

Values Influencing the Practice of Investigative Journalism in Malaysia: Media Practitioners' Perspectives

ADIBAH ISMAIL
Universiti Utara Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Investigative journalism has been an American phenomenon, heavily embedded with their values. Scholars mentioned individualism and press freedom as two founding values of investigative journalism practice in the West. This study attempts to explore values influencing the practice of investigative journalism from a different viewpoint, by investigating Malaysia as a democratic country, but having a controlled media environment. Malaysia is also an interesting research subject because it is a developing country with strong Eastern values. Using local yardsticks, this study explores values influencing the practice of investigative journalism in Malaysia from local media practitioners' perspectives. This research aims to explore more than just the differences between Western and Eastern culture, but also to understand how those different values influence the practice. In-depth interviews were used to explore the perspectives of 16 media practitioners from various backgrounds including editors and journalists who work in mainstream and alternative media in Malaysia. Vast data generated from the interviews pointing to a different viewpoint from current literature. The data, which was thematically analysed, revealed interesting findings which differentiate between Malaysian and Western practices of investigative journalism. The Eastern perspective was found to be dominant, especially in terms of collectivism culture, value of press freedom, and religious teachings influence. This study also highlighted the importance of considering the cultural factor in evaluating any journalism practice in the world. The study concludes that local values and culture must be included as research elements to understand a country's journalism practice.

Keywords: *Investigative journalism, media culture, guiding values, press freedom, Malaysia.*

INTRODUCTION

For decades, newsrooms around the world have practised the craft of investigative journalism. The practice has had its ups and downs, but regained its popularity and started to attract newsrooms and public attention after the exposé of the Watergate scandal in 1972. In the exposé, two reporters, Bernstein and Woodward from the Washington Post, initially investigated a burglary at the Watergate office building which ultimately led to the discovery of the biggest political scandal in United States history. Their reportage had ultimately forced President Richard Nixon out of office in 1974 (Hollis, 2019; Ettema & Glasser, 1984).

Although investigative journalism is being practised around the world, the way reporters practise it varies from one country to another. According to Hallin and Mancini (2014), the practice of journalism cannot be separated from the local cultural and political systems. Jiang, d'Haenens and Zhang (2021) also believed that journalism culture plays a crucial part in journalism practice. The same principle applies to investigative journalism where investigative journalists around the world are practising investigative journalism according to their values, perceptions, cultures, media environment, and political systems. This research aims to explore more than just the differences between Western and Eastern culture, but also to understand how those culture influence the values practised in Malaysian investigative journalism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Values are basic essential principles influencing the practice of investigative journalism. According to Loo (2013):

Values represent shared attitudes within social groups and society at large, of approval and disapproval, of favourable and unfavourable judgments towards other individuals, ideas (for example, freedom), objects (such as the value placed on property), social action and events. Like norms, values vary from one social group or society to another; and they change over time and in different circumstances. (p. 28)

Since investigative journalism has been largely an American phenomenon, and it is practised and researched mostly in that country, their values are heavily embedded in the perceptions and practices (Cancela, Gerber, & Dubied, 2021; Carson, 2019). American journalists reiterated that being a watchdog is almost a sacred commitment. This ideology is grounded in a liberal pluralist understanding of US society that envisions media as the fourth estate (Umejei & Suleiman, 2021). They also highly valued press freedom and they have Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) to protect their rights. This act, enacted in 1967, provided the public the right to request access to records from any federal agency (United States Department of Justice, 2021). Upon request, the department is obligated to make requested records promptly available, or the requester will be granted the right to file a complaint to the federal court. Therefore, their practice of investigative journalism is nurtured around this comfortable environment.

However, the same situation does not apply to other parts of the world, especially countries with different political systems and cultures. Their practices have to be based on their values. Malaysia is an interesting research subject since it is a developing country practising democracy, but has a controlled media environment. The journalism values practised in Malaysia might be different from the West. Unfortunately, according to Malaysian Press Institute (MPI) chief executive officer, Chamil Wariya, using Western framework as a yardstick to evaluate Malaysian practice is not an appropriate approach (Bernama, 2021). He argued that the Western framework will not be able to gauge the country's unique media dynamic and landscape. Therefore, this research is trying to close this gap by measuring the practice of investigative journalism in Malaysia using internal value yardsticks which are the practitioners themselves. This research aims to explore values influencing Malaysian media practitioners' perceptions on investigative journalism practice in Malaysia.

Press Freedom and Investigative Journalism

Press freedom is an essential concept when discussing the practice of investigative journalism. Exposing secrets involves much information digging and freedom to do so is crucial in developing a complete and reliable exposé. Laws and regulations often restrict investigative reporters by hindering them from getting needed information (Alecci, 2020). However, the challenge does not stop there. Investigative reporters are often denied their right to publish investigative reports. Therefore, press freedom is imperative for investigative journalism because press freedom guarantees both the right to access information and the right to publish (Akhbar, 2020). In the West, investigative reporters can leverage the FOIA to fight for their rights, but in Malaysia, there is no specific provision for press freedom. Instead,

the Malaysian government has treated press freedom as a sub-element of freedom of expression, which is guaranteed under the Malaysian Federal Constitution, Article 10 Clause 1(a). Yet, this guarantee of freedom comes with several legal restrictions stated in Clauses 2 and 4 of the same article (Rais, 1995).

Since his first tenure as Malaysian Prime Minister in the 1980s, Mahathir insists that the media system in Malaysia fits the characteristics of Social Responsibility press theory (Mahathir, 1989; Teoh, 2018). A few scholars seem to have a contrasting view. They interpreted government actions of censorship, license suspensions, legal actions against the press, and the shutting down of offending publications as acts of totalitarianism (Brown, 2021). During his long tenure as Prime Minister, mainstream media in Malaysia were said to be under tight government control. Apart from multiple laws and regulations governing the media, the government also controls the media through ownership by regime cronies (International Federation of Journalist, 2019). The same media control mechanism was continued by his successors. Due to the excessive government control, mainstream media has become a lapdog instead of a watchdog. They become uncritical and unreservedly supportive of government policies on the basis of racial harmony, political stability, and economic growth (Brown, 2021).

This is not a healthy environment for investigative journalism, as free and frank political discussion and criticism of the government policies cannot be exercised within this constrained media atmosphere. Worse still, it is hard for investigative journalists to find whistleblowers or informers who are willing to disclose controversial information, because potential informers fear they would be charged under the Official Secret Act (1972). The requirement for the survival of investigative journalism in this media environment is to find a space for publication because all media are reluctant to publish controversial investigative reports out of fear that they risk their permits being revoked (Alecci, 2020).

However, when Mahathir took office for the second time in Mei 2018 after defeating Najib Razak and Barisan Nasional coalition, he pledged for a freer press in Malaysia (Tan, 2018). The supporters were promised with less government control on the press by capping the stakes owned by political parties to only 10% and the abolishing of the newly enacted Anti-Fake News Act. Freedom House has moved the rating for Malaysia from “Not Free” to “Partly Free” since 2018. They admitted that the mainstream media is now more politically neutral under the new Pakatan Harapan coalition, but condemned the slow progress towards enacting major reforms to the legal framework involving media (Freedom House, 2019).

Nevertheless, press freedom in Malaysia exists and has been changing over time. The appearance of investigative reports in the media is increasing with a few mainstream newspapers establishing their own investigative teams (Adibah & Syd Abdul Rahman, 2009). Although the laws and regulations remain almost the same, the Internet is playing an important role in expanding the press freedom in Malaysia. Other than endless information available on the net, many investigative reports have also found a suitable landing space in online publications. There are various other factors that are contributing to this changing media landscape including changes in media control and media culture. It is more apparent when Malaysia’s Prime Minister, who obviously has different principles about media freedom, keeps changing. Head (2021) said that Muhyiddin's government is proving less tolerant of critical reporting than its predecessor, Mahathir. Now that Ismail Sabri is the new Prime Minister, the media control and media culture is really unpredictable given the more heated and less predictable political climate.

Cultural and Historical Values Influence

Scholars in cultural studies have claimed that cultural and ideological factors largely shape news reporting. For example, a study by Stuart Hall in 1978 found that media texts are not neutral. They are shaped by the belief systems and worldviews of media makers and journalists and are therefore 'ideologically' coded (Chambers, 2000). In addition, journalism scholars are on the same wavelength that socio-economic factors have indispensable influence in the form and purpose of journalism in a country; thus, they would be different in developed and developing countries (Wu, 2018). In the practice of Western investigative journalism, journalists are watchdogs who monitor the government for accountability, but in developing countries like Malaysia, journalists are state apparatus who support the country's development plans and national interest. According to Zaharom and Gayathry (2020), journalists were submitting to government demands to help stimulate people to change their attitudes and traditions, which were perceived to hinder socio-economic progress.

In his research on award-winning journalistic work in Asia, particularly in India and the Philippines, Loo (2013) found that personal, cultural, and professional values and goals overlap with Western values for investigative journalism, but diverge in the contexts, forms, contents, and purpose of journalism. Asian journalists focus their reporting to "write for the oppressed and confront the oppressor, empathy for the people, clear understanding of the consequences of the stories on the people, focus on transforming community and high ethical sense of right and wrong" (p. 17). These values can be found embedded in the outer levels of Shoemaker and Reese hierarchy of influences model (1996) where media routines, organisation, extra-media, and ideology are the factors that influence these values.

In Malaysia, the Malaysian cultural tradition and the practical needs of the geopolitical realities were seen as a dominant influence. Issues related to race, religion and rulers were considered as taboo because of the multiracial and religious makeup of the population. Under Sedition Act (1948), open discussions on the topics were prohibited to avoid promoting hostility between different races, avoiding hatred or contempt or excite disaffection against any ruler or government. Other than that, the act also prohibited the questioning of any privileges related to Malay as the official language, the special position of the Malays and indigenous people of Sabah and Sarawak (Fui, 2020). This research extends the exploration to see its significance in the practice of investigative journalism.

Loo (2013) anticipated that investigative style reporting is not practical in Malaysia and Asia, in general, given their tradition of compliant journalism, history of state authoritarianism, media systems, coercive media laws, and death threats received by journalists. He also mentioned a few contradicting cultural values that oppose the practice of investigative journalism including preference for consensus rather than confrontation, 'face' value, deference to authority, respect for elderly, and collectivism. This argument has its basis as the media in Malaysia embraces Asian values which incorporate moral values, social norms, and cultural attitudes derived from Asian philosophical traditions and historical experiences.

All in all, this study contributes to the body of literature on investigative journalism from Eastern perspective, which might be different from Western due to the differences in media systems, government systems and culture. As Malaysia is becoming a model for Asian Muslim developing countries, most likely, this study contributes to an alternative and new understanding about practising investigative journalism while considering Asian and Muslim values and cultures. It will also serve as a blueprint for future research on investigative journalism in Malaysia and other Asian countries.

METHODOLOGY

Although qualitative research does not rely specifically on theories for research variables, it is important to ground the research with an appropriate theoretical framework. In analysing the values influencing the practice of investigative journalism in Malaysia, this research used the Shoemaker and Reese's hierarchy of influences model (1996) to guide the exploration process. In this model, they proposed five levels of influences on media content which are individual, media routines, organisation, extra-media, and ideological levels.

They posited that the individual level has the smallest influence on the media content. In addition, individual personal and professional background and experiences; personal attitudes, values, and beliefs; professional roles and ethics; and power within the organisation have big influence on individuals, but individual level has the smallest influence in creating the content. They explained that the impact of individual level on the content is mitigated by other levels of influences, which are media routines, organisation, extra-media, and ideology levels. Based on this hierarchy, although the individual level has a small role, it is interconnected to every other level, making it a significant and large area to look further.

Most research on values influencing journalism focused on specific values like religious values, cultural values, press freedom and censorship, and role perceptions. Researchers rarely approach the topic as a whole where a few influencing values explained in the hierarchy are taken into consideration. Above all, a limited number of researchers have explored this topic from the perspective of investigative journalism. Most researchers generalised their focus on journalism as a whole. As an attempt to understand the practice of investigative journalism in multi-cultural and multi-religious Malaysia, this research will explore the influence of multiple values influencing investigative journalism practices in Malaysia.

This study used face-to-face in-depth interviews. It is an indispensable way to probe phenomena such as journalistic attitudes and perceptions. One cannot understand human actions without understanding the meaning that participants attribute to those actions – their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, and assumptive words. The researcher, therefore, needs to understand the deeper perspectives captured through face-to-face interaction (Berger, 2020). In this study, a series of in-depth interviews were conducted with 16 Malaysian media practitioners from different backgrounds, roles, and experience in investigative journalism. Qualitative approach usually focuses in-depth on a relatively small purposefully selected sample. According to Tutelman and Webster (2020), small sample size will provide rich and deep exploration rather than broad surveys of phenomena. Since this research aim is to explore newspapers practitioners' perceptions on investigative journalism, informants were purposefully selected by establishing a few characteristics to ensure the accuracy of the information gathered. Compulsory characteristics include that the respondent must be either current or former editors/journalists from mainstream or alternative newspapers, either printed or online version. They must have experience in practising investigative journalism.

At first, it was hard to identify suitable informants because most reporters do not practise investigative journalism on a daily basis, thus, did not claim themselves as investigative reporters. Therefore, the researcher decided to use a snowball sampling technique to reach members of this hidden population. According to Parker, Scott and Geddes (2019), snowball sampling begins with a convenience sample of initial subjects that serve as 'seeds'. These 'seeds' will recruit other subjects and expand the sample size. Fortunately, a search on the net brought the researcher to a website written by a non-mainstream English newspaper reporter that used "investigative reporter" as his by line. He was used as the 'seed'

to start the snowball rolling. He was contacted and willing to be interviewed.

The snowball started after that first interview where informants were asked to introduce other investigative reporters. The researcher stopped at 16 informants when the data had reached its saturation point as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2019). They operationalise a more general notion of data saturation concept as the point in data collection and analysis when new information produces little or no change to the codebook. When informants independently express the same idea, the data is saturated. In this research, after eight interviews, informants were seen repeating the same idea but there was still one or two new pieces of information. However, according to Mason (2010), most common sample sizes for in-depth interviews were 20 to 30 informants (Mason, 2010) and 15 is the smallest acceptable sample (Bertaux, 1981). Therefore, the researcher continued rolling the snowball and when 16 interviews had been done, the researcher was satisfied that there were no new ideas expressed by informants and that data saturation point had been met.

This study used semi-structured, open-ended protocols to probe informants. This format enabled the researcher to elicit as much information as possible from informants (Patton, 2002). Questions were formulated based on literature review and theoretical framework. Depending on the situation, additional questions were asked during the interviews to probe deeper. This protocol allows the informants to express their opinion freely. The interviews were conducted at a place convenient to the informants. Due to their busy working nature, most of them prefer to have the interview in their office. However, there are a few interviews held at the comfort of an informant's house and restaurants. The duration of the interviews is between 60 to 90 minutes. As the informants come from different backgrounds, the interviews were conducted in the language of their choice, either in English or Bahasa Melayu. Notes were taken by the researcher who personally interviewed all 16 informants, and at the same time, the interviews were recorded with informants' permission to ensure the accuracy of transcription and no important information will be left out. The interviews were transcribed and analysed using qualitative analysis software, Nvivo. Nodes were established using thematic analysis.

In terms of data reliability and validity, this study subscribes to the naturalist paradigm prescribed by Guba and Lincoln (1982) as it offers contextual relevance and data richness which is crucial to understand Malaysian practitioners' perspective on investigative journalism. This paradigm also takes advantage of the human-as-instrument which provides more than adequate trade-off for the presumably more objective approach that characterizes rationalistic inquiry (Guba & Lincoln, 1982, p. 235). According to Guba and Lincoln (1982), reliability and validity testing in qualitative research is out of context as qualitative research is value-laden. Value systems cannot be separated, methodologically controlled or eliminated as they characterise the researcher, the informant, the paradigm chosen, the methods selected and social and conceptual contexts. In addition, according to Creswell (2012), the biases, values and judgement of the researcher were considered positive and useful to enrich the data. Thus, informants-researcher face to face interactions add up to the data richness of this study.

FINDINGS

Through interviews, informants revealed three major themes of value systems guiding their practice of investigative journalism which are religious teachings, Malaysian culture, and press freedom (Figure 1).

Religious Teachings

Malaysia is a multi-religious country, but Islam has been gazetted as the official religion. Other religions include Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity. Malaysia allows its citizens to freely practise their own faith. Malaysians are also abiding to unwritten rules of not discussing sensitive issues on other religions for the sake of harmony. Thus, religious teaching is not officially incorporated into professional practices like journalism. Analysis of interviews with informants revealed an unprecedented but significant outcome when they mentioned that religious teaching is influencing their journalism practice. Interestingly, these informants were not just from one religion. They were two Muslims and one Hindu who mentioned religious teachings during the interviews.

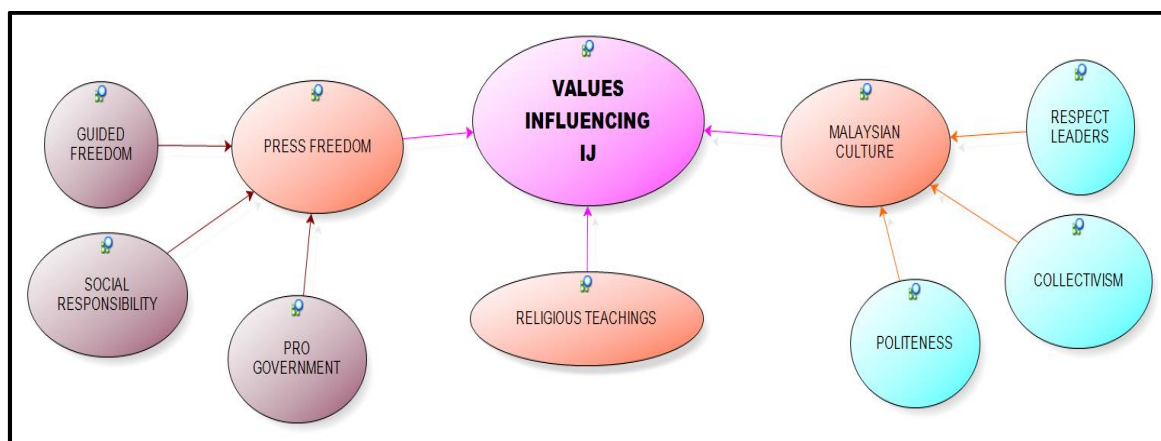


Figure 1: Values influencing the practice of investigative journalism in Malaysia

A senior investigative reporter, who is a Hindu, acknowledged that religious teaching has a great influence in Malaysian daily lives:

Almost all religions taught universal values like respect, love, peace not war, harmony and not to harm others. These values have been embedded in us since we were small. Definitely it will influence our writings.

According to him, although Malaysian reporters have openness, it comes with responsibilities. The layers of responsibilities among Malaysians go beyond cultural and political contexts. Religious teachings influence them all the way from the beginning of their writing processes – their judgement on deciding what story is of public benefit, either to investigate a tip-off or otherwise, and if it is worth putting the effort, time, and money investigating an issue. They must be responsible to their readers, nation, government, organisation, editors and even their sources.

Another informant added that Western investigative reporters, with their individualistic principle, honour their profession as their ‘religion’. They will do anything to get a story for their career success. It is different with Malaysians:

The practice of investigative journalism in the West is far different from here. As a Muslim, we will avoid investigating something that can humiliate others. In Islam, if it is true, it is considered as backbite, if not, it is libel.

From that principle alone, journalists have to be very careful in selecting issues to investigate and the way they present the story. According to another senior investigative reporter working with a mainstream newspaper, every time she is considering an issue to investigate, future public benefit will be her priority. She will drop the issue if the story humiliates somebody but with no future benefit. Thus, this is a significant finding that can separate Malaysian practice from the West.

Malaysian Culture

Malaysian culture is unique due to its multiracial demographic. Although Malays occupy about 50 per cent of the population, Malay culture is not the dominant influence in Malaysia. Malaysians share similar universal values rooted from different racial cultures. Generally, they are known with high-context cultures, they highly respect their leaders and value collectivism rather than individualism. Their common preference is consensus rather than confrontation, they also value 'face saving' and respect of their elders. Interviews with informants yielded three themes under Malaysian culture which are collectivism, respect for leaders, and politeness (Figure 2).

a. Collectivism

Collectivism is simply an antonym of individualism. Collectivists are group-oriented person and assume that each individual's behaviour affects the group (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2018). An informant confessed that he found it difficult to expose wrongdoings of his own race because it will give a bad impression to other races. Another informant added that it has become a journalism culture in Malaysia not to write sentiment issues regarding race, religion, and culture. He said that it is an unwritten law that has been implemented in journalists' daily routine. Given such circumstances, he believed that it is not a negative influence, but it actually helps unite the nation. Another informant conformed to that statement as he said that Malaysian culture is not a hindrance for him to explore issues for his reporting.

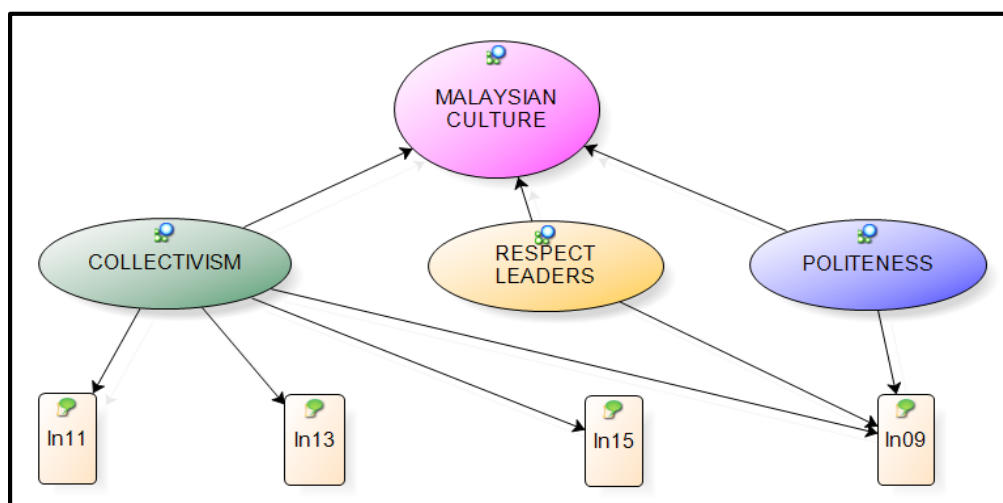


Figure 2: Values influencing the practice of investigative journalism: Malaysian culture

In addition, one of the informants stressed that by and large, Malaysians are non-violent people. They love peace and always favour political and economic stability:

To a larger extent, it influences reporters because Malaysian culture's background (is) entrenched from non-violent Eastern culture which regard family ties as a very important element. Westerners are more individualistic. They don't think about others, what others feel. But for the Orient, because of strong family ties, it instilled respect, love and harmony. It existed in them. So, when they become a reporter, these cultural values will play its part in their writing.

b. Respect leaders

Malaysians look up to their leaders. This culture of reverence for authority is also influencing the local journalism practices. A press conference in Malaysia is almost like a lecture where reporters can be seen taking down notes, instead of asking critical questions to the ministers. This is not new because compliant journalism has been practised in Malaysia since before Independence in 1957. An informant said that he has had an experience where he tried to break the unwritten rule. He ambushed a minister while he was walking to his car, but he was stopped by the minister's bodyguards and officers. Fortunately, he was lucky because the minister was willing to answer his questions. He said the press tradition in Malaysia has ruined good journalists because they are restricted in many ways from questioning their leaders. Therefore, their job is merely as stenographers, rather than journalists.

c. Polite

Moreover, Malaysian culture also inculcates politeness as a virtue. Derived from cultural appropriateness, politeness as a virtue that applies across races, religions, and ideologies. Malaysians still pay attention to being polite in communication to respect their differences, which is a vital concern for those living in this multicultural country (Romlah, 2013). Politeness is an element incorporated as national ideology in Malaysian *Rukunegara*. It is indeed a good value, but it is not good for the practice of investigative journalism because trying to be polite hinders reporters from asking critical questions. They do not challenge the authority and expose the truth to the public. According to Informant 9, these media culture has been created by the media practitioners themselves because the element of politeness has become instinctive to them.

Press Freedom

Press freedom refers to the journalists' and public's right to access information, right to report, and freedom to express dissent in the public sphere (Loo, 2013). However, the interpretation of press freedom is very subjective depending on the political system, the makeup of society, the history and ownership of the press, and the country's economic situation (Idid, 1998, 2000). Interviews with informants yielded three interpretations which are guided freedom, pro-government, and social responsibility (Figure 3).

a. Guided Freedom

As asserted by an informant, what is considered as freedom in developed countries like United States might not be considered the same in developing countries like Malaysia. Value systems in Malaysia will influence how Malaysian media practitioners conceptualise press freedom. The informants pointed out that their freedom is guided mainly through laws and ethics. There are about 42 laws governing the media in Malaysia. According to an informant:

We have our own ethics, the code of conduct in our work. We are bound by the rules too, such as the OSA, and PPPA. So, we have our limits. There are certain things that should be left alone, if it is sensitive issues regarding races and religion in Malaysia, I don't think we should investigate, unless it really involves public interest at large.

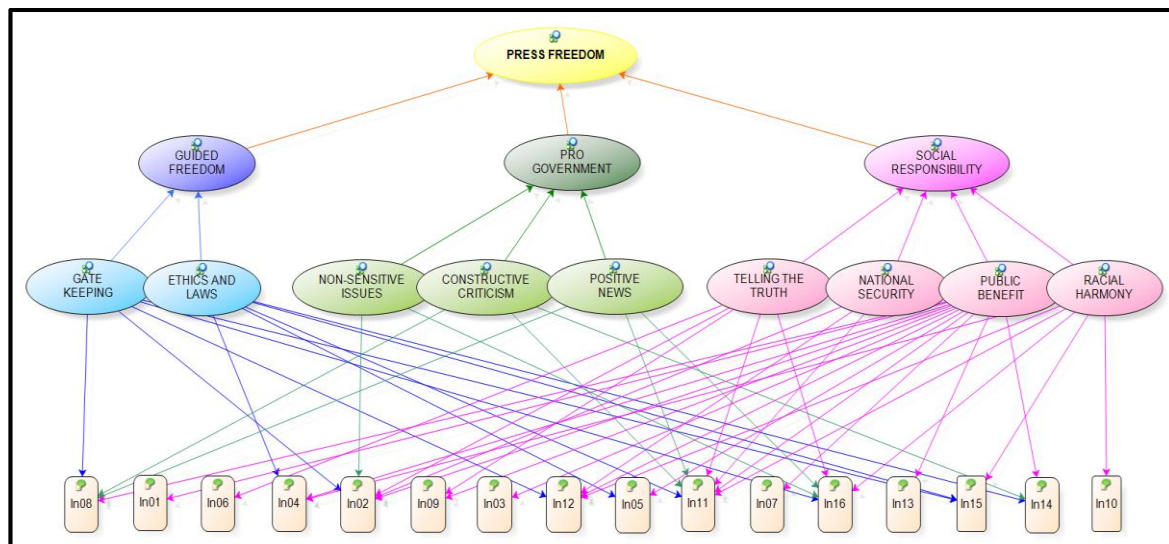


Figure 3: Values influencing the practice of investigative journalism: Press freedom

At least three informants admitted that there is no absolute freedom in Malaysia and it is a better approach for the nation:

Freedom without limit will only create chaos. It also makes the media vulnerable to manipulation by irresponsible parties for their own benefit. Take for example the media in Indonesia. They have freedom, but there are certain parties taking advantage of them, spinning the story, provoking racial outrage and instability. They are fighting for something unnecessary.

Press freedom in Malaysia is moderate, controlled and the Malaysian way. Our government is loosening up the ties. There is a reason why licensing and permits were put under jurisdiction of the Home Affairs Ministry. The media is as dangerous as weapons, which was also put under the same ministry. Previously, we had to renew the permit every year but now the government has blanketed the rule. Media will be issued a warning and if they are still ignorant, then only the government will revoke the permit.

According to another informant, "Malaysia is not a developed country, therefore our people's mentality is different. So, we buffer some information, in fear that our readers can't accept it. Slowly, our generation is more open, but sometimes they fail to assess the information correctly." She added, this is why the journalists have to be selective in their exposé. Most informants agreed to this statement as they consistently mentioned that Malaysia has openness but it comes with responsibility.

Besides ethics and laws, guided freedom in Malaysia is also exercised through gatekeeping mechanisms, mostly by editors. This process has been explained by Altschull (1984) who introduced the media ownership theory to explain how ownership will influence media content. According to Chomsky (1999, 2006), the owners already exert this control from the set-off stage by selecting top-level editors that can execute their policies. According to an informant, the decision to investigate something depends very much on the organisation policy. Even if she had decided to pursue an issue, the editors will have the final word of whether to proceed or not. She added that the same situation happens in other organisations including those owned by private sectors. Another informant added that if reporters get a big story, they still have to brief the editor before they can proceed with investigation. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) explained this through the theory of media content where they contended that the owners have the ultimate power over the content. "Although the lower-level employees exert influence over media content, the owners set the direction and the ultimate policies" (p. 262). Informant also added that there are times when editors get orders from media owners not to publish certain issues. "It is an agenda setting and it is normal."

b. Pro-Government

Apart from guided freedom, Malaysian media is also known to be pro-government. They are not watchdogs but lap dogs as they will always project positive and non-sensitive news. However, informants admitted that there are times where they will publish constructive criticism of the government, but this will be done in a very careful manner. Media is expected to help the government in spreading development policy and uniting the nation. It is called a tool for national development (Loo, 2013). Therefore, positive news is very important to maintain people's support for the government actions. There is also a term known as "political correctness" where basically news has to be of approval to current political stance. According to an informant who works with a Malaysian news agency:

Our organisation is not supposed to be pro-government, but we deliver correct and precise government policy to the people. We never engage in making speculations.

Another informant added that as a responsible reporter, he will not write stories that can tarnish the government's reputations, but he does write stories that tell the truth about what is happening on the ground for the government to take actions. Two of the informants stressed that the pressure for the media to present positive issues is very high especially near the general elections. All news will be neutralised to portray a good government image. Investigative reports that could damage the reputation will not be published.

An informant also admitted that there is not much report on abuse of power in the mainstream newspapers because it is a sensitive issue for the government who is also the owner of the media:

I don't think there are a lot of exposé on political VIPs or minister in Malaysia because it is a very sensitive issue. We don't want to weaken the government machinery. We have to admit, things like this, if we expose, the opposition will take advantage and make things worse.

Nonetheless, a few informants stressed that from time to time, they will still publish constructive criticism towards the government:

Since the 2008 general election, how do you think the government has regained the people's trust? It is because of the criticism published not only in pro-opposition newspapers, but also government-owned newspapers. We need to write such stories to remind the government about their weaknesses.

c. Social Responsibility

The press system in Malaysia is basically following the Social Responsibility press system, but informants admitted that the press freedom in Malaysia is not exactly as outlined in the system because of the demographic and cultural differences. In Malaysia, the utmost priority is to maintain national security. According to an informant:

Press freedom is when there is a conducive environment for media practitioners to perform their duty responsibly. It is not just their responsibility to the company, but also to the nation and its citizens. Therefore, national stability and security is the most important rule. We cannot write anything that will jeopardise national security.

Due to the reason mentioned above, reporters and editors are very careful in selecting issues to investigate:

Decision to investigate something depends on the organisation policy. But if it will jeopardise national security, of course I will not do it. You have to look at the importance of the issue.

It is the reporter's responsibility to choose what to write and not to cause a threat to national security. Because we are a multiracial nation, so we have to be very sensitive in selecting issues and writing our reports. We must exercise self-censorship for the sake of harmony and stability.

Racial harmony is another important responsibility for Malaysian reporters. Given the demographic divides, reporters have to restrain themselves from touching sensitive issues regarding race and religion for the sake of harmony. Informant 4 even went to the extent of saying that it is not worth the time and effort to investigate sensitive issues regarding races and religions in Malaysia because the damage is bigger than the benefit of the exposé.

Another informant concurred with the statement:

We will not tolerate it if it involves national security, racial and religious issues. We will be really careful although we get first-hand information, we will not publish if it will risk our national security. Media plays a big role in national unity so those issues should be avoided. Our nation is our priority.

An editor of a tabloid newspaper said that he does not sensor news related to VIPs and political leaders, but will definitely sensor the story if it involves sensitive issues that can tarnish racial harmony.

However, the informants also pledged that they have the responsibility to tell the truth to their readers. They still believe that the truth will always prevail. An informant who works with alternative media said he will not discount the truth just because the issue involves political leaders and VIPs. He said that he has written the truth in a few of his exposés about wrongdoings involving political leaders and VIPs, and he will keep doing it. Another informant supported his stand. According to her, reporters have to be impartial even if it involves political VIPs or ministers. She stressed, "If it is wrong, it is wrong!"

In addition, an editor of a tabloid newspaper said that they investigate and expose the truth to the public because they do not want the public to be fooled by false news spread for the benefit of certain parties.

We will investigate to find the truth for the public. We do not want the opposition to spread false news that will tarnish the government reputation. We do the same when the government has done something wrong. We have to tell the truth to the public.

Last but not least, Malaysian media holds on to the responsibility of doing everything for public benefit. They write investigative reports to create awareness on the issue and educate the public. They also trigger the authorities to take actions on the issue. According to an informant, public interest is his priority because it will impact a very large group of people and they are his readers. Another informant added that public interest means the country's interest as well, therefore it must be given priority.

Apart from that, one informant considered that as her civic contribution:

The most important thing is to provide information and create awareness. This is my contribution to society. It is like I am telling you (public) what is happening; now I'm passing it to you (public) to do something with it. Reporters have to highlight issues of public interest, issues that policy makers have to be concerned about.

Informant also stressed that his publication still exposes issues of public benefit even though it may give bad impressions on his publication:

My publication has always been associated as sensationalising stories, focusing more on sexual stories, but actually, in a way, it shows that we are concerned about the people. What we expose is the reality of our social problems, even though sometimes it is hard for people to accept. So, yes, we do care about the public.

Another informant said that investigative reports will provide the public with information they need to make informed decisions. He said that it is part of their social responsibility to the public.

DISCUSSIONS

Values as investigative journalists' internal compass exist in the form of unwritten rules in all three themes that had appeared in interview analysis. These unwritten rules were built from values embedded in them through religious teachings, Malaysian culture, and press freedom perimeters in Malaysia.

Religious teaching is an unprecedented finding. Since Malaysians are multireligious, it was not expected that religious teachings would be incorporated into professional practice. However, this research proved that religious values do influence the process from the beginning of making the go or no-go decision, and during the information searching and writing process. Western scholars rarely discuss the influence of religious teachings on investigative journalism (Pope, 2020). This could be contributed by secularism where they separate church or religion in general from other institutions. This is not the case at least in Islam where religion is incorporated in daily life. In the West, religion is considered personal business, but in the collective Malaysian community, religion is a value that belongs to the public. Therefore, the influence of religious teachings in their daily activities is quite dominant.

For example, in Islam, exposing bad things about a person, even if it is true, is prohibited. It's called backbiting. If it is not true, it's called libel. Both are considered major sins. Therefore, when an investigative reporter gets a tip-off about a person's wrongdoings, the reporter will have to judge the impact of his/her exposé. Most Malaysian reporters will drop the case if damage to the individual is more severe than the public benefit the news could provide. This is at odds with the individualistic principle of the West where they honour their profession as their 'religion', and they will proceed and do anything to get the story for their career success. Thus, this is an important finding that separated the two practices.

Furthermore, religious teachings and Malaysian culture are closely related because mainstream media is owned by ethnocentric political parties—newspapers dedicated to their respective races. It gives the impression that ethnic value is controlling media behaviour in Malaysia but religion is actually the dominant influence because in Malaysia, religious affiliation follows ethnic lines where Malays are normally Muslims, Chinese are normally Buddhists, and Indians are normally Hindus. Thus, it is understandable when religious teachings appeared as a value in investigative journalism practices in Malaysia.

Malaysian culture is unique because different ethnic groups mainly Malay, Chinese, and Indian live harmoniously and respect other races, and at the same time are adherent to their own races' identities, customs, values, and norms. Malaysians have been embedded with this cultural relativism against the West which was continued by the fifth Prime Minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi when he introduced the concept of Islam Hadhari where he expanded the Asian values campaign with a stress on Islam and Malay agenda (Abdul Mua'ti Zamri, 2019). When Najib Razak took charge in 2009, he continued to unite Malaysians with the '1Malaysia' slogan, incorporated in most of his programs and policies. These unity policies have successfully indoctrinated a sense of responsibility and self-censorship among journalists, not to tarnish the community's harmony. After more than 30 years of being induced with the values, journalists seem to absorb them into their journalism practices. The influence is apparent in topics covered by Malaysian investigative reports. They choose to report more on social issues where the blame is on organisations, not, individuals

On the other hand, investigative journalists in Malaysia do not find press freedom as a hiccup in delivering their duty as they are comfortable to work around freedom perimeters established by the government including laws and regulations, ethics, ownership and

gatekeeping. The informants believed that there is no absolute freedom, and that guided freedom is a better approach to suit the nation's needs. As a developing nation, Malaysian media is more of a lapdog rather than a watchdog for the government. Their priority is always to support government policy. Therefore, informants always project positive, non-sensitive news but occasionally, when needed, they also publish constructive criticism. Overall, Malaysian media practitioners do not value press freedom the same as Western practitioners do.

CONCLUSION

To date, there has been limited scholarly research published on values influencing investigative journalism perception and practice. Recent trends in investigative journalism research only focus on the outer levels of Shoemaker and Reese hierarchy of influence model where researchers are studying media routines, organisation, extra-media, and ideology (Cancela, Gerber, & Dubied, 2021; Carson, 2019). In contrast, this research explored the inner level related to individual values. These values can be used as major yardsticks that separate Malaysian practice from other countries, especially Western countries. However, a major limitation of this research is seen in the complexity of Malaysian culture where it might not be applicable to other countries. Future research involving different cultures should explore deeper into these variables as it could result in big differences to perceptions and practices of investigative journalism. It will also give a clearer understanding on the role of individual values or the inner level of the Shoemaker and Reese (1996) model in influencing investigative journalism practice.

This research also found that religious teaching is an influential value, but it has never been mentioned in the literature of investigative journalism practice. Thus, future research should explore how and why this value has become a major influence in the East. Given the fact that there is multi-religion in Malaysia, future research should also explore this value from various religious perspectives including Islam, Buddha, and Hindu.

This research concludes that values influencing the practice of investigative journalism in Malaysia has been institutionalised in local media culture. Although Shoemaker and Reese hierarchy of influences model (1996) posited that the individual level has the smallest influence on the media content but the impact of individual level on the content is mitigated by other levels of influences, which are media routines, organisation, extra-media, and ideology levels. Based on this hierarchy, although individual level has a small role, it is interconnected to every other level, making it a significant and large area of influence. Thus, although the three values – religious teaching, press freedom parameters and Malaysian culture influence the individual level, it is still a major force that influences investigative journalism practice in Malaysia. All three values - religious teachings, Malaysian culture and press freedom in Malaysia have been accepted by Malaysia's newspaper practitioners as part of their professional practices.

BIODATA

Adibah Ismail is a senior lecturer at the Department of Communication, School of Multimedia Technology and Communication, Universiti Utara Malaysia. Her research interest includes communication for social change, media and journalism with a special interest in investigative journalism. Email: adibahafiz2012@gmail.com

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