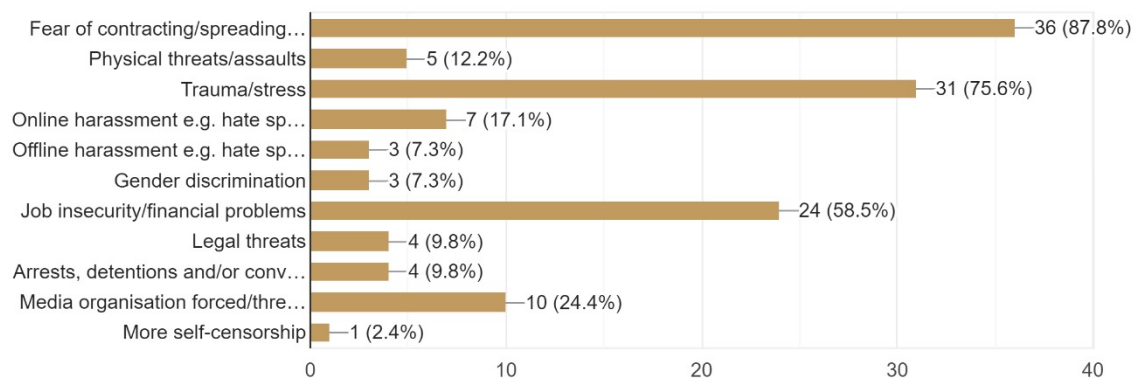


Source: PMA / Google Forms

The top three factors that contributed to respondents (**see Chart 14a**) feeling unsafe were the fear of contracting or spreading COVID-19 (36 out of 41 respondents or 87.8%); trauma or stress related to the pandemic (31 out of 41 respondents or 75.6%) and job insecurity/financial problems (24 out of 41 respondents or 58.5%).

14a) If you selected 'False', what has made you feel most unsafe? Please select 3 answers:

41 responses

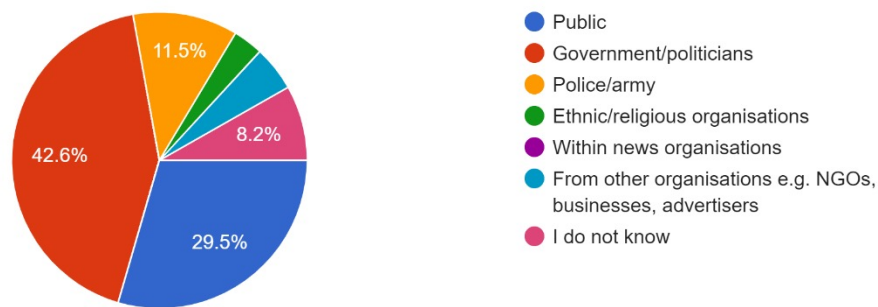


Source: PMA / Google Forms

Governments and politicians were considered the most prominent perpetrator of threats and attacks on journalists and media workers (**see Chart 15**), accounting for 26 out of 61 respondents (42.6%). This was followed by the public (18 out of 61 or 29.5%) and the police or army (7 respondents or 11.5%).

15) In your opinion, who do you think the threats and attacks on journalists (whether physical, verbal or digital) predominantly came from?

61 responses

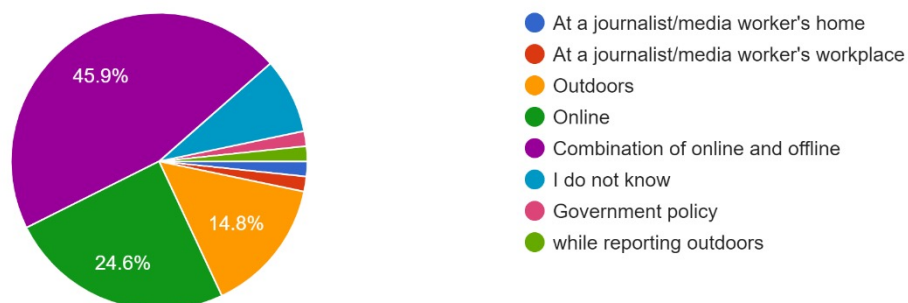


Source: PMA / Google Forms

45.9% of respondents (28 out of 61) believe that threats and attacks on journalists tended to take place online and offline (**see Chart 16**). Almost a quarter of participants (24.6%) believe that most attacks and threats took place online only, while ten respondents (16.4%) believe that the majority took place while reporting outdoors, in the field.

16) In your opinion, where did the threats and attacks on journalists/media workers tend to take place?

61 responses



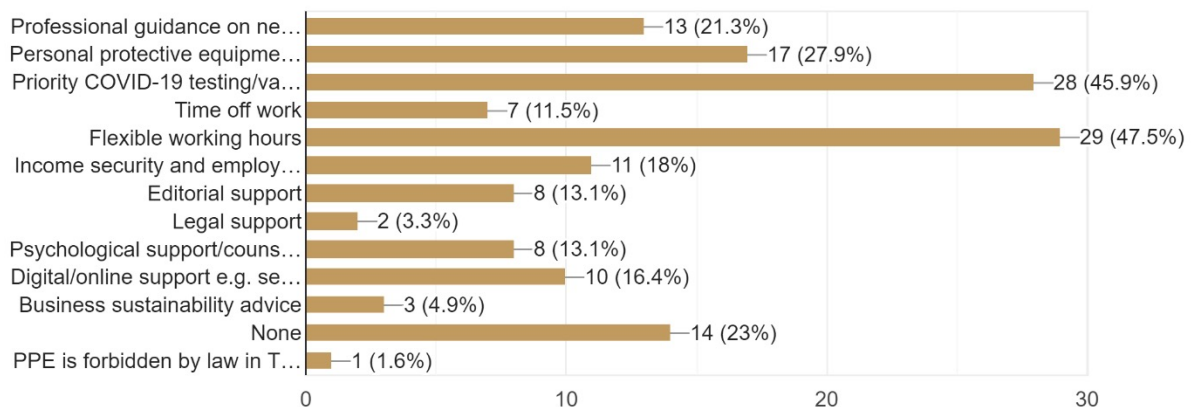
Source: PMA / Google Forms

2.c. Safety support and training

Many of the respondents shared that they received some sort of safety support during the pandemic (**see Chart 17**). Almost half of all respondents were offered flexible working hours, which accounted for 29 out of 61 respondents (47.5%). 28 respondents (45.9%) shared that they received priority COVID-19 testing or vaccinations, while 17 (27.9%) shared that they received personal protective equipment (PPE). Other respondents were offered professional guidance on their new working arrangements (13 out of 61 or 21.3%); income security and employment support (11 out of 61 or 18%) as well as editorial (8 out of 61 or 13.1%) and psychological support/counselling (8 out of 61 or 13.1%). However, nearly a quarter of respondents (14 out of 61 or 23%) admitted to not receiving any support.

17) What support did you personally receive during the pandemic? Please select 3 answers:

61 responses

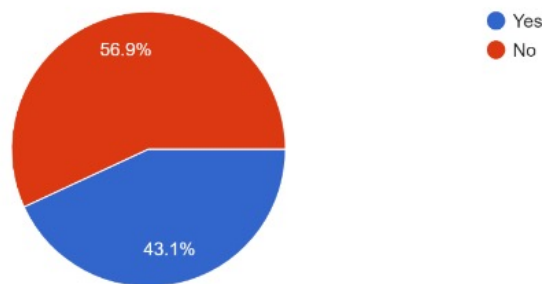


Source: PMA / Google Forms

As for training and support for journalist safety, more than half of respondents (33 out of 58 respondents or 56.9%) declared that they have never previously received any type of media safety training (**see Chart 9**).

9) If you are a journalist/media practitioner, editor or a media manager/owner, have you previously had any type of media safety training?

58 responses



Source: PMA / Google Forms

For those that had received training, it ranged from physical and digital/cyber safety training for journalists; safety and survival training during natural disasters, health crises or other dangerous situations; specific Hostile Environment & First Aid Training (HEFAT) as well as data security and journalists' rights. One respondent mentioned specific COVID-19 related training, including for social distancing. However, one respondent admitted to not remembering the training they received, suggesting that more regular, engaging, and targeted training may be required (**see Table 1**).

Table 1: Screenshot of responses to question 9a, 'If yes, please describe the type of training you have received.'

27 responses

Physical and digital safety training for journalists

Honestly I can't remember much of it

CamboJA | IWPR Social Media | Cambodian Center for Independent Media (CCIM) | DW & CamboJA Fact-Check | RECOFC Journalists Resource.

HOSTILE training.

Safety Training for Journalists (First Aid, Digital Security, Self-defense)

Digital Safety Training

HEST Training

Training to ensure survival in dangerous situations.

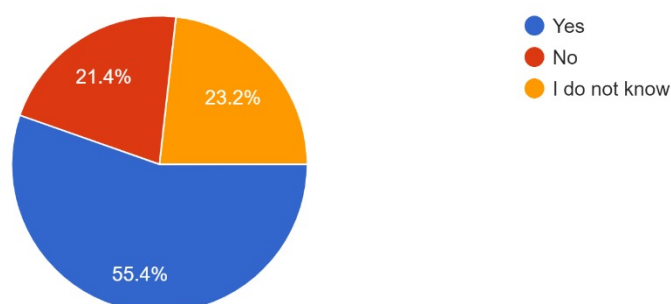
Regular HEFAT refreshers

Source: PMA / Google Forms

Similarly, some organisations have policies or codes in place to protect and ensure the safety of staff online and while reporting in the field, according to 31 out of 56 (55.4%) respondents (**see Chart 10**). But this is not a universal trend across the region. One fifth of respondents (12 out of 56 or 21.4%) admit to not having any safety policies or codes in place, while almost a quarter (13 respondents or 23.2%) admitted to not having any knowledge that such policies or codes might exist within their organisation.

10) If you are a journalist/media practitioner, editor or a media manager/owner, does your organisation have policies or codes in place to protect the safety of staff (e.g. online, in the field, etc.)?

56 responses



Source: PMA / Google Forms

For those that knew of specific regulations and policies (see Table 2), some mentioned seeking legal support; referring to their organisation's 'Standing Operating Procedures' (SOPs), including statutes and internal regulations; crime reporting procedures or referring to national media, press laws, or national constitutions. Other strategies include working collaboratively with solidarity networks. But several respondents reiterated that they either had very minimal or no assistance, or were unsure about possible regulations or procedures.

Table 2: Screenshot of responses to question 11 'If you are a journalist/media practitioner, editor or a media manager/owner, what regulations/procedures does your organisation have for crimes against journalists? (Please describe)'

27 responses

Physical and digital safety training for journalists

Honestly I can't remember much of it

CamboJA | IWPR Social Media | Cambodian Center for Independent Media (CCIM) | DW & CamboJA Fact-Check | RECOFC Journalists Resource.

HOSTILE training.

Safety Training for Journalists (First Aid, Digital Security, Self-defense)

Digital Safety Training

HEST Training

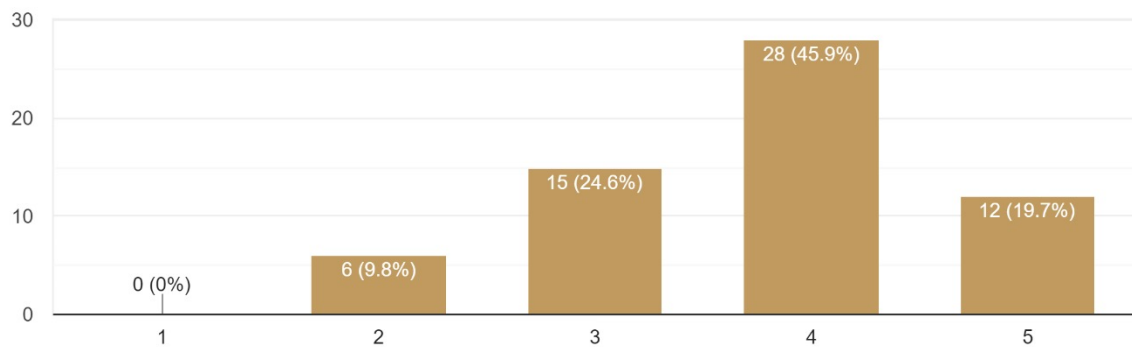
Training to ensure survival in dangerous situations.

Regular HEFAT refreshers

Source: PMA / Google Forms

While the survey reveals that most participants' awareness of their personal safety has changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, and that they would feel more prepared for a future crisis or emergency (40 out of 61 respondents or 65.6% agreed with the statement on improved personal safety awareness and future crisis preparedness) (see Chart 18), the above findings and analyses still provide a considerable cause for concern for journalists' personal safety in Southeast Asia. More action is required to address and alleviate these threats.

18) On a scale of 1-5, how strongly would you agree with the following statement? “My personal safety awareness has changed during the Covid-19 p... changed, 4 = Slightly agree, 5 = Strongly agree] 61 responses



Source: PMA / Google Forms

Currently, there does not appear to be a uniform set of regulations, training, or support for journalist safety across the region, especially during times of crises. And given that bodies of authority – as well as the general public – tend to be the most common perpetrators for attacks and threats to journalists, this adds to the growing body of evidence that developing a multi-stakeholder approach for journalist safety during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic is required.

3. Media Freedom

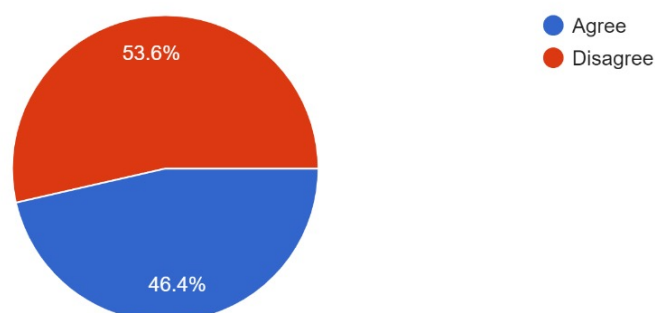
As COVID-19 restrictions were rolled out across the region, the extent to which journalists and media workers in Southeast Asia could cover stories during the pandemic varied greatly. It was often the case that the health crisis was used as a pretext to curtail independent media and critical reporting.

3.a. Restricted access to information and self-censorship

Just over half of respondents (30 out of 56 or 53.6%) said that they were unable to freely cover stories, compared with 26 out of 56 (46.4%) who admitted that they could (**see Chart 20**).

20) If you are a journalist/media practitioner, do you agree or disagree with the statement: “I have been able to freely cover stories during Covid-19”

56 responses

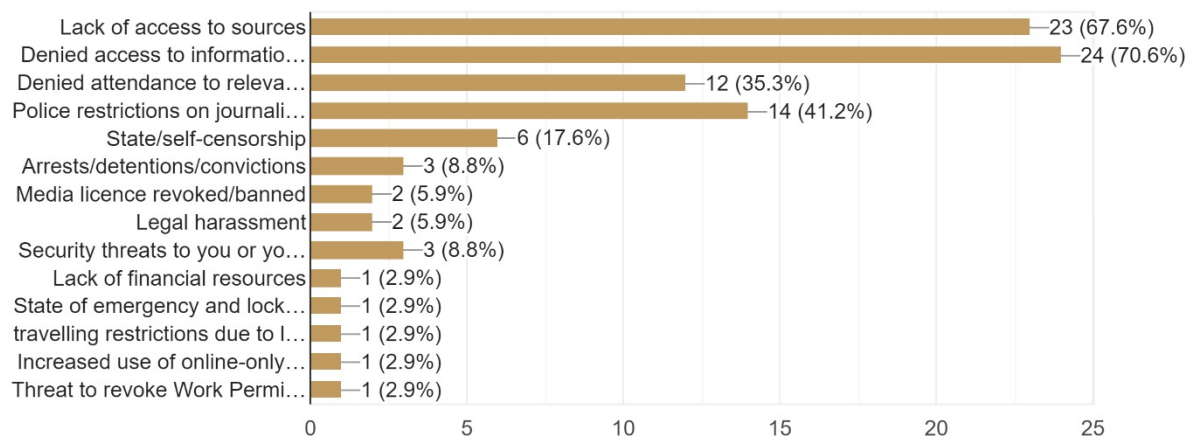


Source: PMA / Google Forms

Of those that faced restrictions, the main three factors included being denied access to information such as from public, government, or official health records (24 out of 34 responses or 70.6%); a lack of access to sources for stories (23 responses or 67.6%) and police restricting journalists from reporting or broadcasting (14 responses or 41.2%) (**see Chart 20a**).

20a) If you selected 'Disagree', what restrictions have you experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic? Please select 3 answers:

34 responses

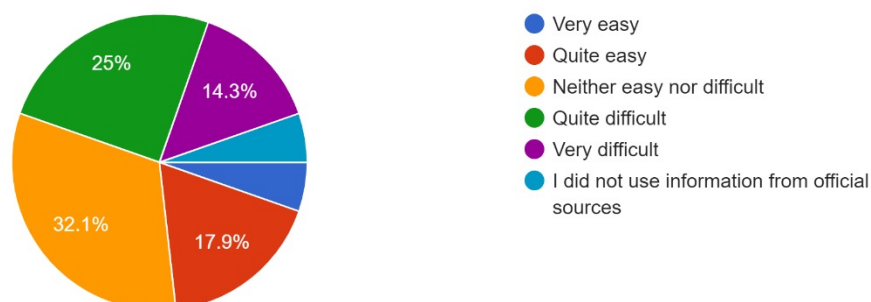


Source: PMA / Google Forms

More specifically, several respondents found it 'quite' or 'very' difficult to access information from official sources, such as from the Ministry of Health or hospitals, while reporting during the pandemic, accounting for 22 out of 56 respondents (39.3%). Only 13 respondents (23.3%) found it either 'very' or 'quite' easy, while 18 respondents (31.1%) found it neither easy nor difficult to access information. Only one respondent disclosed that they did not use information from such sources (**see Chart 22**).

22) If you are a journalist/media practitioner, how easy was it to access information from official sources e.g. Ministry of Health or hospitals for reporting during the Covid-19 pandemic?

56 responses

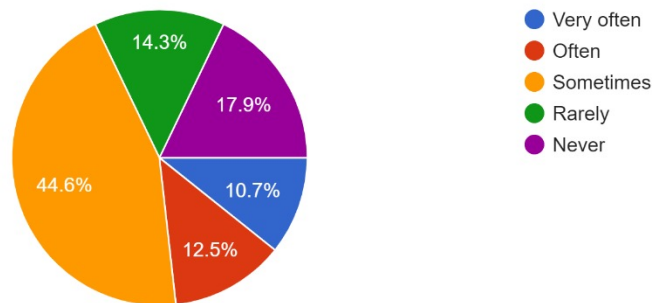


Source: PMA / Google Forms

An overwhelming majority of journalists and media practitioners said that they experienced the need to self-censor (**see Chart 23**) their reporting at some point during the pandemic. This ranged from 'very often' (6 out of 56 responses or 10.7%) and 'often' (7 out of 56 or 12.5%), to sometimes (25 out of 56 or 44.6%) and 'rarely' (8 out of 56 or 14.3%). Only 10 respondents (17.9%) said that they never experienced the need to self-censor.

23) If you are a journalist/media practitioner, throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, how often have you experienced the need to self-censor your reporting?

56 responses

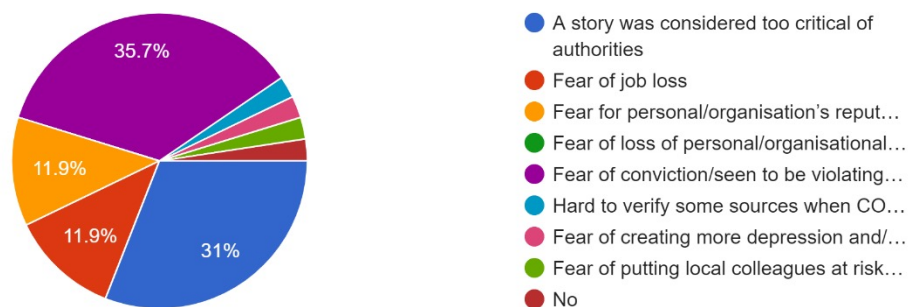


Source: PMA / Google Forms

The main reason for those who did not pursue a story was fear of conviction or being seen to be violating laws or regulations (**see Chart 23a**), which accounted for 15 out of 42 respondents (35.7%). This was closely followed by a third of respondents who self-censored if stories were allegedly considered to be too critical of authorities (13 out of 42 respondents or 31%). Some respondents self-censored for fear of either harming their personal or organisation's reputation (5 out of 42 responses or 11.9%) or losing their job (5 out of 42 or 11.9%). Other reasons included fear of creating additional stress within society due to the pandemic by 'toning down' their reports or fear of putting local colleagues at risk from authorities, and the difficulty of verifying some sources while COVID-19 restrictions were in place.

23a) For all answers except 'Never', what was the main reason not to pursue the story?

42 responses



Source: PMA / Google Forms

While most respondents (49 out of 61 respondents or 80.3%) stated that they had not been accused of violating laws or regulations used to silence critical voices or dissent, the outcome for those that had been accused (12 out of 61 or 19.7%) varied. This included receiving a 'stern government warning and legal threat' or being 'found in contempt of court' or 'conviction' (see Table 3).

Table 3: Snapshot of responses to question 24a 'If yes, please explain the outcome of the accusation (e.g. lawsuit, paid a fine, conviction, organisation closure, operating licence revoked/not renewed)'

11 responses

Plagiarism
Stern government warning and legal threat
It was a kind of public reaction from pro-government social media supporters.
Diffamation law in Thailand had been used against the media I'm working for.
found contempt of court
Conviction
the Press Council found a solution to address the complaints by publishing a right to reply from the parties who complained

Source: PMA / Google Forms

Table 4: Snapshot of responses to question 25 'How else has COVID-19 restricted freedom of speech/expression in your country? E.g. information blocked, social media sites shut down? Please describe in your own words:'

61 responses

information restriction
Govt is the main source of COVID info with no way/access to independently verify
judicial attack and detention
I cover a vast region but in Thailand, the pandemic has been used as a pretext to stifle dissent and to report on those who continue to dare to do so
Information blocked
It's very risky to have negative opinions about Chinese vaccines given to Cambodia.
Journalist arrested Information blocked Social media sites shut down
Overreliance on online connection, in which insecure and prone to government-sponsored censorship/blockage.

Source: PMA / Google Forms

Insecure online connections, question vetting during virtual press briefings, and internet shutdowns, were among the many restrictions placed upon journalists' and media workers' freedom of speech and expression, and access to information in

their respective countries (see Table 4). One respondent explained how questions from the media were 'strictly vetted' during daily press conferences in Brunei. In Cambodia, journalists were reportedly 'arrested, jailed, sued and fined'. Meanwhile, a 'stonewall' culture has reportedly become more apparent in Thailand with information being withheld for 'national security' reasons. Media reports on the vaccine roll-out have also been at risk of defamation lawsuits or visa revocation.

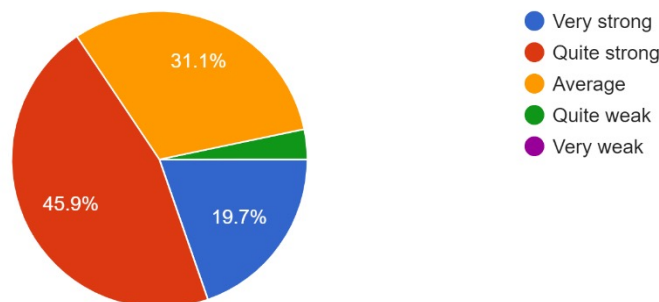
3.b. Misinformation and Disinformation

Most respondents stated that they would rate their level of knowledge about misinformation and disinformation as either 'very strong' (12 out of 61 respondents or 19.7%), 'quite strong' (28 out of 61 or 45.9%) or 'average' (19 out of 61 or 31.1%) (see Chart 26).

Just over half of respondents (56.9% or 33 out of 58) stated that they had previously received training on how to spot mis- and disinformation. while an overwhelming majority of respondents (98.4% or 60 out of 61) believe that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the spread of misinformation and disinformation.

26) How would you rate your level of knowledge about misinformation and disinformation?

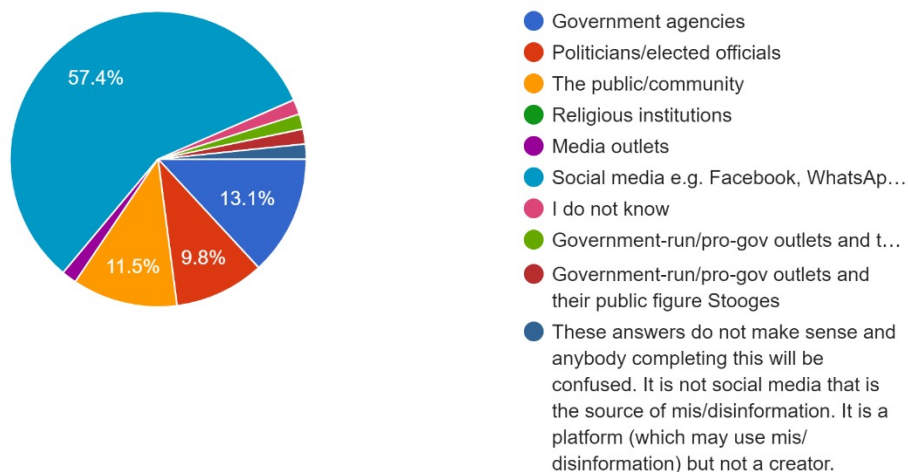
61 responses



Source: PMA / Google Forms

28) In your opinion, who would you identify as the main source of misinformation and disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic?

61 responses



Source: PMA / Google Forms

The majority of respondents identified that they were mostly exposed to mis- and disinformation via social media (**see Chart 28 above**). This accounted for 57.4% (35 out of 61) respondents. This was followed by government agencies (8 out of 61 or 13.1%) and the public/community (7 out of 61 or 11.5%). Other possible sources were politicians or elected officials (6 out of 61 or 9.8%).

Respondents shared various ways of confronting mis- and disinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic, including rigorous fact-checking tools; using clear and evidence-based reporting; challenging official statements and corroboration or de-bunking conspiracy theories related to COVID-19 and vaccines; launching fact-checking columns or live blogs; engaging with specialists and reputable experts to verify information, and not running programmes or printing reports that could not be verified (**see Table 5**). These best practices and knowledge exchange among media workers and organisations may be useful in the fight against mis- and disinformation across the region, alongside regular training.

Table 4: Snapshot of responses to question 25 'How else has COVID-19 restricted freedom of speech/expression in your country? E.g. information blocked, social media sites shut down? Please describe in your own words:'

41 responses

by delivering clear and evidence-based news reports

Performing fact checking on false facts circulating in the public.

Clear and evidence based reporting

We engaged with specialists in the field to verify our information.

Delivering official and evidence-based news reports

Verifying information through official channels and updating the public and disseminating the outcome, as per advice of officials

using fact-checking tools and provide fact check content

We had a live blog on all the latest COVID updates which included debunking the latest rumours/misinformation being spread on social media

Source: PMA / Google Forms

4. Media Business Viability

The last set of questions focused on the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on media business operations and their future viability, as per UNESCO's Media Viability Indicators (MVIs).

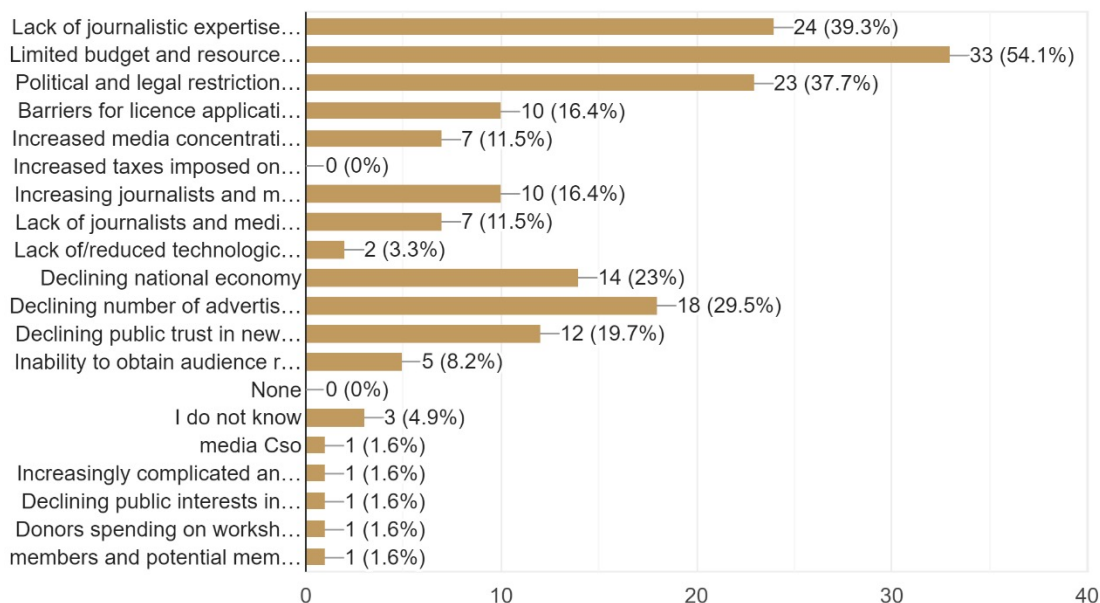
Some questions were clearly targeted to particular respondents in recognition of their experiential and contextual differences, such as media managers or owners and reporters. Some questions were suitable for all respondents.

4a. Financial losses and threats to media viability

According to the majority of respondents, the three main threats facing media organisations as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (**see Chart 32**) included: having a limited budget and stories for investigative stories (33 out of 61 or 54.1%); a lack of journalistic expertise on health or science reporting (24 out of 61 or 39.3%); and the political or legal restrictions imposed during the pandemic, which repressed media freedom (23 out of 61 or 37.7%). Other respondents added that they experienced challenges including a complicated media visa application process; declining public interest in news media vis-a-vis entertainment or government affiliated media, and donors investing more capital on workshops or training than journalism.

32) What are the main threats to the existence of your media organisation because of the COVID-19 pandemic? Please select 3 that apply:

61 responses

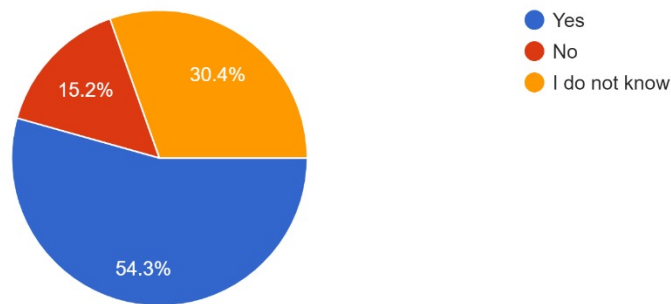


Source: PMA / Google Forms

More than half of all media managers/owners (25 out of 46 or 54.3%) said that their organisation was losing income due to the COVID-19 pandemic (**see Chart 33**). This was compared with only 7 respondents (15.2%) who said they weren't losing income and 14 (30.4%) that were unsure.

33) If you are a media manager/owner: Is your organisation losing income due to the COVID-19 outbreak?

46 responses

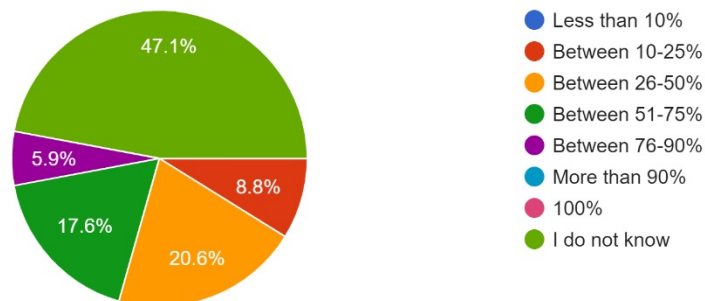


Source: PMA / Google Forms

The exact amount of income that organisations have lost since the start of the pandemic varied (**see Chart 33a**). A fifth of respondents (7 out of 34) declared that they lost between 26–50% of their income, which was closely followed by 6 out of 34 respondents (17.6%) who declared a 51–75% loss. 3 respondents lost between 10–25% while 2 respondents lost between 76–90% of their income.

33a) If yes, how much income has your organisation lost because of the pandemic?

34 responses

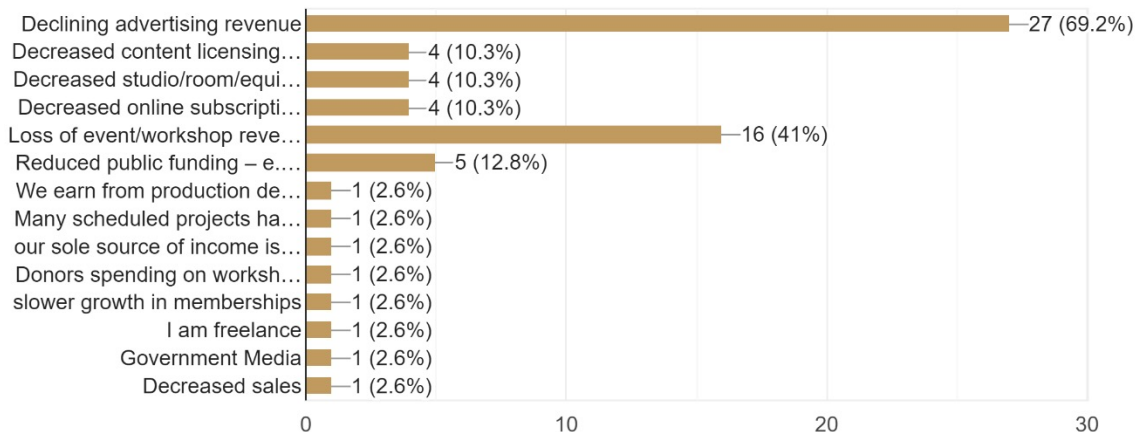


Source: PMA / Google Forms

While income loss varied, it was predominantly due to declining advertising revenue (27 out of 39 respondents or 69.2%), which was closely followed by loss of event or workshop revenue (16 out of 39 or 41%) (**see Chart 33b**). Other factors included a reduction in public funding for media organisations, which rely on sources such as licence fees or government subsidies (5 out of 39 or 12.8%); decreased online subscriptions (4 out of 39 or 10.3%); decreased content licensing (4 out of 39 or 10.3%) and decreased studio/room/equipment rental (4/39 or 10.3%).

33b) How has the COVID-19 pandemic predominantly reduced your organisation's income? Please select 2 answers:

39 responses

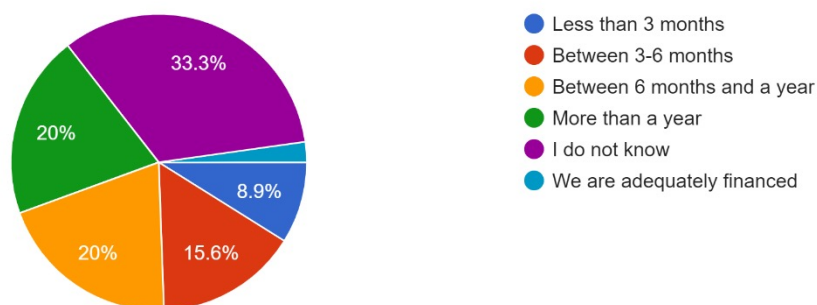


Source: PMA / Google Forms

The questionnaire also revealed the impact that a loss of income is having on sustainability (**see Chart 33c**). While one fifth of respondents (9 out of 45) said that they had more than a year's worth of financing and another fifth had between 6 months to a year, other respondents shared more grim realities. 7 respondents said that they had between 3-6 months' worth of financing and 4 respondents said that they had less than 3 months. The remaining 15 respondents were unsure, while 1 respondent stated that they were 'adequately financed'.

33c) How much financing does your organisation currently have to continue operations in its current form?

45 responses

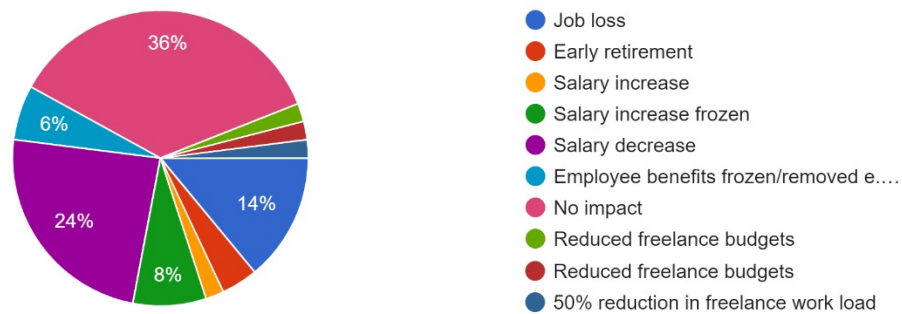


Source: PMA / Google Forms

As for journalists/media practitioners or editors, most stated that the COVID-19 pandemic had no financial impact on them (18 out of 50 respondents or 36%) (**see Chart 40**). However, nearly 1 in 4 experienced a salary decrease (12 out of 50 respondents) and 14% lost their job. Others had their salary growth (8%) or employee benefits (6%) such as medical or travel allowances, frozen.

40) If you are a journalist/media practitioner or editor: how has the COVID-19 pandemic mainly impacted you financially?

50 responses



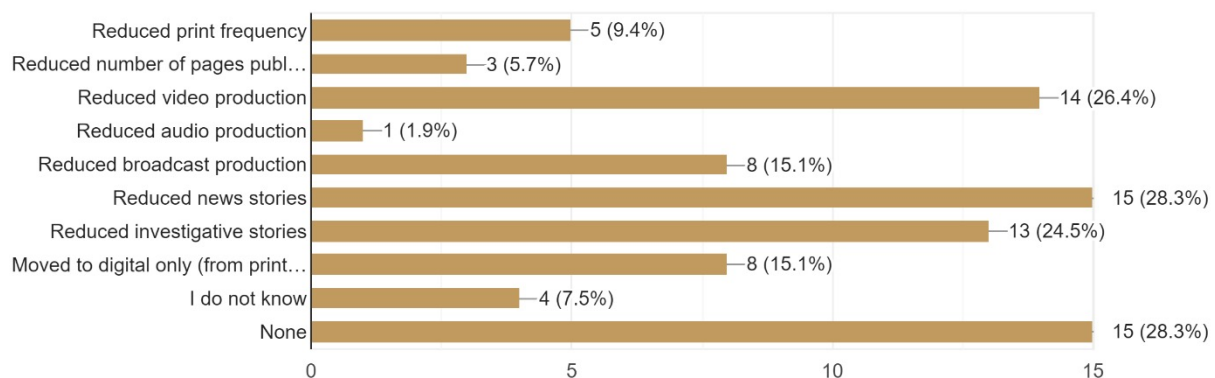
Source: PMA / Google Forms

4.b. Austerity measures & responding to sustainability issues

The two most prominent changes that news organisations made to their output (see Chart 34) since the start of the pandemic include reducing the number of news stories produced (15 out of 53 responses or 28.3%) and reducing video content (14 out of 53 or 26.4%). This was closely followed by reduced investigative stories (13 out of 53 or 24.5%) and a move from print or broadcast to digital only content (8 out of 53 or 15.1%).

34) If you are a journalist/media practitioner, editor or media owner/manager: What main changes has your news organisation made to its output since Covid-19? Please select 2 answers:

53 responses



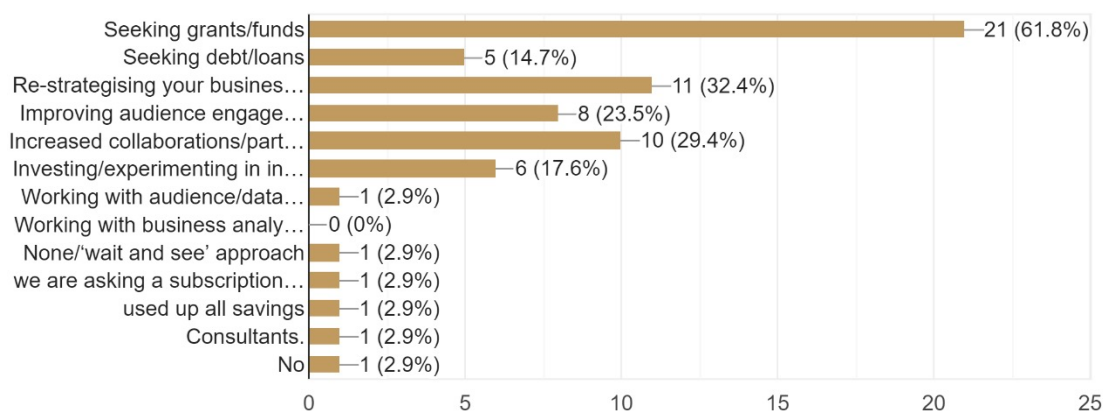
Source: PMA / Google Forms

Regarding the austerity measures undertaken by media organisations, respondents said that recruitment freezes (18 out of 52 responses or 34.6%), salary cuts (17 out of 52 or 32.7%) and job cuts (14 out of 52 or 26.9%) were among the most prominent measures. Other measures included salary freezes (11/52 or 21.2%); departmental cuts (7 out of 52 or 13.5%), temporary office closures (6 out of 52 or 11.5%) and an inability to contribute to employment benefits such as pension schemes or travel and medical aid allowances (6 out of 52 or 11.5%). Fortunately, very few experienced a permanent closure of their offices (2 out of 52 or 3.8%), and 15 out of 52 stated that there were no austerity measures. 2 out of 52 were unsure about austerity measures carried out.

According to media managers/owners (see Chart 36), their main response to combat financial and sustainability challenges was to seek a grant or additional funds (21 out of 34 responses or 61.8%). Others re-strategised their business models (11 out of 34 or 32.4%), increased collaborations or partnerships with other media organisations/agencies (10 out of 34 or 29.4%) or invested/experimented in innovative platforms (6 out of 34 or 17.6%). Very few (2 out of 34 or 5.8%) took no approach at all.

36) If you are a media manager/owner: What has been your main response to these financial/sustainability challenges? Please select 2 answers:

34 responses

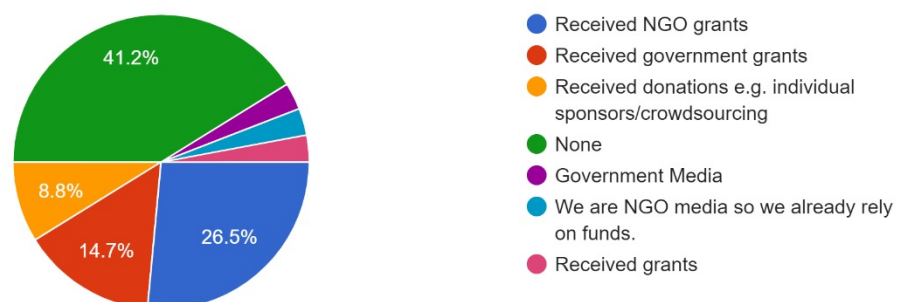


Source: PMA / Google Forms

More than a third of media managers/owners (14 out of 34 responses or 41.2%) did not receive any financial support for their lost revenue (see Chart 37). For those who did, NGO grants (9/34 or 26.5%), government grants (5 out of 34 or 14.7%) and donations in the form of individual sponsors or crowdsourcing (3 out of 34 or 8.8%) were the most popular forms of support.

37) If you are a media manager/owner: During the COVID-19 pandemic, what main financial support has your organisation received due to lost revenue?

34 responses

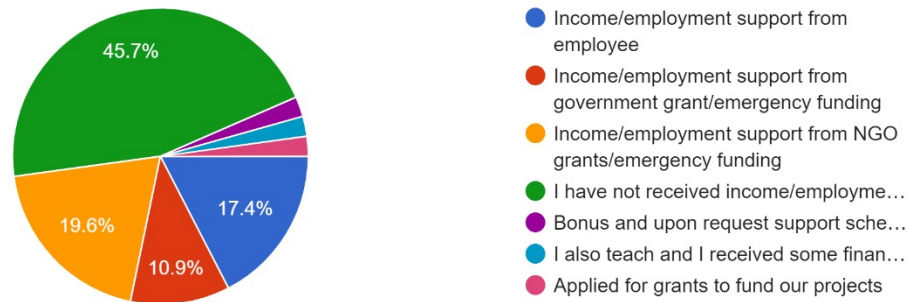


Source: PMA / Google Forms

Similarly, most journalists/media practitioners and editors did not receive any income or employment support (21 out of 46 responses or 45.7%). For those who did (**see Chart 41**), NGOs (9 out of 46 or 19.6%), employers (8 out of 46 or 17.4%) and government grants/emergency funding (5/46 or 10.9%) were the main sources of income or employment support

41) If you are a journalist/media practitioner or editor: what main income/employment support have you received?

46 responses



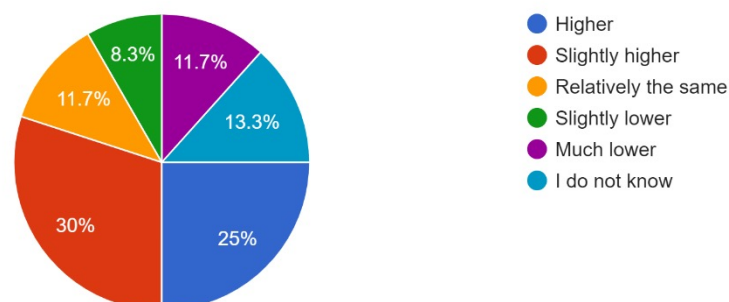
Source: PMA / Google Forms

4.c. Reach and engagement

Not all changes during the COVID-19 pandemic were damaging to future media viability. In fact, most respondents recorded a 'slightly' higher level of engagement – in terms of the number of comments, likes, shares, followers, donations, subscriptions, audience time spent on web page – during the health crisis, accounting for 18 out of 61 respondents (29.5%) (**see Chart 42**). Meanwhile, nearly a quarter experienced an even 'higher' level of engagement (15 out of 61 or 24.6%). 1 in 10 respondents (7 out of 61) experienced the same levels of engagement while only 6 out of 61 experienced slightly lower and 7 out of 61 experienced 'much lower' engagement. The remaining respondents were unsure about the overall level of engagement with their content/organisation.

42) What overall level of engagement has your organisation recorded during COVID-19? (e.g. comments, shares, likes, followers, time on page, donations, subscriptions)

60 responses



Source: PMA / Google Forms

There were several reasons for differing engagement levels throughout the pandemic (**see Table 6**). This included a fluctuation in public interest throughout 2020 depending on key events or incidents during the pandemic, and audiences preferring to consume content via digital platforms.

Table 6. Snapshot of responses to question 42a 'If levels of engagement have differed at different times during the COVID-19 pandemic, please describe:'

18 responses

I don't know

The engagement mainly related to the events or incidents of Covid-19 pandemic. Audience would engage more when there are important events happening. The same for answers 41 and 43, the engagement and reach depends on the events, meaning sometimes it was higher and sometimes it was lower comparing to the pre-pandemic period.

There's news.

Less programs implemented

People are more paying attention on stories especially on digital platforms as they are on these platforms too.

Maybe that because of the audience have much time to spend in the internet

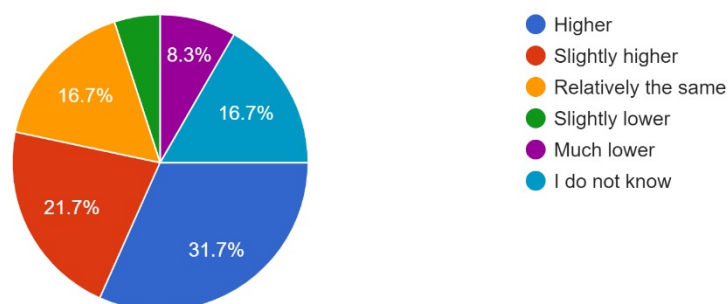
We now have a lot more community members (both paid and unpaid)

Source: PMA / Google Forms

Similarly, a third of respondents also recorded 'higher' levels of reach – reads, listens, views – compared with pre-pandemic levels, accounting for 19 out of 61 responses or 31.1% (**see Chart 43**). A fifth experienced 'slightly higher' levels (13 out of 61 or 21.3%). Only 4 out of 61 experienced 'slightly lower' reach levels and 5 out of 61 experienced 'much lower' reach. 10 out of 61 respondents said that their reach was 'relatively the same', while the remaining 10 respondents were unsure.

43. What overall level of reach has your organisation recorded during COVID-19? (e.g. reads, listens, views, clicks)

60 responses



Source: PMA / Google Forms

According to respondents, the reasons for increased levels of reach include the growth in online publishing, which is in tandem with digital subscribers and mobile phone users (**see Table 7**). Conversely, some respondents revealed that due to programme postponements and lack of quality coverage, reach declined.

Table 7. Snapshot of responses to question 43a 'If levels of reach have differed at different times during the COVID-19 pandemic, please describe.'

13 responses

Much lower
referrals from viewer to viewer
I don't know
There's news.
Postponed of programs
All of mobile phone users are consuming internet and social media so that they become our audiences. It means more reach to the public when we produces the stories.
There's a significant growth on online publishing
Nam on
Higher viewership and following across all platforms.

Source: PMA / Google Forms

A key consideration from these media business viability findings would be for media houses to share best practices and innovations that respond to financial challenges among likeminded organisations. Building on existing or creating new partnerships and collaborations, and enhancing digital offerings would also be highly beneficial.

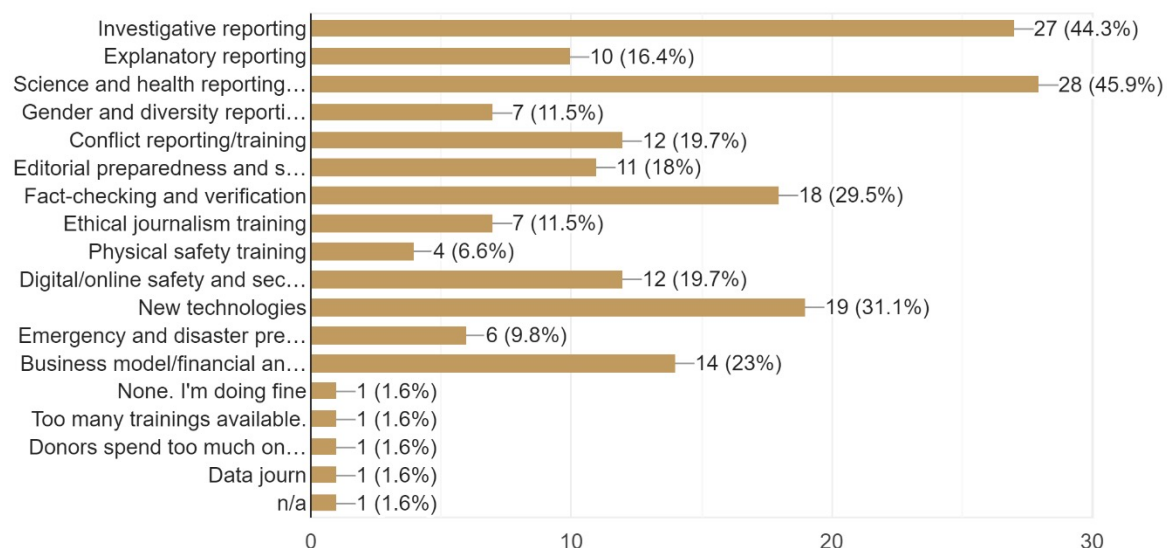
5. Beyond the COVID-19 pandemic

The final two questions focused on the Southeast Asian media landscape beyond the pandemic.

The most popular fields or subjects which respondents suggested they would appreciate more training in include science and health reporting (28 out of 61 responses or 45.9%) and investigative reporting (27 out of 61 or 44.3%) (see **Chart 44**). Others would appreciate more training in new technologies (19 out of 61 or 31.1%); fact-checking and verification (18 out of 61 or 29.5%); business model/financial and sustainability training (14 out of 61 or 23%), and digital/online safety and security (12 out of 61 or 19.7%).

44) Which field or subject would you welcome more training in? Please select 3 answers:

61 responses

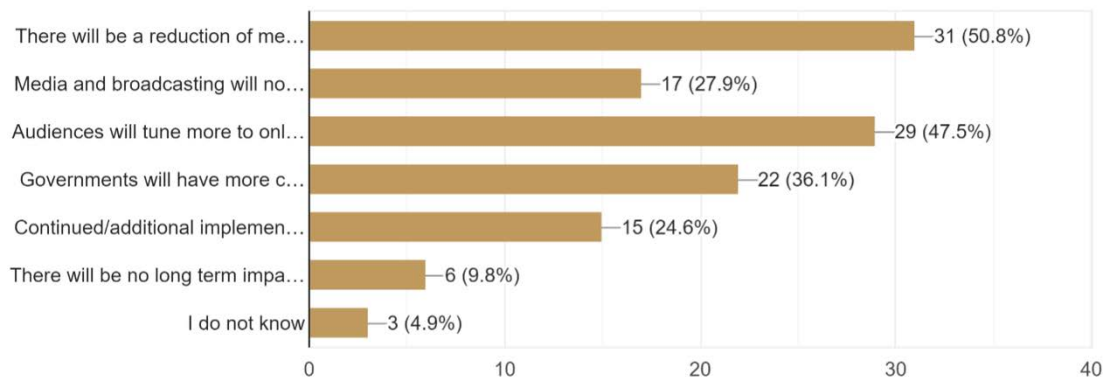


Source: PMA / Google Forms

According to respondents, the future of the media landscape in Southeast Asia remains bleak (see **Chart 45**). Respondents stated that the three main long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their respective countries include reduced media plurality/diversity (31 out of 61 respondents or 50.8%); that audiences will turn to online platforms for news more (29 out of 61 or 47.5%) and that governments will have more control over output (22 out of 61 or 36.1%). Only six respondents believe that there will be no long-term impact, and one respondent answered, 'I do not know'.

45) What do you think the main long term impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic will be on the media in your country? Please select 2 answers:

61 responses



Source: PMA / Google Forms

Key findings and recommendations contained within this questionnaire range from enhanced digital training, offerings and safety to greater media literacy, science and health, and investigative journalism training.

However, the responses also demonstrate why there is a considerable cause for concern regarding journalists' safety in Southeast Asia. A multi-stakeholder approach to journalist safety and media freedom as well as continued or increased cooperation and knowledge exchange are essential to alleviate threats and challenges across the region. Media freedom and viability also require an enabling environment without restrictive media laws and regulations, and where journalists do not feel pressured to self-censor for fear of reprisal.

It is therefore vital that media organisations and workers adapt their output and operations where possible to not only survive but thrive beyond the pandemic. These outcomes and recommendations are explored in the corresponding report: The impact of COVID-19 on media freedom, journalist safety and media viability in Southeast Asia.