



New Naratif

Envisioning Media Freedom and Independence

Narratives from Southeast Asia

Media Freedom in Southeast Asia Series No. 1
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Fadhilah Fitri Primandari · Samira Hassan · Sahnaz Melasandy

**Envisioning
Media ↘
↙ Freedom and
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Narratives from Southeast Asia**

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**Envisioning Media Freedom and Independence:
Narratives from Southeast Asia**

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Research Team

Fadhilah F. Primandari, Democracy Researcher

Samira Hassan, Research Editor

Sahnaz Melasandy, Network Coordinator

Layout design by Ellena Ekarahendy

Cover illustration by Amita Sevellaraja

Illustrators

Amita Sevellaraja

Marvinne de Guzman

Nadhir Nor

Astro Ruby

Pssypl

Editors

Samira Hassan

Thum Ping Tjin

Jacob Goldberg

Charis Loke (illustrations)

Funding

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New Naratif is a movement for democracy, freedom of information and freedom of expression in Southeast Asia. We aim to make Southeast Asians proud of our region, our shared culture and our shared history. We fight for the dignity and freedom of the Southeast Asian people by building a community of people across the region to imagine and articulate a better Southeast Asia.

Media Freedom in Southeast Asia Series

The Media Freedom in Southeast Asia Series is New Naratif's collection of reports dedicated to the fight for media freedom in Southeast Asia. The series takes an approach that centres media workers at the heart of the region's media landscape. The reports housed by the series cover a range of topics, from the challenges faced by media workers in Southeast Asia, to their aspirations for a freer media space, to potential pathways for collective action.

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Stories are at the heart of our work. We began this research project to listen to independent media workers who are on the ground, facing the brunt of injustices. Through our conversations with our research participants, we understand the need to be in solidarity with media workers who are fighting for a freer Southeast Asia. We can only hope this project does their work justice.

We would like to extend our gratitude to all the research participants who have taken the time to speak with us—through different languages and time zones—despite their busy schedules. We feel honoured to have them share with us their struggles and hopes for media freedom in Southeast Asia. While we may never be able to fully capture the entire spectrum of their experiences, this research study is an initial attempt at amplifying their important stories and perspectives.

We would also like to express our gratitude to our talented illustrators Amita Sevellaraja, Marvinne de Guzman, Nadhir Nor, Astro Ruby and Pssypl, who have gracefully transformed our words into riveting visuals. Our highest appreciation goes to them for making this report come to life with their remarkable illustrations.

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To the New Naratif members who have supported us through all the years, who stood in solidarity with us when we were under attack, and who are the reason we can continue doing work like this—we owe this to you.

**Fadhilah,
Samira
and Sahnaz**

Finally, we would like to thank you for reading this report. We hope our contribution may inspire more conversations on how we can support each other in fostering democracy in our home, Southeast Asia.

FOREWORD

The main characteristic—and tragedy—of Southeast Asian studies is that it has been defined by the purposeful agendas and self-interest of global and local elites. From British, French and Dutch colonial powers before World War II, to American, British, Japanese and Australian interests after the war, to the national governments of Asean from the 1970s onwards, the defining characteristic of Southeast Asian studies is that it has always served a concatenation of elite interest—governmental, industrial, military and commercial—who have funded the field in order to push forward their agendas and promote their values.

To a certain extent, this is true of academia in general. However, the one crucial characteristic of Western academia that has bypassed Southeast Asian studies is the role of knowledge producers speaking truth to power, especially with regard to the promotion of values indigenous to Southeast Asia that are representative of the lived realities of the vast majority of Southeast Asians. Ruthless repression means that Southeast Asia—apart from perhaps the Philippines—lacks the equivalent of an academic tradition that allows academics to produce first-rate scholarship based on meticulous research and judicious reasoning, that also makes clear interventions into contentious public debates and speaks truth to power.

It was with this in mind that I founded New Naratif in September 2017. New Naratif aims to conduct such research on important issues of importance to the people of Southeast Asia, with the goal of using this research to empower Southeast Asians to take collective action to improve their societies. Our agenda is to strengthen Southeast Asian democracy by strengthening the ability of the people to take action and hold those with power accountable. To achieve this, it is vital that the information and skills that we provide are founded in the local context, sensitive to the local conditions and accessible to the people of Southeast Asia.

It is thus with no small pleasure that I introduce to you the first report in our research on media freedom in Southeast Asia. It has been a long road to get to this point where New Naratif can produce our own original research, and there is a long way more to go, but I believe this is an extremely valuable first step that will make an important contribution. This research has been carried out and conducted by Southeast Asians, on Southeast Asia, with the goal of benefiting the people of Southeast Asia. I have had the immense pleasure of working with the three very talented members of our research team, who have worked incredibly hard with much drive and initiative. All the credit for this project must go to them, and I look forward to the many further exciting works they will inevitably produce.

**Dr. Thum
Ping Tjin**
Founder &
Managing Director
New Naratif

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Envisioning Media Freedom and Independence: Narratives from Southeast Asia started in the heart of a challenging year for media freedom in Southeast Asia. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) recorded at least 76 journalists imprisoned and one killed in the region this year, and their World Press Freedom Index ranks 10 out of 11 Southeast Asian countries among the worst 100, with Brunei, Laos, Singapore and Vietnam below 150 out of 180 countries, while only one country, Timor Leste, is ranked above 100. These large-scale indices, however, only reveal to us a fragment of the challenges of media freedom in Southeast Asia, obscuring the diversity of the region as well as its rich terrain of activism by media workers and outlets. Just as Southeast Asians are not a monolith, different media workers encounter distinct problems. Independent media workers are regularly targeted in attacks by Southeast Asian governments, which prompted us to explore the challenges that they face further.

This research explores the different ways in which independent media workers understand media freedom through their unique contexts and identities. For the purpose of this research, we define independent media workers as those who do not work for state-owned or state-affiliated media. Our research participants work as journalists, artists and representatives of organisations that advocate for media freedom and support media start-ups; some are formally employed, while others are freelancers. We spoke with 44 independent media workers and asked the imperative question: “What does media freedom mean and look like to you?” Our research participants’ answers ranged far and wide, with common themes and concerns that emerged throughout the process.

INTERSECTING MEDIA WORK AND IDENTITIES

National borders on their own are insufficient to explain the distinct challenges that media workers in Southeast Asia face. Experiences vary greatly even among those living and working in, or covering, the same country. Attributes such as race, citizenship status, gender, sexuality, age, geographical location and employment status (formal employment vs. freelancing) among our research participants are inseparable from their experiences as media workers. These identities shape the relations and power dynamics between media workers and their surroundings, whether within their newsrooms or with the wider public.

BREAKING DOWN ATTACKS AGAINST INDEPENDENT MEDIA

Across Southeast Asia, media work that is critical of the state often draws scrutiny and reprisals. Depending on context and country, certain topics are more likely to draw reprisals. However, hostile governments are not the only adversaries of independent media, and it is not always possible to identify the perpetrators of attacks on journalists. Therefore, we broke down attacks based on the various forms they take: a) physical violence and police brutality; b) regulatory harassment, restrictions and lawsuits; c) anti-media propaganda; and d) digital attacks.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

There are several barriers that often impede media workers' efforts to create and publish content. For journalists in particular, the process of accessing official sources and information for news reports is an extremely difficult task. Some Southeast Asian governments do not always make official data easily accessible, which means journalists often have to resort to data published by non-government sources. Even in countries like the Philippines and Indonesia, where freedom of information is enshrined in the law, deterrent practices such as intimidation by government officials and protracted bureaucracy make it difficult to obtain public information. The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated these challenges. In Malaysia, press conferences were moved online, and only state-owned outlets were invited to participate. As a result, independent media outlets and workers were unable to pose questions to state officials and hold them accountable. Beyond government sources, independent journalists also face difficulties approaching other sources. Research participants from Thailand, Cambodia and Indonesia described sources being apprehensive about giving interviews due to safety concerns.

FINANCIAL PRECARITY

Another concern that threatens the livelihoods and existence of independent media workers in Southeast Asia is that of financial precarity. Most freelancers we spoke to described low and unstable pay in the media sector, making it difficult to make ends meet. Many also noted the pay disparity between local and international media outlets, stating that the latter would normally pay more. However, because international media outlets tend to allocate relatively few resources toward reporting in Southeast Asia, competition is stiff. Financial precarity has worsened because of the pandemic. Several news outlets across the region have laid off employees, leading many media workers to pick up freelancing or shifting to a different industry altogether. Although some governments offer grants for creative work, these are not always accessible, as applying for them entails disclosing the sensitive nature of some artists' work.

In response to these financial challenges, some media outlets are beginning to pivot toward a membership model, which is difficult to kickstart in a region where people are reluctant to pay for news. Reliance on any external stakeholders, whether they be external institutions or readers, informs the type of content that beneficiary outlets produce, prompting us to question the term “media freedom” itself: Who are we seeking freedom from?

RESISTANCE AND SOLIDARITY

In a political climate that penalises media freedom and freedom of expression so heavily, being an independent media worker can itself become an act of political resistance. Many media workers see their jobs as not only to publish stories, but to bring to light stories of injustice and hold the powerful accountable. This is a feat because many newsrooms are unwilling to publish critical stories due to potential repercussions. As a result, many organisations and informal communities have emerged to provide support and show solidarity with (and among) independent media workers. Examples include the Cambodian Journalists Alliance Association (CamboJA) and Aliansi Jurnalis Independen (AJI) in Indonesia, which are critical support systems for journalists in those countries. Other organisations like the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) and Centre for Investigative Journalism (CIJ) in Malaysia provide fellowships and capacity building workshops for journalists. However, these resources are not accessible to everyone, and they have effects on what some media workers are able to do and do not. Well-connected media workers are able to write about sensitive topics in a way their less-resourced counterparts are not, as connections also often mean access to protection. Therefore, solidarity networks for and among media workers are vital for media freedom in Southeast Asia.

RETHINKING MEDIA FREEDOM: WHAT’S NEXT?

This research project is only the beginning of uncovering the nuances within media workers’ experiences in Southeast Asia. We hope to contribute to future studies that attend to the rich diversity of the region, its people and its experiences. Future research needs to be conscious of how factors such as class, geographical location, citizenship status, employment type, race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality shape the experiences of media workers, and how certain groups are routinely silenced, marginalised and do not have as much access to participate in research projects such as this one.





"Just as Southeast Asians are not a monolith, different media workers encounter distinct problems. Independent media workers are regularly targeted in attacks by Southeast Asian governments, which prompted us to explore the challenges that they face further."

PREFACE

Attacks against media freedom, and against democracy in general, in Southeast Asia are on the rise. Attempts to understand media freedom, however, suffer from being too focused on the national level, with insufficient consideration for the various experiences of media workers within the same country, especially across different political contexts. These studies often do not ask what media freedom actually means to media practitioners in Southeast Asia. This report uses an exploratory, narrative-driven approach to understanding the challenges facing media freedom from the perspectives of independent media workers who cover this region. We aim to shed more light onto hitherto neglected issues and constraints on media freedom in Southeast Asia.

This report has three parts. In Part I, we explain our methodological approach, the positionality of this report, its limitations and ethical considerations. In Part II, we discuss our findings regarding the intersection between media work and identity, the various ways in which media freedom is attacked, how the ability of the media to access public information is deliberately limited, how the financial constraints on media workers affects their freedom, and how media freedom depends on efforts to defend and expand a free media space. In Part III, we consider what we've learned, make suggestions for action, and identify opportunities for future research.



Part I



Introduction



➤ 1. THE COMPLEXITY OF MEDIA FREEDOM

Reporters Without Borders (RSF), one of the world’s leading non-governmental organisations advocating for media and press freedom, recorded at least 76 journalists being imprisoned and one killed in Southeast Asia this year as of September (Reporters Without Borders, 2021b). RSF’s World Press Freedom Index (2021a) ranks Brunei, Laos, Singapore and Vietnam below 150 among 180 countries, while only one Southeast Asian country, Timor Leste, is ranked above 100. The sentencing of three journalists in Vietnam in June (Ives, 2021), the military coup in Myanmar and the subsequent revocation of licences of the country’s five leading independent media organisations (Robinson, 2021), as well as the recent ban on The Online Citizen and the passing of the Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Bill (FICA) in Singapore (Mahmud, 2021) further exacerbate the pessimism over the future of democratic space in the region. New Naratif has not been immune to crackdowns and intimidation either—in 2020, the Singapore Prime Minister’s Office filed a police report against New Naratif for alleged unauthorised election advertising. This was just one of several attempts by the Singaporean government to silence New Naratif (New Naratif, 2021a).

Unfortunately, this barely touches the surface of the challenges and dangers that media workers in the region face. The quantitative scoring of multiple dimensions and indicators used by media freedom indices and rankings offer us insights into the challenges media workers face. Tallies of violations carried out against media workers tell us of the imminent threats against dissent that lurk in many countries across Southeast Asia. However, they have several shortcomings.

First, they are mostly aggregated at the national level. This elides the tremendous diversity contained within each Southeast Asian country. Such aggregates are unable to differentiate between the different experiences of media workers within the same country, which are likely to differ depending on ethnicity, religion, language, location, income and employment status. These summaries may lead to a simplistic and generalising view of media freedom (or lack thereof) in the region. Each country in Southeast Asia is home to multiple ethnicities, religions and languages, as well as various socio-economic contexts, and media freedom can differ radically between these different contexts. Conversely, national aggregates often overlook the similarities between workers who live in different countries but are situated within similar contexts, such as those living on different sides of a common border, or those working in major cities.

Second, and related to the point above, the political contexts of media workers also vary widely. At the national level, the political regimes in the region are spread across a spectrum, with the most restrictive and undemocratic ones such as Laos and Vietnam on one side and those that are more liberal and democratic—though unconsolidated—such as the Philippines and Indonesia on the other (EIU, 2020). Furthermore, different provinces, states and cities may be governed differently; for instance, Indonesia’s governance of the Papua and West Papua provinces is more authoritarian than in the rest of the country (Tapsell, 2015), and Myanmar’s Rakhine State is subjected to heavy surveillance and harsher restrictions on movement than other parts of the country (Looi & Diamond, 2020). Additionally, there is often a clear difference between the experiences of those working for state-affiliated media organisations and those who are either employed by non-state-owned media organisations or freelance workers.

Third, just as it is likely that experiences among media workers vary widely across the region, it is also plausible that media workers hold different conceptions of media freedom. This is often unaccounted for by global media freedom indices, which mostly apply frameworks of media freedom and democracy that originate in Western democratic contexts (Schneider, 2020, p. 18). While freedom of the press and media is “a language journalists know by instinct” (Doronila, 2000, p. xiv), it may have different meanings to people in different places. Thus, while the term itself “travels” (Schneider, 2020, pp. 34–35), it is important to interrogate and unpack how the concept is understood by different people across various media environments. Asking this question to the media workers of Southeast Asia is, therefore, imperative.

↘ 2. IN SEARCH OF STORIES

There is limited research that centres the narratives of media workers. The contributions of surveys and large-scale comparative indices, such as Freedom House’s “Freedom of the Press”, the Media Sustainability Index by the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), and the press and media-related indicators released by Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), are invaluable. However, surveys and assessment scores refer to people and their activities (Bevir and Rhodes 2016, p. 22) and numbers do not have much meaning unless they are embedded in narratives (see Stone 2016). More narratives need to be told from the perspectives of those who live in the world that these indices and surveys seek to summarise.

Narratives have been crucial in improving our understanding of complex political environments. Previous in-depth qualitative research and their narrations of the political media environment in Southeast Asia have unearthed stories that are usually uncaptured by large-scale indices and tallies. For example, Tapsell’s study (2020) shows that macro-level and “big data” media analytics, which are increasingly employed in Western democracies to study the role of social media in politics, are inappropriate to study digital media in Southeast Asia due to the more prevalent use of private communication platforms to exchange information. In another study on media and politics in Papua, he reveals not only the dangers of reporting but also the financial constraints faced by local outlets in the region (Tapsell, 2015). Nguyen-Thu’s (2018) research on the Vietnamese media landscape shows that it would be a mistake to say that political restrictions are the main problem pervading media freedom in the country as media organisations also grapple with the pressure of commercialisation and lack of public trust. These studies show us not only the nuances that qualitative approaches can capture, but also that we cannot indiscriminately apply conceptual and theoretical assumptions founded outside Southeast Asia without considering whether those assumptions are relevant to the region and whether they are sufficient to capture its distinct conditions. These qualitative projects show that there is value in not entering the field with a rigid, top-down framework in mind.

We thus employ an exploratory approach to the question of media freedom in Southeast Asia in our effort to bring more stories of lived experiences to the study of Southeast Asian media freedom. We carried out online focus group discussions and interviews, each lasting between 40 minutes and three hours, with 44 independent media workers—journalists and illustrators, freelance and formally employed—and representatives of independent media organisations across eight Southeast Asian countries, namely, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam, from July to October 2021. We asked our research participants about their experiences in producing stories and artwork, the challenges they face in their work, and how they navigate them. At different points of our conversations, we posed the imperative question: “What does media freedom mean and look like to you?”

This study finds and thus stresses that the constraints to media freedom go beyond overt crackdowns and arrests by hostile governments. Our research participants described constraints related to their own identities and cultures, lack of access to data, lack of protection for sources and financial difficulties. Several stressed the importance of standing in solidarity with media workers in hostile political climates. These raise questions about the survival of independent media in the region. We emphasise that these problems are real; just like the overt suppression and violence against media workers, these are important dimensions that affect media freedom in the region. Though we by

no means claim that our study is fully representative, it shows that the way the constraints to media freedom have been portrayed falls short of the concerns and aspirations of many media workers in the region.

↘ 3. POSITIONALITY

No social research is value-free, nor do we believe that they should strive for such an objective. We argue that research, especially about marginalised, struggling and oppressed communities, should be empowering for participants. This study is part of a wider project that aims to foster wider networks and engagement among independent media workers in Southeast Asia. Thus, the aim of this study goes beyond unearthing the experiences of independent media workers in the region; it also seeks to develop strategies to help independent media workers in the region navigate and resist the challenges of working under conditions—whether political, social or cultural—that are hostile toward them. This aim feeds into our decision to employ participatory methods that allowed research participants to interact and exchange knowledge and stories.

Our participatory approach means that we regard the people whom we interviewed as “research participants” rather than “research subjects”. We sat down together and asked as well as sought their advice on how we may support them. Taking this position does not mean that it sets aside our ability to think critically of the issues raised during our discussions. Rather, we try to think together with our participants instead of prescribing a top-down solution, policy or programme.

We regard ourselves as part of the Southeast Asian independent media community. We often relied on our established networks to carry out this research. This means that we interviewed and discussed with some of our own friends and colleagues, with whom we had close relationships even before the conceptualisation of this research project. While the information that we convey in this report is objective in the sense that it is based on the experiences of our research participants, our own experiences in working in and navigating the challenging Southeast Asian media environment nevertheless affect the way we understand and empathise with the participants in this research. We regard this as a strength rather than a limitation, as it helped us to not only immerse ourselves in the narratives shared by our participants but also to value this project beyond the goals of providing empirical explanations.

4. RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

We acknowledge that our exploratory approach has its limitations. First, while we aim to bring forward the dimensions of media freedom in Southeast Asia that are often under-emphasised in larger-scale studies, we make no claims to be statistically representative nor exhaustive in the dimensions or issues that we discuss. Our constrained timeframe and outreach resulted in the limited number of people and countries we could include in this report. We were not able to interview media workers from Brunei, Laos or Timor Leste, and while we were able to speak to participants from the other eight Southeast Asian countries, we recognise that the limited number of individuals we interviewed as well as our inability to conduct on-site observations due to the COVID-19 pandemic, preclude us from claiming full representation of the complex realities “on the ground”. Furthermore, the online mode of interaction that we resorted to likely affected what participants were willing to reveal, particularly within the limited amount of time that participants might be comfortable with in conversing over an online video conferencing software.

Apart from logistical and time constraints, we suspect several factors contributed to our limited outreach. Some of them were posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The inability to meet potential participants in person, which forced us to rely on emails and online video conferencing platforms, served as a hindrance to establishing a rapport with people we hadn’t met before. We understand that people are generally hesitant to communicate and share details of their lives with people they are not familiar with, and the loss of direct interaction posed by the pandemic may have exacerbated this hesitancy. Security concerns may have also played a part in people’s decisions not to participate in this research, which focused on a topic that is politically sensitive, especially in certain countries. The shift to online communication channels may have also affected people’s fatigue and thus reluctance to respond and agree to have an interview.

The implication of this first limitation is that we do not claim to have carried out a comprehensive by-country comparison or analysis of the media landscape in Southeast Asia. Nor do we claim to provide an in-depth study on a few of them. Rather, we focus on *dimensions*—issues, problems—to show that our common understanding of media freedom in Southeast Asia should be expanded. Our findings will inform our future research projects on media freedom and democracy in Southeast Asia.

Second, this research specifically looks at the experiences of independent media workers, whom we define as those who either work in independent media organisations or freelance—not for state-affiliated organisations. This report thus does not cover the challenges state-affiliated media workers face

or how they deal with those challenges. However, this should not be taken to mean that state-affiliated media workers do not face challenges.

Third, as this study centres on independent media workers' lived experiences, we did not analyse the content published by our participants. In some sections of this report, we touch on issues related to content production and publication as they may relate to the challenges faced by our research participants, but we do not analyse them in depth.

Nevertheless, we hope that the narratives we include in this study contribute to the discussion on media freedom in Southeast Asia and pave the way for future efforts to gather and consolidate support for media workers in the region.

➤ 5. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Most of the research participants in this study live and work under dangerous and sometimes life-threatening situations. We have thus taken precautions to ensure that none of the information included in this report can be traced back to any individual participant without their consent. We have not published the names of any individual participants, and we have only mentioned media organisations by name with the consent of their representatives. We also stripped all quotes and paraphrased statements of any personal identifiable information, except in cases when we received consent from the participant to include it.

While some information may not be traceable back to an individual participant, surfacing it may still pose potential harm toward the groups discussed in this study. Any research that covers marginalised groups or communities has the potential to exacerbate their vulnerabilities, and making certain survival strategies visible may feed into sinister efforts to look for weaknesses in these strategies (Schaffer, 2016, pp. 94–95). In other words, information published in these kinds of research has the potential to be used by hostile governments or groups in order to familiarise themselves with the operations and work of media communities to potentially carry out harsher crackdowns. Therefore, we excluded information that we believe could bring more harm than good, such as details of one's security strategies or weaknesses. Nevertheless, we recognise that any publication regarding politically dangerous or risky work may be used by any party with evil intentions; for decades, authoritarian governments, or those with authoritarian tendencies, have been studying the operations of dissenting groups and activists to come up with more effective ways to suppress them. As researchers, we cannot control how our

publications are used by those who read them, but we try to be aware of the possible negative consequences the information we put out might have. Thus, in sections that reveal certain vulnerabilities of our participants or their communities, we make note of their possible implications. We hope that by showing how hostile governments may utilise certain information against media workers, we can strengthen ongoing solidarity efforts amongst media workers in Southeast Asia.

➤ 6. RESEARCHING MEDIA FREEDOM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

EXPLORING CHALLENGES, RESISTANCE AND ASPIRATIONS

Any effort to explain the varying dimensions of media freedom must begin with the question of, *what exactly is media freedom?* Scholars have come up with several definitions as well as aspirations about media freedom. To McQuail (2003, p. 170), media freedom means one’s right to produce, publish and distribute information and ideas without censorship or threat of penalties. The media, he says, should be independent from external influences, especially the government. To Graber (1986, p. 258), a free media should reflect diverse opinions of society, not be constrained by the government and public, and provide a forum for conflicting ideas. Rozumilowicz (2002, p. 14) argues that free and independent media “exist within a structure which is effectively demonopolised of the control of any concentrated social groups of forces and in which access is both equally and effectively guaranteed”. From these definitions, we highlight that media freedom consists of, at least, the media’s ability to produce, publish and distribute information without constraints from the government or members of the public. But what affects these abilities?

Prior studies on media freedom have found that there is more to media freedom than the absence of repressive laws and violent attacks against media workers. In *Press Freedom in Contemporary Asia*, Burrett (2020) points to the role of commercialisation, business ties and social media in both shaping and restricting the production of media content in many Southeast Asian countries. Analyses of media freedom must also consider the relations between different actors in society, as the terms “independent media” and “media independence” themselves refer to relational qualities (Bennett, 2015b). This, Bennett (2015b, p. 21) argues, “must include acknowledging the hybrid arrangements and compromises that allow independent media to continue to function as business”. The contextualisation of media freedom that acknowledges the

role of relations between actors is particularly relevant considering that we now live in a world where people are becoming increasingly interconnected through the internet.

This expanded understanding of media freedom helped us design our questions for this study's research participants. We asked them not only about the safety and financial challenges of working as an independent media worker, but also about their relations with their audiences, the wider public and other media workers in the region, as well as their strategies to navigate and resist pressures and continue working in the Southeast Asian media sector. At various points in our discussions, we also asked research participants about their conceptions of media freedom. Through our conversations, we tried to sense their frustrations, worries and expectations. In doing so, we viewed our research participants as more than "actors who produce and distribute information in Southeast Asia"; we recognise them as political actors who resist pressures and fight for a freer and more democratic space. As McCargo (2003, p. 2) says, "the media are political actors and political institutions in their own right", and thus it is only appropriate to recognise their agency in contributing to our public discourse.

SAMPLING THE "INDEPENDENT MEDIA WORKER"

Large-scale studies on media freedom in Southeast Asia often do not differentiate between media workers working for independent media and those working for state-affiliated media organisations. As there has been much coverage on government efforts to punish those who voice dissent and are perceived as a threat to their power and legitimacy, including independent media workers (see Quackenbush et al., 2018; Sandoval, 2021), asking independent media workers about their experiences in working in the Southeast Asian media space could give us valuable insights into the dimensions of media freedom that are not always discussed. For this reason, this study centres on the experiences of independent media workers in Southeast Asia.

We acknowledge that the term "independent" is ambiguous. Bennett (2015b, p. 2) argues that media independence, and thus independent media, are utopian ideals that we cannot truly attain, but should work toward nonetheless. Their definitions vary by context, including history and power dynamics between different actors. For example, an academic understanding of independent media in China departs from the conventional Western conception of independent media; rather than referring to the complete absence of state control over media content and the media's ability to defy the state, it has been argued that media freedom in the Chinese context refers to media organisations' ability to diversify its content and not strictly use its platforms to distribute state propaganda (Fung et al., 2015).

“The contextualisation of media freedom that acknowledges the role of relations between actors is particularly relevant considering that we now live in a world where people are becoming increasingly interconnected through the internet.”

For the purposes of this research, we employ a minimalist but also contextual definition of “independent” media workers. We recognise that no entity is absolutely independent; influences are always present. The question, rather, is which influences are most relevant (Karppinen & Moe, 2016, p. 112)—a question that requires us to pay attention to context. For instance, there are differences between independent media in Southeast Asia and Western democratic countries such as the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom. One of them pertains to the issue of funding; while it is relatively common for Western democratic governments to provide financial support to media organisations to help them maintain independence and diversity (Schweizer et al., 2014), such practices are uncommon in Southeast Asia, where many governments have forcibly placed critical media under their control.

Here, we define “independent media workers” as those who identify themselves as working in media and are not funded or employed by state-owned or state-affiliated media. This definition does not imply that influence cannot come from other sources or that the media workers who fall under our definition of “independent media workers” are not subject to any influence at all. Rather, our minimalist definition—in the sense that it is reduced to a single characteristic—allows room for further exploration of “media freedom” and “independence”, while at the same time drawing a line between those who are beholden to the state and those who strive to distance themselves from it. With this definition, we forgo the distinction between “independent media” and “alternative media”, defined based on newsroom size and positionality (Bennett, 2015b), which was originally devised in the context of Western democracies.

The next question is, who do we define as a media worker? Most studies on media freedom (see for example Becker et al., 2004; Nyarko & Teer-Tomaselli, 2018; Price et al., 2002) seem to regard “the media” as mainly comprising of the press, limiting the scope of actors to people whose profession is to gather and publish “news” and only those who are associated with a socially, politically or legally recognised media or press organisation. Plaut (2014, p. 841) noted that this conventional definition of the term involves an element of gatekeeping, as developments in the media landscape, where the production of information is no longer monopolised by a few, have rendered these definitions insufficient. We adopt a broad definition that is open to all kinds of workers who are involved in the media landscape, such as those who run media organisations, journalists and artists—whether formally employed or freelance. We adopted this definition in order to acknowledge the various ways through which information is conveyed in the contemporary media landscape as well as their political significance. The sentencing of cartoonist Jiang Yefei to jail by the Chinese government in 2018 (Reporters Without Borders, 2018) and Fahmi Reza by the Malaysian government earlier in the same year (BBC, 2018), along with many other artists who have been threatened or prosecuted for their art (Yeluri et al., 2021), show how these types of media work communicate information that governments and certain groups fear might weaken their legitimacy or power. With this definition, we therefore depart from the traditional perception that the media work exclusively entails gathering and publishing “news”, which is normally associated with a socially, politically or legally recognised media or press organisation.

We also define our research participants’ relations to the Southeast Asian region loosely. With technological developments in the media landscape, people are increasingly able to correspond, report and write remotely. Some of our research participants do not reside in, are not native to, or are not citizens of a Southeast Asian country; nevertheless, they do media work in or about the region. We believe that having an open definition allows more room to gauge the roles that identities, such as nationality and race, play in the region’s media landscape.

Our research participants mainly consisted of journalists and artists, both freelance and formally hired by non-state media organisations. We also spoke to organisations that do not produce news in the traditional sense, but they advocate for media freedom and provide support for media start-ups. In our discussion section, we specify whether a given participant is a reporter, journalist, artist or illustrator to better contextualise their stories. We argue that the definition that we employ to select our research participants facilitates this study’s exploratory aim. Employing a broad definition of media workers, that is not restricted to journalists, allows us insight into more issues such as the various types and formats of media output and the unique challenges that come with certain professions.

RESEARCH METHODS: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS AND INTERVIEWS

For this study, we carried out online focus group discussions and interviews from July to October 2021. Each of these sessions lasted between 40 minutes and three hours. A total of 44 independent media workers—journalists and illustrators, freelance and formally employed—participated in this study. Our participants include those who attended the sessions on behalf of themselves and those representing their media organisations, and were from eight Southeast Asian countries, namely, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. The flow of the discussion and interviews were semi-structured and covered three major themes: their experiences in producing stories and artwork, the challenges they face in their work, and how they navigate them. We also communicated with our participants during the writing-up of this report to confirm the things they have said during the interviews and invited them to comment, critique or add more information.

Through this research, we aim to expand the way we think of media freedom in Southeast Asia by exploring the experiences of independent media workers in the region. While we seek to show that solely relying on quantitative scoring to understand media freedom (or lack thereof) limits our understanding of media freedom, we do not wish to construct a grand and overarching theory of media freedom. Rather, we emphasise on narratives and show that listening to stories of how independent media workers have navigated the Southeast Asian media landscape can foster a better understanding of the complex and diverse Southeast Asian media space.





“We adopt a broad definition that is open to all kinds of workers who are involved in the media landscape ... We adopted this definition in order to acknowledge the various ways through which information is conveyed in the contemporary media landscape as well as their political significance.”

Part II



Discussion



PART II: DISCUSSION

This section discusses the challenges that independent media workers face in carrying out their work as well as how they navigate oppression and constraints within the Southeast Asian media space. We explore the many dimensions of what it means to work in independent media in the region, especially for those who are seldom discussed in quantitative studies on media freedom and freedom of expression. The challenges faced by our research participants go beyond physical violence, arrests and intimidation. A full understanding of media freedom requires the term to be conceptualised from multiple angles, such as the ability to write and create art without fear, financial sustainability, access to information as well as access to spaces in which their work can make an impact. We also discuss the importance of activism and solidarity among media workers. Embedded in these dimensions is the role of personal and group identities, which shape the experiences of our research participants as media workers.

➤ 1.

INTERSECTING MEDIA WORK AND IDENTITIES

Comparative studies, particularly indices, on media freedom are usually centred around countries; media freedom rankings, for example, assess individual countries, implying that differences or variations mostly occur at the country level. However, national borders on their own are insufficient to explain the distinct challenges that media workers face in Southeast Asia—and, most likely, in other regions as well. Experiences can vary greatly even for those living and working in the same country or producing content about the same country.

We strive to fracture the monolith of Southeast Asia in this research by paying special attention to the role of attributes such as race, citizenship status, gender, sexuality, age, geographical location as well as the employment type of our research participants. These factors and identities are inseparable from media workers' experiences, such as the kinds of news stories and media content that they produce as well as the types of challenges that they face (Steiner, 2012). Identities shape the relations and power dynamics between media workers and their surroundings, whether within their newsrooms or with the wider public. In this section, we argue that media workers' personal and professional attributes are integral to and form part of each other, and the ways that these attributes shape media workers' experiences vary depending on the socio-political contexts that they are situated in (McCall, 2005). We found the following identities and factors to play significant part in our research participants' experiences as media workers:

ON GEOGRAPHY, RACE AND CITIZENSHIP

Media workers do not only write about the countries they reside in. For example, they may write about more than one country, which may include or exclude their own country of nationality. They may also report and write remotely, whether due to the demands of their job or socio-political factors. These different conditions can bring different challenges. For example, a research participant who was reporting on Myanmar from outside the country shared with us the challenge of reporting from afar:

“ . . . and trying to develop sources from, like, thousands of miles away... with the time difference too, I have to wake up so early . . . I have to wake up really early to...to start my work or stay up really late to keep writing and be able to file something so that it's . . . it's on the editor's desk like, immediately.”

Focus group discussion, 6 July 2021

Meanwhile, a refugee journalist from Myanmar who had been temporarily living in Indonesia shared with us how his immigration status can bring risks:

*“Well, my situation is a bit different here after fleeing my country. I became an immigrant in Indonesia, and **foreign immigrants doing some political stuff and doing journalism is really difficult.** I have faced many challenges, like I had to **run from city to city, to save myself, to be anonymous** . . . I just keep changing my addresses, because, you know, it's also important . . . to keep yourself safe . . . So I have faced a lot of threats . . . from the immigration [authorities] and probably [the] government as well . . . ”*

Focus group discussion, 27 July 2021, emphasis by researcher

As such, foreign and local journalists may receive different treatment by authorities or the public, despite covering or working in the same country. What is “foreign” or “local”, however, is complex and subjective. While the terms may invite us to think of them through the conception of formal citizenship, the experiences of our research participants show that in practice, who is a “foreigner” and who is a “local” mostly depend on how their appearances are perceived by those around them. In Cambodia and Myanmar, for example, journalists who appear local tend to be more targeted by the authorities than white, foreign journalists, especially when they write critically (focus group discussion, 13 July 2021; personal interviews, 28 July and 9 September 2021). This, however, does not mean that reporting is necessarily risk-free for (and with) foreign journalists and that appearing “local” is always disadvantageous. One of our Vietnamese research participants shared that in certain cases, reporting with a foreigner may prompt more suspicion and harassment, as it would attract more attention (focus group discussion, 13 July 2021). This is particularly the case when reporting in rural and border areas (focus group discussion, 13 July 2021). Conversely, a journalist from the United States with experience covering various parts of Southeast Asia told us that his racial identity as an Indian-American has made it easier for him to immerse himself within local communities (personal interview, 28 July 2021).

Media workers in the same country can also face vastly different working conditions depending on their specific location. A research participant from the Philippines shared how journalists in rural areas usually receive much lower pay and face higher safety threats because they do not receive as much attention compared to their urban counterparts (focus group discussion, 6 July 2021). National demarcations alone, therefore, are insufficient to explain media workers’ experiences, and we require a more local lens to recognise the nuances that come with individuals’ race, citizenship as well as location. The insufficiency of national borders as explainers for our participants’ experiences also point to the need for more research on supra-national identities and their effects on media workers.

“Media workers in the same country can also face vastly different working conditions depending on their specific location.”

GENDER IDENTITIES AND GENDERED EXPERIENCES

Media workers’ experiences in navigating the media landscape are also gendered, with women often facing more difficulties in carrying out their media work. Various studies have exposed how women media workers around the world are subject to sexual harassment not only while they are reporting, but also in their own newsrooms (Ferrier, 2018; North, 2016; Walsh-Childers et al., 1996).

These problems were also raised by some of our research participants. A journalist from Malaysia recounted her experiences with sexual harassment from colleagues at a Malaysian news agency (focus group discussion, 27 July 2021). The participant, who has since transitioned into freelancing, added that working as a freelancer had afforded her more freedom as it allowed her to avoid the structures and people in her workplace that had made her—and likely other women—feel unsafe (focus group discussion, 27 July 2021). Another woman participant recalled being catcalled and subjected to sexist remarks by potential sources while she was reporting on the ground. Her woman colleague had also experienced being catcalled while reporting (15 September 2021).

It is important to recognise that women media workers have a harder time in the media industry not only by virtue of their gender identity. Structures within newsrooms are often inadequate to prevent sexual harassment and assault and to protect victims when such problems occur (see for example Ferrier, 2018). For instance, there are very few redress mechanisms to report sexual harassment and gender-based bullying in the workplace (personal interview, 15 July 2021). Larger structures, such as men-dominated media organisations and the wider patriarchal culture, which fail to recognise sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence, are likely to cultivate gender-discriminatory employment practices. Another participant from Malaysia shared an anecdote of a middle-aged woman media worker who did not get her contract renewed because of her age—she did not meet the conventional expectations of what a (woman) television host should look like (personal

interview, 15 July 2021). There is thus a need to not only recognise that media workers' experiences are gendered, but also to cultivate gender-sensitive practices and make the media landscape, especially newsrooms, a safer and friendlier space for women media workers.

DOES AGE MAKE ANY DIFFERENCE?

In addition to locations, race and gender, the complexity of power dynamics and relations within newsrooms is also affected by age and generational gaps. In certain settings, these may have crucial implications for decision-making processes, such those pertaining to what gets published and does not. For example, at “more established” and prominent outlets in Indonesia, where editorial boards are usually made up of older journalists, the production of news is sometimes gatekept by an “old guard” who are reluctant to publish investigative stories exposing corruption and abuses of power by political figures (focus group discussion, 13 July 2021). Younger journalists are usually more open to writing such stories (focus group discussion, 13 July 2021), making them a possibly significant variable in the work that independent media outlets do in holding power to account.

FORMAL EMPLOYMENT AND FREELANCING

Although types of employment are not typically regarded as personal attributes, we consider them as part of a media worker's identity, not only because many of those we spoke to identify themselves using those markers, but also because employment status can have significant impacts on media workers' lives. Another reason we wish to point to this explicitly is because the issue of employment status is seldom brought up in discussions about media freedom, despite the important ramifications that it may have.

For example, being a full-time, formally employed journalist can guarantee one's access to legal protection, usually provided by an employer. Being a freelancer, on the other hand, may make it more difficult for individual media workers to access legal protection (focus group discussion, 13 July 2021). Another way employment status can affect media workers' experiences is through career and financial certainty—or lack thereof. Some of the freelancers we spoke to pointed out that although freelancing does offer them more flexibility with time and the type of work they do, regular income is not guaranteed (focus group discussion, 8 July 2021). We explore this issue of financial precarity further in one of our subsequent sections, *Money Matters*.

In this section, we argue that understanding how media workers' personal attributes form an integral part of their experience as media workers, especially how these attributes are institutionalised—through cultural perceptions and habituation—is essential for efforts to illuminate the varying challenges that media workers face. The examples we covered above are only a few of the ways in which identities matter in the conceptualisation of media freedom. With this, we encourage further exploration of other forms of identities and how they shape professional experiences. For example, our conversation with participants from a Malaysian organisation explicated that media workers from marginalised backgrounds, such the LGBTQIA+ community and religious minority groups, face more layers of harassment from both the public and employers in their work (personal interview, 15 July 2021). Further research needs to consider these dimensions.





Illustration: Pssyppi

↘ 2. BREAKING DOWN ATTACKS AGAINST INDEPENDENT MEDIA

Across Southeast Asia, news reporting and other forms of media work that are critical of the state often draw scrutiny and reprisals (Faulder & Venzon, 2018). There are, however, certain topics that are more controversial and sensitive in different places. In Singapore, for example, news stories related to corruption by government officials and questioning the judiciary’s independence inevitably draw fierce attacks from the government (personal interview, 28 September 2021). In Malaysia, the 3Rs—race, religion, royalty—are regarded as highly sensitive issues (personal interview, 15 July 2021), while in Vietnam, media workers need to be careful when covering issues pertaining to minority groups, borders, corruption and land rights (Abuza, 2015). Participants from Thailand told us that news related to the monarchy was particularly risky. In Indonesia, unfavourable coverage of environmental destruction and the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic may invite backlash (Arditya, 2021).

In understanding how independent media workers and organisations are attacked, it is important to keep in mind that hostile governments are not the only adversaries of independent media. Furthermore, while at certain times it may be easy to identify the perpetrators of such attacks, at other times it may not be clear. Therefore, instead of categorising attacks solely on the basis

of their perpetrators, we structure this section based on the varying ways in which attacks against the media can take form.

PHYSICAL VIOLENCE AND POLICE BRUTALITY

For most of our research participants, covering stories that criticise governments, prominent politicians and the military come with critical safety threats. For instance, the assassinations of media workers in the Philippines (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2021) has created a climate of fear for those working in media. As most of these assassinations have been carried out in rural areas, some of our Manila-based participants said that they are less concerned about their safety but fear more for those who have to travel and work in remote areas (focus group discussion, 6 July 2021). Another way in which media workers in the Philippines are targeted is through red-tagging, the act of labelling individuals or critical organisations as terrorists or linking them to the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), the National Democratic Front (NDF) and/or the New People’s Army (NPA). When media workers are red-tagged, their pictures are published and circulated with bounties being offered for their deaths—essentially a “license to kill those who are red-tagged” (personal interview, 16 September 2021).

In Indonesia, some reporters who covered the protest against the revision draft to the criminal code, the revision to the Law on the Corruption Eradication Commission and Omnibus Bill in 2020 were threatened, beaten, detained and/or had their reporting equipment damaged by police (Amali, 2020; CNN Indonesia, 2019; Septianto, 2019). Similarly, Prachatai, an independent outlet in Thailand, told us that one of their reporters was arrested during their coverage of the 16 October 2020 student-led anti-government protest (personal interview, 29 July 2021). The protest formed part of the longer series of protests against Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha’s government, during which the Thai police indiscriminately used tear gas, rubber bullets and water cannons, even against reporters with press IDs and badges (personal interview, 29 July 2021). Coverage of the protests by Voice of America also noted that some journalists who were present felt that the police were targeting them and preventing them from reporting (Walker, 2021). These events show that being identified as press on duty does not guarantee protection and that in some instances make them targets of attacks.

REGULATORY HARASSMENT, RESTRICTIONS AND LAWSUITS

Legal and regulatory instruments can be used by both governments and members of the public to restrict and punish media workers. Research participants from the Philippines observed the open antagonism toward the media since the 2016 election of the current Duterte administration. This

antagonism has resulted in the shutdown of major broadcaster ABS-CBN and the arrest of journalist Maria Ressa. The Singaporean government's efforts to drown The Online Citizen, an independent media based in the country, in red tape, lawsuits and criminal charges since 2011, and the outlet's subsequent shutdown in September 2021 following the suspension of its website license, are further examples of regulations being used to clamp down on critical reporting (New Naratif, 2021b; Reporters Without Borders, 2021c). In Myanmar, after the February 2021 coup, the Ministry of Information revoked the licenses of Myanmar Now, 7 Day News, Mizzima Media, Democratic Voice of Burma and Khit Thit Media on 8 March (Thornton, 2021).

In some countries, laws also allow non-government entities to sue media workers and organisations. Malaysiakini, a Malaysia-based independent media organisation covering political and current affairs, lost a defamation case against Raub Australian Gold Mining (RAGM), a gold mining company, in early July 2021 (Rashid, 2021). The Malaysian outlet is facing four lawsuits as of mid-July 2021 (personal interview, 16 July 2021). In Indonesia, the Law No. 19/2016 on Electronic Information and Transactions (UU ITE), is often used to criminalise critical views on the basis of defamation and libel. Although the law formally does not apply to the press, which is governed and protected by the Press Law, in practise members of the press have been victims of UU ITE's vague and catch-all provisions, with one of the most recent examples being the charge against journalist Bahrul Walidin from the media outlet Metro Aceh (CNN Indonesia, 2021).

“Legal and regulatory instruments can be used by both governments and members of the public to restrict and punish media workers.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has been used by some Southeast Asian governments to further restrict the media. For example, when the first COVID-19 outbreak hit Thailand, the Thai government issued an Emergency Decree, which included a provision that criminalises publishing information that causes fear in society (personal interview, 29 July 2021; Reporters Without Borders, 2020). This has constricted the already shrinking space for media and expression under the lèse-majesté law and the Computer-Related Crime Act, which have been criticised for limiting people's freedom of expression online through its

“The COVID-19 pandemic has been used by some Southeast Asian governments to further restrict the media.”

provisions that allow “competent officials” to censor information and reinforce the penalisation of criticisms against the monarchy (Charoen, 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2016; Reuters, 2020). Similarly, in the Philippines, the Duterte administration enacted the “Bayanihan to Heal as One Act” in March 2020, which enabled the government to penalise anyone for publishing information that is perceived as “false”, deemed to provide no “beneficial effect on the population” or “promote chaos, panic, anarchy, fear, or confusion” until the law’s expiration in June 2020 (Barreiro Jr., 2020; Freedom for Media, Freedom for All Network, 2020).

ANTI-MEDIA PROPAGANDA

Labelling critical stories as “fake news”, either through the aforementioned laws or mere rhetoric, is a strategy that hostile governments have long used to undermine criticism (see for example Goebbels’s use of such campaigns in Longerich, 2015; for an account of the ongoing campaign, see Neo, 2020, p. 4). Some of our participants told us that this strategy is particularly concerning because it erodes the public’s trust in the media. A participant from the Philippines said that, on various occasions, the Duterte administration has tried to delegitimise the media by accusing them of being unable to convey an objective truth (personal interview, 19 August 2021). The government has even remarked that social media influencers were more legitimate sources of information than media outlets (personal interview, 19 August 2021). These statements are likely to weaken the public’s trust in the media, particularly as the Duterte administration has received high approval ratings from the public (Ranada, 2021). A journalist reporting on Myanmar stressed that, when successful, labelling the media as “fake news” could be incredibly dangerous; pointing to the case of Rohingya, he said, “in the ten steps of genocide, the last step is denial” (focus group discussion, 6 July 2021).

DIGITAL ATTACKS

Digitalisation has opened up a new frontier for attacks against media workers. With the internet enabling the public to directly engage with the writers and

publishers of the information they consume, it also allows them to harass and attack media workers. The anonymity offered by social media platforms has given rise to faceless accounts or bots—known as trolls in the Philippines, buzzers in Indonesia, the PAP’s Internet Brigade (IBs) in Singapore and cyber-troopers in Malaysia (Sinpeng & Tapsell, 2020, p. 9). These anonymous accounts skew online discourse through reactionary and negative comments. In Indonesia, the government and other political actors have allegedly paid and taken advantage of buzzers to disseminate pro-government narratives and policy information (see for example CNN Indonesia, 2020; Syahputra et al., 2021). This shows that the line between state actors and social groups has become increasingly blurry.

A journalist who often covers issues regarding West Papua has had her name and photographs circulated by an anonymous account on Twitter (focus group discussion, 13 July 2021). Another Indonesian journalist who was also an activist working on issues of media freedom told us that she has received death threats (personal interview, 15 July 2021). In August 2020, the websites of Indonesian outlets Tempo and Tirto were hacked after they respectively published pieces about the use of social influencers to promote the Omnibus Bill and the alleged involvement of the military and intelligence establishment in the production of COVID-19 medication (Aji, 2020; Nurita, 2020). In June 2018, Luat Khoa, which covers political affairs in Vietnam, experienced distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks against their server, which led to the suspension of the website for 10 days (personal interview, 13 July 2021). Due to the anonymity afforded by the internet, it is often unclear who are behind the attacks in such cases.

Another form of digital attack against media workers comes in the form of hacking and taking over one’s personal or work account. A research participant from Tabloid Jubi, an independent news outlet based in Indonesia’s Papua Province, told us that all except one of his personal communication accounts have been hacked (personal interview, 6 September 2021). A Singaporean participant told us that he has suspected that there have been attempts to compromise his personal Facebook account (personal interview, 28 September 2021).

Unfortunately, this harrowing portrayal is only a tip of the iceberg of the challenges that independent media workers in the region face. In the next section, we show the other—often unseen—constraints that our research participants navigate during their work.





Illustration: Nadhir Nor

➤ 3. MONEY MATTERS

Though information may ideally be claimed as a public good, the freedom to gather, produce and publish information should not be taken for granted. Working in media is work—labour—and media organisations are businesses, even for independent ones. Therefore, money plays a crucial role in the ways that independent media operate.

In this section, we explore the financial difficulties faced by both individual media workers and media organisations, how they impact media output, as well as strategies employed by media organisations to remain in business. Here, we make the case that money matters, and efforts to support independent media need to consider the financial aspects of the media industry.

UNDERAPPRECIATION AND LOW PAY

“I have been underpaid and sometimes even unpaid . . .”

Personal interview, 18 September 2021

“If you want to be a freelance journalist in Asia, it’s kind of difficult for you to survive financially because . . . you don’t get paid well, and you don’t get paid enough.”

Focus group discussion, 27 July 2021

DISCUSSION: MONEY MATTERS

Most of the freelancers we spoke to said they struggle to make a living out of freelancing due to the uncertainty of the work and its low pay. It is not uncommon for freelance journalists to work other jobs to cover their living costs. Several freelancers—both journalists and illustrators—also told us that starting freelancing had been difficult; it requires a series of trials and errors, which often includes multiple rejections (focus group discussions, 8 and 27 July 2021; personal interview, 9 September 2021). This process of experimenting with different styles and themes sometimes also entails discerning the type of audience one wishes to appeal to (personal communication, 3 November 2021). In Cambodia, the pandemic has also restricted movement for freelance journalists, making it difficult for them to access and interview communities in remote areas for their work, adversely impacting their income (focus group discussion, 13 July 2021).

A part of these financial challenges is caused by less-than-ideal receptions to the work produced by media workers. Some participants complained about a lack of appreciation for their work, particularly when pitching to local outlets. A Myanmar journalist told us,

“The other thing that is frustrating about being a freelance journalist in Asia is that the media actually doesn’t really value your work as much as you deserve . . . you don’t get paid enough for your work.”

Focus group discussion, 27 July 2021

The problem of low pay is also experienced by art creators, who do not only create artwork for editorial purposes but also commercial. From our discussion about clients’ and people’s reception to their work, we learned that art, particularly digital art, is not always seen as “real work” in their countries because it is not tangible. The underappreciation of artwork makes it difficult for artists to negotiate pay with potential clients and has even led to instances of plagiarism from members of the public (focus group discussion, 8 July 2021). An Indonesian artist shared his experience of having his works republished without any credit or acknowledgement attributed to him. This republication of his work was done by a person who had been running smear campaigns against certain public figures on social media (focus group discussion, 8 July 2021). This appropriation of his work was contradictory to what he had intended to do with it. Adding to the issue of plagiarism, a Malaysian illustrator told us that art students have plagiarised some of his works for their assignments, though this does not concern him unless they are monetised (focus group discussion, 8 July 2021).

Some of the participants have observed differences in how their work is received by international and local outlets or clients. An Indonesian freelance

“The underappreciation of artwork makes it difficult for artists to negotiate pay with potential clients and has even led to instances of plagiarism from members of the public.”

artist said international clients tend to be more appreciative of creative work and ideas—and as a result pay more—than local clients, although he noted that local clients or brands that are more established are usually also generous (focus group discussion, 8 July 2021).

Some freelance journalists also prefer to submit their work to international outlets, as they tend to offer higher pay and better guarantees for due credit. However, this does not necessarily mean the process is any easier. While local outlets tend to pay less for individual submissions, international or global news outlets tend to allocate lower budgets and space for stories from Southeast Asia (personal interview, 9 September 2021). These budgets are usually even less for countries that international outlets deem less “prominent”, such as Cambodia (personal interview, 9 September 2021). These conditions result in higher competition among freelancers pitching to international outlets.

WHAT DOES (THE LACK OF) MONEY DO TO MEDIA CONTENT?

Money and working conditions play a big role in many media workers’ decisions to produce certain content, publish stories or even work in (independent) media. Low pay has implications on what journalists can and cannot write about, as well as when they can and cannot write. Some participants voiced their frustration over not being able to write on certain topics because it might not be as profitable, or it would be difficult to pitch. A journalist from the Philippines said he has had to write about topics he did not enjoy in order to pay his bills (focus group discussion, 6 July 2021).

In Indonesia, the problem of low pay has led some journalists, including those employed by more “established” independent outlets, to accept bribes from government officials, police officers and companies in exchange for covering certain topics or framing reports to be more favourable to them (focus group discussion, 6 July 2021; personal interview, 19 August 2021). This practice,

sometimes called budaya amplop (envelope culture), was said to be very prevalent and difficult to monitor and get rid of. A research participant told us that without taking these amplop, it would be very challenging for journalists to get by (personal interview, 19 August 2021).

The unprofitability of working in independent media has also made it difficult for some outlets to find people who want to work in the sector. Several participants from Cambodia and Thailand were pessimistic about getting younger people to enter independent journalism; they observed that university students and recent graduates seem to be more interested in the communication industry instead because of better pay (focus group discussion, 13 July 2021; personal interviews, 28 July 2021 and 29 July 2021).

BUSINESS MODELS AND VIABILITY

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, several news outlets in the region have had to cut salaries or even lay off journalists. On 12 October 2020, The Jakarta Post, one of Indonesia's best-known independent newspapers, encouraged its employees to resign (Nurbaiti, 2020) and within a month, 25 journalists submitted their resignations (Mariani, 2020). Tempo, another leading independent outlet, also laid off some of their journalists in September 2020 (Hutton, 2021). In the Philippines, some community news groups closed down after cutting pay and personnel (Elemia, 2020).

These cases show that, like individual media workers, independent media outlets have also struggled to stay afloat. With no financial support from government institutions, independent media organisations need to look for other sources of funding to stay in business and maintain their editorial independence.

Grants have been one of the main sources of funding for the independent outlets we spoke to. VOD, based in Cambodia, told us that being funded by foreign donors has helped them maintain independent reporting. A media organisation from the Philippines corroborated this, saying that although some donor agencies had requested to see their pre-prints, our research participant had been strict about their terms of editorial independence (personal interview, 19 August 2021).

With so many independent media outlets requiring funding and the limited number of grants, there is bound to be competition. Competition has only grown steeper since the COVID-19 pandemic started, as less funding was being offered, and the number of independent media workers and organisations in need of money increased (personal interview, 28 September 2021). Accessibility of funding applications also mattered; in Malaysia and Singapore, some grants were offered to artists, but those covering contentious issues were reluctant

to apply, as they would be required to disclose the sensitive nature of their work (focus group discussion, 8 July 2021).

Sometimes, even funding from donors is not enough for media outlets to continue operating. Prachatai complemented their funding from international donors with merchandise sales such as books, T-shirts and umbrellas (personal interview, 29 July 2021). Other research participants have questioned the sustainability of relying on donors for funding and said they are looking for ways to be more self-sufficient, such as through advertising and subscription models.

Advertising models are not always easy to set up and make profitable. An independent news outlet in Papua said advertising does not bring them much money because advertisers tend to prefer spaces in Jakarta and West Java, where most businesses are centred. Companies do not usually see advertising in a remote area such as Papua as potentially lucrative (personal interview, 6 September 2021). In Cambodia, advertisers and businesses are reluctant to work with independent media outlets because it may get them into trouble with the authorities (personal interviews, 28 July and 15 September 2021).

Some outlets are now looking to pivot toward subscription and membership models—sometimes also complemented by donations and crowdfunding—but the process of creating and implementing them has been slow and challenging. One reason why these models are difficult to kickstart and maintain is people’s reluctance to pay for content, particularly when it is hosted online; the public seems to assume that everything online should be free (personal interview, 19 July 2021; personal interview, 28 September 2021). An Indonesian research participant who has been active in Southeast Asian media and activism since the mid-1990s noted that the internet has, indirectly, exerted financial pressure on media businesses (personal interview, 19 August 2021). As the internet allows virtually anybody to generate and circulate news, and as information is becoming more accessible, people have less incentive to buy news and content through subscriptions. When people’s disposable income took a hit during the pandemic, their ability to pay for news and content became more limited (personal interview, 28 September 2021).

This does not necessarily mean that these models are doomed to fail. Project Multatuli in Indonesia was optimistic about setting up its membership model, despite its difficulties; their audience research revealed that readers are beginning to realise the importance of supporting independent and critical media (personal interview, 19 July 2021). Luat Khoa, which focuses on Vietnam, said revenue from their readers made up around one fifth of their 2020 budget, which they considered a large amount of money (personal interview, 13 July 2021). The success of these models rely on outlets’ ability to make their work and mission resonate with their target audience, especially as some of these media outlets also see themselves as socio-political movements advocating

for critical thinking and democratic progress. However, despite the growing success and optimism around membership models, it should be noted that the existing ones form only a niche fraction of the wider public. Expanding the pool of people who are supporting independent media is then necessary to establish a free media that is in service to the wider public.

Splice Media, which supports and reports on media start-ups, told us that one of the big challenges for emerging independent media organisations today is balancing between fighting for a cause with running a business (personal interview, 14 July 2021). The business side of media work requires testing funding models, forecasting their viability and discerning what target audiences want to see and consume. This prompts us to ask: to what extent is a media worker or organisation independent if they constantly need to tailor their content to appease funders and audiences? As one of the journalists we interviewed said, "We need to improve our product, but improve it to whose taste?" (personal interview, 7 October 2021).

Money, therefore, has concrete impacts on media workers and the work they produce, perhaps even more so for independent workers. Directly or indirectly, factors such as pay and sources of funding may influence what kinds of content one can and cannot produce. It is therefore important for media workers to be paid fairly. As a research participant told us,

*“The more journalists get paid,
the better their work will be.”*

Focus group discussion, 6 July 2021

Elucidating the critical role of money for independent media’s survivability, however, has its risks. It exposes a point of vulnerability that can be exploited by hostile governments or other groups to further curb independent media and critical voices. For example, governments and other

hostile entities can weaponise litigation and fines to make it financially unsustainable for critical and independent media to operate. Thus, in recognising that money (and its lack thereof) matters, we point to the need for strategies and resources that not only support independent media workers legally and physically, but also financially.

Overall, a more expansive understanding of financial issues in the media industry is needed. When scholars speak of financial independence, they often emphasise company ownership and ties to business and/or political elites (for example Barnett & Townend, 2015; Bennett, 2015a; Nyarko & Teer-Tomaselli, 2018), with less attention paid to the precarious financial situation of individual media workers, both formally employed and freelance, even at well-funded media organisations. The conversations we had with our research participants showed that such a conception of financial independence is insufficient. As more freelancers enter the media sector and shape public discourse, they too deserve more scholarly attention as well as support.





Illustration: Pssypl

↘ 4. AVOIDING REPRESSION: THE ART OF CONTENT-MAKING AND CONCEALMENT

In the two previous sections, we fleshed out the various forms of attacks and financial constraints that our research participants face. In this section, we explore further how such challenges have impacted the ways our research participants write and draw in order to avoid reprisals. While self-censorship is often mentioned in discussions and written works about media freedom in Southeast Asia (Han, 2018; Kingston, 2020), not many have looked into the different ways self-censorship takes form. Our conversations with our participants revealed that there are shades and layers to ways media workers tailor and adjust their media content to remain safe. These range from completely avoiding certain topics, to making stories less susceptible to accusations of libel and lawsuits, to altering the tone or framing of the issues being covered. There are also various reasons behind the different methods that media workers employ.

A participant who had previously written on the issue of race in Singapore told us she had stopped writing publicly because she had been placed on the government’s “grey list” as a result of her work, preventing her from being hired by certain companies and government agencies for over a year (focus

group discussion, 27 July 2021). The artists we spoke to had also mentioned cultural taboos and barriers that prevent them from fully exploring their creativity and interests. A Malaysian illustrator and painter expressed his interest in exploring cultural and religious elements through his artworks but had refrained from doing so out of fear of having his work being labelled as blasphemous (focus group discussion, 8 July 2021). The artist, who identified himself as queer, wished he could incorporate Malay-Muslim visual elements, such as Jawi scripts, in his works, but feared that more conservative members of the public would not like seeing “someone queer to work on those [religious elements]” (focus group discussion, 8 July 2021).

“Our conversations with our participants revealed that there are shades and layers to ways media workers tailor and adjust their media content to remain safe.”

Others told us that instead of avoiding particular themes, they spend more time editing, fact-checking and carefully framing stories to avoid being targeted by government authorities. Prachatai told us one way of doing this was to paraphrase or cut potentially incriminating parts of interviews that may be used against the outlet (personal interview, 29 July 2021). Participants from Malaysiakini and The Online Citizen said their teams work hard to make their stories “bulletproof”, or more difficult for people to contest or file charges against them (personal interviews, 16 July; 3 & 18 August 2021). In a similar vein, another Singaporean participant told us that the government’s targeting of independent media has made him more cautious with his writing, prompting him to invest more time in preparing his publications and supplementing his work with more information and evidence (personal interview, 28 September 2021). Other tactics that VOD shared were to make sure information they publish is attributed to sources and use more conservative headlines for their stories (personal interview, 28 July 2021).

The conversations we had with our research participants also revealed that there is an art in the ways they choose the framings and wordings for their stories. For example, an illustrator from Thailand shared that his strategy for depicting the monarchy or government in his works is to use characters or symbols to represent the Thai law system instead of drawing a specific

person (focus group discussion, 8 July 2021). In a country where critics of the monarchy can face up to 15 years of imprisonment (Reuters, 2020), avoiding explicit and personalised narratives and criticism can make the difference between criminalisation and remaining out of jail. An Indonesian illustrator told us he sometimes avoids being explicit in his comic narratives, leaving the “meaning-making” to his readers:

“... you have to work with semantics and take symbols and also ask your followers to think, to interpret what you want to deliver.”

Focus group discussion, 8 July 2021

We found that publication languages matter too—and are strategically used by some media workers to avoid public and government reprisals. Some of the journalists we spoke to said that writing in English gave them a stronger sense of safety because their governments do not pay as much attention to articles written in English. Similar comments were made by the media outlets we interviewed. A participant who reports for the Prachatai English edition said:

“We tend to think that we can write more directly in English because we believe that English publications are not watched as much as Thai language publications.”

Personal interview, 29 July 2021

This was confirmed by the outlet’s readership data, which shows that readers were mostly academics, students and foreigners living in Thailand (personal interview, 29 July 2021). In the same vein, a freelance journalist from Vietnam told us that one of the reasons she preferred to write in English was that,

“... the news censors don’t monitor English language publications as much as they do for Vietnamese; unless it’s like a really big story by a very big outlet that caused a lot of fuss, they don’t really pay attention. So it gives me more freedom to write politically.”

Focus group discussion, 13 July 2021

Another journalist from Cambodia said writing stories in English could draw less scrutiny from the government and public compared to writing in Khmer (focus group discussion, 13 July 2021).

A participant from Tabloid Jubi, which publishes in both Indonesian and English, confirmed that a national or local language is more likely to attract reactionary responses because they circulate faster on social media platforms, such as Facebook (personal interview, 6 September 2021). Pointing to a similar problem, an Indonesian illustrator told us she was reluctant to have her artwork reach a wider Indonesian audience because she was wary of the cancel and doxing culture prevalent in Indonesian social media (focus group

discussion, 8 July 2021). A Malay artist who creates queer-themed illustrations echoed that publishing in English gives him a stronger sense of safety. However, he lamented that publishing in English may have also prevented him from reaching other queer Malays by making his art more relatable to them (focus group discussion, 8 July 2021).

Publishing in English, however, does not completely preclude reprisals. One Vietnamese participant told us that writing for international media—which usually publish in English—may implicate her as somebody who is trying to portray her country in a bad light, which the Vietnamese government is especially sensitive about (focus group discussion, 13 July 2021). The participant, who had previously worked in state-owned media prior to freelancing, said that sometimes writing in a state-owned Vietnamese newsroom can confer a stronger sense of safety, as articles are more rigorously filtered, checked and approved prior to publication (focus group discussion, 13 July 2021).

“Self-censorship comes in various forms, and that it would be a mistake to interpret self-censorship as a complete lack of agency.”

This section thus shows that self-censorship comes in various forms, and that it would be a mistake to interpret self-censorship as a complete lack of agency. Many coverage on media freedom tend to narrowly portray media workers in hostile political climates as victims, without recognising the subtle ways media workers resist (see for example Freedom House, 2018; Hayton, 2021; Strangio, 2021). On the contrary, our research participants assert their agency through the strategies that they devise to maintain the messages that they wish to convey in their works while also avoiding punishment for them. For example, the strategy of using symbols and framing in artworks shows that the conventional definitions of the media that centre around “objective” journalism cannot be applied in contexts where information can be communicated in formats beyond the news format, while the act of “bulletproofing” news articles symbolises persistence in conveying critical information. Through this section, we further the argument we made earlier in this report: that when we speak of media workers as carriers of information, we should employ a broad definition as, in contexts where conveying “truth” can threaten one’s own life, masking information through symbols and images could mean the difference between having an independent voice and not having any.



Illustration: Marvinne de Guzman

↘ 5. UNDERSTANDING MEDIA FREEDOM AS FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

“The challenge at the moment is actually the access to information because, due to the pandemic . . . it also limits the reporters’ ability to actually go out and speak to people . . .”

Focus group discussion, 13 July 2021

The previous sections engage with how media freedom is hampered by violent attacks, company shutdowns, intimidation and financial constraints. These particular dimensions centre a conception of media freedom as the freedom to tell and publish stories without fear of repression, which is a minimalistic way to understand the term. In this section, we argue that media freedom does not only entail the ability to publish without repression, but also media workers’ access to information. Information is at the centre of media work—it is what media workers look for, gather, distribute and create. It is thus reasonable to argue that access to information should be treated as a crucial dimension when we conceptualise and campaign for media freedom in Southeast Asia.

Across the board, our research participants from various countries had attested to the difficulties in accessing information such as documents and

verbal statements. Even finding statistical data could be challenging. For example, in Cambodia, it can be difficult to find and access certain types of statistical data from the past five years, including those related to COVID-19 (personal interview, 9 September 2021). Some Cambodian government bodies do not make official data easily accessible, leaving journalists to rely on data researched and published by international non-governmental organisations such as United Nations agencies (personal interview, 9 September 2021).

Obtaining information or comments directly from public officials can also be a difficult task. Some countries, such as Cambodia, Myanmar and Singapore, do not have laws that guarantee the public's access to data. By not having the right to information enshrined in law, media workers' chances of speaking to officials depend on government bodies' or spokespersons' willingness to entertain comment requests. When government officials are willing, it can be quite easy to speak to public officials (personal interview, 9 September 2021); other times, the process can be a gruelling and protracted one. A freelance journalist from Cambodia recounted that a ministry spokesperson had refused to speak to her on the grounds that she was a freelancer, accusing her (and freelance journalists in general) of only being interested in selling information to foreign agents without caring about whether such information could jeopardise the country's peace and stability (focus group discussion, 13 July 2021). In Singapore, officials often ignored requests for comment from journalists who are known to be critical of the government (personal interview, 28 September 2021). The Singaporean participant we spoke to on the matter also told us that in the past, there have been instances where public information was withdrawn or amended when it was used to critique the government (personal interview, 28 September 2021). One such incident was cited during a debate over the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Bill (see Section 19 in Ong, 2019). The absence of laws guaranteeing access to information also means it could be difficult to hold public officials accountable for refusing to disclose information of public importance. Additionally, without the ability to independently verify obtained information, there is little to no way to ascertain whether it has been amended or manipulated.

However, even in countries like Indonesia, where there are laws that formally state that the press and public have rights to access government records (see Indonesia's Law No. 40/1999 on the Press and Law No. 14/2008 on the Transparency of Public Information), gaining access to offline documents or government officials is not always easy due to time-consuming bureaucracy (personal interview, 28 July 2021). An Indonesian freelance journalist told us that, when trying to interview a police officer in Pematangsiantar, a city in North Sumatra, he had to justify covering that story and provide information about the outlet he was writing for before being able to interview them (focus group discussion, 6 July 2021). Another journalist working on environmental stories in Indonesia's Papua Province recalled coming to a government office

“Information is at the centre of media work—it is what media workers look for, gather, distribute and create.”

several days in a row before being able to get an interview with an official (personal interview, 15 September 2021). Sometimes, even press-identifying attributes, such as badges or cards, do not guarantee the freedom to observe and document events (see Solopos, 2018).

Similarly, although Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte has signed Executive Order No. 02, also known as the Freedom of Information (FOI) Program, which formally guarantees full public disclosure of government records and documents within the government’s executive branch (President of the Philippines, 2016), accessing wealth records, especially those of the president, has become more difficult during his presidency. The Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ), known for their work on corruption, said the Duterte administration has declined requests for wealth-related documents since the publication of their report on President Duterte’s wealth in 2019 (personal interview, 19 August 2021).

When the pandemic hit the region, some governments took advantage of it to further limit access to information. In the Philippines, it became an easy excuse to put information requests on hold (personal interview, 19 August 2021; Barreiro Jr., 2020). As press conferences were moved online and later on pre-recorded, opportunities for journalists to respond to statements and ask questions became more limited. In Malaysia, attendance in press conferences during the pandemic have been limited to media organisations selected by the government, such as Bernama, Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM), New Straits Times and Berita Harian (personal interview, 18 August 2021; CIJ, 2020). As the pandemic got worse, these sessions were moved to Zoom, a video conferencing platform, but there were still moderators who would filter the questions asked by journalists (personal interview, 18 August 2021). Questions from independent media outlets or journalists would often be deprioritised or not answered at all. Access to parliament was also restricted; even when journalists were able to get inside, their movement and ability to approach ministers were limited (personal interview, 18 August 2021). Journalists working for independent outlets often had to resort to asking their peers from state-affiliated media organisations to ask their questions for them, though this strategy has rarely been successful.

Research participants told us it was also challenging to interview non-government sources. Sources—in some countries more than others—have refused to speak to journalists because they fear the repercussions. Two participants from VOD in Cambodia said:

“ . . . because of so many arrests of opposition party activists, activists on the environment, it has become a threat to others. Some NGO staff constrain themselves from speaking on sensitive issues. As a journalist, you rely on sources, but they refuse to speak to you.”

Personal interview, 28 July 2021

“Experts don’t talk, whatever the issue is, experts don’t talk. That’s universities, international NGOs, everyone who thinks that if they say something, they won’t be able to work with the government again.”

Personal interview, 28 July 2021

A news outlet’s name and reputation affect how potential sources respond to interview requests, though in different ways. Prachatai, a Thai independent news outlet that often covers human rights issues, told us they have had sources ask for more time to deliberate before agreeing to an interview because it was risky to appear in their reporting (personal interview, 29 July 2021). On the other hand, PCIJ, which has had a reputation for investigating the wealth of public officials in the Philippines, are often approached by sources or whistleblowers who provide tips in the form of advice, information and exclusive documents (personal interview, 19 August 2021).

Concerns over the safety of sources post-interview and publication were also brought up by some of our research participants. Tabloid Jubi, based in Papua, where the flow of information is more restricted than other provinces in Indonesia (Freedom House, 2020), said they maintain communication with their sources to ensure that they remain safe after the publication of their stories (personal interview, 6 September 2021). When they suspect that their sources might be exposed to physical harm, they evacuate them (personal interview, 6 September 2021).

In addition to being refused interviews and concerns over the safety of sources, some media workers were also constrained by limited technological infrastructure, such as low-quality internet connection. In many Southeast Asian countries, internet connection is more accessible for people living in urban areas than their rural counterparts, affecting day-to-day ability to communicate, work and learn online (Jalli, 2020). This has become more apparent since the COVID-19 outbreak, as travel restrictions have pushed media workers, particularly journalists, to rely on long-distance reporting. Most of our Philippines-based participants, for example, complained about

the poor quality of their internet connection, which had impeded one of them from conducting online interviews with sources from rural areas, where internet connections are usually less reliable or even inaccessible (personal interview, 16 September 2021). We experienced this problem ourselves: in an online interview with a research participant from Papua, bad internet connection affected the flow of our conversation, and at one point, a power outage occurred on our participant's end of the line, cutting off the discussion completely.

It is also important to note that access to information is not one-dimensional. It does not only hinge upon media workers' access to information, but also the freedom of the larger public to express their thoughts and recount their experiences. This is particularly crucial because media depends on people's ability to retell stories and experiences to media workers, who then disseminate those stories to the public. Media freedom therefore cannot exist without freedom of expression for the public, as one of our research participant argued:

*“ . . . if you really want to improve media freedom and freedom of the press, *you also need to expand what citizens are allowed to say as well*. If you don't allow citizens to say, speak, think certain things then journalists are further restricted by that because maybe journalists can go push against this public opinion a little bit, but ultimately if no one reads you it doesn't really matter anymore . . . As **public opinion expands, media freedom and freedom of speech also expands.**”*

Focus group discussion, 6 July 2021, emphasis by the researcher

Here, we have made the case that freedom of the media is not only about the absence of violence against media workers, but also media workers' access to various sources of information. The availability of these sources, however, relies on legal, social and technological structures that allow media workers to access them safely. Therefore, we call for a more holistic and thorough understanding of media freedom—one that recognises the media beyond the publication of stories and that takes into account the full range of actors and structures involved in making information public.



In this section, we analyse how the act of working in media is itself an act of resistance, especially in a region where it is exceedingly difficult to do so. Many of the journalists and illustrators we spoke to said they write and draw not just to convey information to the public, but also to expose and fight against injustices and to galvanise support around causes that they care about—both explicitly and implicitly. In this section, we argue that media workers are political actors, and the media are a political institution (McCargo, 2003, p. 2), thus highlighting the inherently political nature of media work: producing information has very much to do with power and influence.

We highlight three main ways in which our research participants use their work in media as forms of resistance. First, media work can be a form of resistance against state narratives and domination. In contexts where governments are constantly trying to impose singular narratives of “the truth”, there is an imperative to tell untold stories. For example, when marginalised communities or even the media themselves are attacked, spreading information about those attacks is a form of resistance. A participant from The Online Citizen described the media space in authoritarian regimes:

“The best way for a dictatorship, authoritarian government, is to make sure that information remains curtailed, the whole narrative is being distorted . . . ”

Personal interview, 3 August 2021

Raising awareness of attacks against media workers serves as a strategy to counter hostile governments’ attempts to control the media space; violations against media freedom are not always covered by state-affiliated media outlets. Sometimes, stories about these events need to be framed to emphasise that certain rights and freedoms are violated and that justice needs to be attained; writing “neutrally” does not always lead to awareness that something wrong and unjust has occurred (see for example Blanding, 2018; Hanson, 2019; Shaw, 2012). Therefore, in contexts where the media space is clearly not a free marketplace of ideas, media work cannot be defined solely as news stories or illustrations that are impartial, as traditional definitions of journalism often do (Plaut, 2014, pp. 841–842).

Second, media work has been regarded as resistance by some of our research participants due to the struggles they have faced in pitching their stories to publishers. Publishing articles or illustrations in spaces that are traditionally gatekept is an act of making stories relevant. Some participants told us that sometimes their editors would tone down their articles or even filter information for publication. In Indonesia, for example, not many newsrooms are willing to publish news that exposes prominent political figures due to their ties with their investors or owners (focus group discussion, 13 July 2021).

“Many of the journalists and illustrators we spoke to said they write and draw not just to convey information to the public, but also to expose and fight against injustices and to galvanise support around causes that they care about—both explicitly and implicitly.”

Some participants said they also struggled to get stories about environmental issues commissioned. A research participant from Malaysia said:

“I think it starts with editorial decisions for me, at least for environmental stories. A lot of editors in general are just not interested to publish environmental stories. So, it’s a lot of effort from my side just to convince newsrooms why we need to have certain stories as the front cover . . . but you don’t talk climate change, I mean, you don’t see that on the front covers of newspapers in Malaysia. It’s always somewhere inside, in the small box about environment.”

Focus group discussion, 27 July 2021

This phenomenon is not exclusive to local newsrooms. While writing for international outlets offers an opportunity to engage a wider audience and to platform more Southeast Asian stories, local stories tend to receive very little attention from editors in international newsrooms. This makes it difficult to publish these stories, let alone convey their complexities to an international audience. A freelance journalist spoke of the challenges he had experienced in trying to make local news global:

“In terms of . . . pitching stories, I would get frustrated very often because, especially, for a lot of my journalism, initially, was environmental . . . making the case that an environmental story in Southeast Asia matters to a global audience is really, really tough. I was pitching a story that was about Sulawesi and Mindanao, and editors

didn't think that was an important story, because . . . it's too regional. But from my perspective, those two islands have huge populations and huge amounts of forests. So it is, to me, a global story. But it's really hard to prove that it's a global story . . . or to make the case, because editors have so little knowledge about, especially, remote regions of Southeast Asia."

Personal interview, 28 July 2021 (emphasis by the researcher)

Pitching stories about Southeast Asia to international outlets often also means filtering them through reductive views of the region. A participant from Singapore brought up the issue of "country quotas" where international outlets have a limit on the number of stories they can publish for a certain country (focus group discussion, 27 July 2021), while a Malaysian participant let us in on her thoughts about sacrificing the authenticity of one's story or perspective for the wider readership offered by these outlets:

"I don't think you're staying true to yourself because you just want to write something that's nice for the Western audience to consume, so you kind of, like, form your story around their expectations and assumptions of what's happening in your country . . . I do want to make sure that in our stories, we do have a sense of self-determination. We don't need ideas from certain organisations or from the West to kind of decide the future or the trajectory for how we want to solve our own problems."

Focus group discussion, 27 July 2021

The participant, who has written about environmental and conservation issues in Malaysia and Indonesia, added that environmental issues, such as the palm oil industry, are often judged as either "good" or "bad", pushing aside other issues that do not fit squarely into the dichotomy (focus group discussion, 27 July 2021). She criticised some international outlets' expectations of blanket denunciation of palm oil production, emphasising that environmental problems are complex. Imposing a narrow lens on the industry means nuances around local people's livelihoods and their dependence on natural resources; our participant shared that unfortunately, some international outlets or funders rarely view these issues as "sexy enough" for a story (focus group discussion, 27 July 2021). It is also this very problem that makes it difficult to start conversations around environmental issues, even with potential sources—the government, non-governmental organisations and scientists—as they can also have rigid and reductive views on these complex issues that do not accommodate the lived experiences of local people (focus group discussion, 27 July 2021 and personal communication, 1 November 2021).

Third, media work from Southeast Asia can be interpreted as Southeast Asian media workers' fight to reclaim the media space where narratives about the region are told. In one of our focus group discussions, an Indonesian freelance

journalist complained about some international editors' preference for choosing foreign journalists over their local counterparts to cover news stories about Southeast Asia (focus group discussion, 13 July 2021). She also voiced frustration at foreign journalists, usually from Western countries, hiring local journalists to act as fixers and refusing to credit them, even when local fixers end up doing more than arranging interviews (focus group discussion, 13 July 2021). Our participant stressed the importance of local journalists writing and reclaiming stories about their own communities, countries and the issues that affect them (focus group discussion, 13 July 2021).

"Media work from Southeast Asia can be interpreted as Southeast Asian media workers' fight to reclaim the media space where narratives about the region are told."

These narratives tell us that working in Southeast Asian media is also a pursuit to amplify Southeast Asian voices and experiences, and that it is simplistic to portray activism through media work as mainly against hostile governments. Independent media workers in Southeast Asia engage with and resist not only hegemonic state narratives that attempt to silence critical and non-conforming views and dictate what is true and false, but also narrow depictions of Southeast Asia. Making sense of independent media work in the region requires considering media work beyond the provision of information as a public good to also regarding it as a discursive struggle and recognising media workers as symbols of resistance.





Illustration: Astro Ruby

➤ 7. ADVOCACY AND STANDING TOGETHER IN SOLIDARITY

“[The media] is only free because the media is fighting for it to be free.”

Personal interview, 19 August 2021

“In principle, we need to network because we are media . . . whose risk of being criminalised is quite high. So we need to have a strong network, many connections.”

Personal interview (translated), 6 September 2021

Due to the dangerous nature of working in independent media, banding together with fellow independent media workers is vital for media workers’ wellbeing, and sometimes for their survival. Our research participants emphasised the importance of building a community where they can share experiences with one another in order to feel more supported and secure. Beyond providing emotional support, many networks and communities also work to raise awareness when problems arise, to gather more support from other networks and the wider public, as well as to push for institutional reforms. Many independent media workers are, therefore, activists. In this section, we look at some of the networks and communities that our participants

are part of and these organisations' efforts to provide the resources our research participants need. We also assess whether the larger public has been supportive of independent media.

CAMPAIGNS, PROTECTION, TRAINING—AND ACCESS

At the core of media workers' networks and communities often lies the aspiration to create a freer media space. Therefore, some organisations campaign to reform or rollback laws that restrict the media. Gerakan Media Merdeka (Geramm) from Malaysia, for example, was part of a cluster of organisations that advocated for greater freedom of expression and had engaged with the Ministry of Communications and Multimedia to discuss the possible establishment of a media council. A journalist who has been part of Geramm since its conception told us their discussions with the government about abolishing the Printing Presses and Publications Act and the Communications and Multimedia Act, which have been used to regulate and restrict the media in Malaysia, had been smooth until the collapse of the Pakatan Harapan government in 2020, when the process came to a halt (personal interview, 18 August 2021).

In a climate this hostile to critical voices, independent media workers' access to legal protection is crucial, especially as institutional and regulatory reforms in favour of media freedom are unlikely to materialise soon. Some organisations and communities address this need by providing legal assistance for media workers. The Cambodian Journalists Alliance Association (CamboJA) and Aliansi Jurnalis Independen (AJI) in Indonesia, for example, provide legal support to journalists facing legal attacks due to their journalism (CamboJA, 2021; personal interview, 15 July 2021).

Some organisations also offer capacity building training for media workers. For example, PCIJ offers fellowships for individual journalists, which entail training sessions, opportunities to pitch stories as well as funding for selected pitches (personal interview, 19 August 2021). These training sessions have usually covered issues of media freedom, freedom of information and investigative reporting (personal interview, 19 August 2021). Sometimes, sessions have been held to cover more specific topics such as election coverage, human rights issues, the environment, and more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic (personal interview, 19 August 2021). Similarly, CamboJA also offers its members and the wider public investigative journalism training on various issues, including land rights (personal interview, 15 September 2021). AJI provides basic to advanced courses on fact-checking and sensitivity training that teach media workers how to report and write on issues related to gender and minority groups (personal interview, 25 July 2021). In addition to skills training, Yayasan Pantau, another Indonesian organisation, also raises funds for journalists (personal interview, 19 August 2021).

Unfortunately, these connections and networks are not accessible to everyone; some media workers are better connected and well-resourced than others, allowing them to receive more support. A well-connected freelance journalist from Indonesia told us that while she felt fine reporting on sensitive topics such as LGBTQIA+ issues, environmental problems and human rights violations in West Papua, other journalists may prefer to shy away from these topics because they do not have the legal support that she has (focus group discussion, 13 July 2021). On the other hand, a Myanmar journalist seeking refuge in Indonesia said that he had little to no protection due to his circumstances (focus group discussion, 27 July 2021).

Many freelancers, both journalists and illustrators, noted the absence of networks and communities that specifically cater to the needs of freelancers. Resources such as tips, information on fee rates, contacts of editors as well as a space to share experiences would be helpful, they said, especially for those starting out in the field. Therefore, it is important to not only ask what networks and communities provide for their members, but also who gets to be their members and access their benefits.

ON GETTING PUBLIC SUPPORT

Acknowledging the role of the public in strengthening democracy (see for example Gill, 2000; Gillman, 2018; Pietrzyk-Reeves, 2015), we asked our research participants about the wider public support and activism for freedom of the media in their respective countries. The answers varied. The public is not monolithic; they consume different types of information and sympathise with different issues depending on their own diverse identities, cultures, religions and political affiliations.

A Malaysian journalist and activist told us that it is not always clear which issues would resonate with the public, making public support for campaigns on media freedom uncertain (personal interview, 18 August 2021). In Singapore, freedom of the media does not seem to be a top public priority (personal interview, 28 September 2021); while it is likely that people do have their opinions on the matter, supportive views do not guarantee a robust movement to protect freedom of expression and the media. In Indonesia, while it is common for netizens to take to social media to protest various issues, including violations against press freedom, counter-protests were also common when the media workers under attack have been known to cover sensitive issues. Maintaining momentum and sustaining strong public support over long periods of time is also difficult, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Primandari, 2021, p. 6).

Discussing public support also requires touching on the issue of audience segmentation. Our research participants told us that younger people tend to

“It is important to not only ask what networks and communities provide for their members, but also who gets to be their members and access their benefits.”

be more supportive of independent and more progressive media coverage. These are often university students, recent graduates and millennials. In Thailand, supporters of the pro-democracy movement also tend to support independent media coverage (personal interview, 29 July 2021).

International events can also shape the way the public perceives independent media. A participant from Vietnam told us that since the election of Donald Trump as president in the United States, independent media in Vietnam have gotten a bad reputation due to some independent media outlets and journalists expressing support for Trump (personal interview, 13 July 2021). This support was spurred by Trump’s anti-communism and anti-China rhetoric, which is shared by a large portion of the Vietnamese population (personal interview, 13 July 2021). However, support for Trump has not been popular among independent media consumers, and this development has caused a setback to independent media’s efforts in building their support base (personal interview, 13 July 2021).

In the above section we have sought to establish four arguments. First, we cannot speak of media freedom and criticise its absence without thinking and speaking about how to materialise it. Activism to achieve and maintain a free and safe space is thus imperative. Second, media workers’ networks and communities offer crucial support, protection and resources that non-democratic governments do not provide. As independent media are essential for democracy, networks and communities that maintain the wellbeing of media workers are thus also crucial in fighting for a more democratic media space. Third, access is an important dimension that must be considered when we speak about community-building and solidarity. Fourth, garnering public support for independent media and the wider goal of media freedom remains a challenge. Devising a strategy that also engages the public is therefore needed if we wish to attain structural changes.

➤ 8. QUESTIONING SUSTAINABILITY

The various problems we discussed in the previous sections, from state repression to financial constraints to layers of censorship to the need for activism, raise the question of independent media’s sustainability. Can independent media survive the dangers of writing and drawing critical stories? What does it take to achieve a sustainable, independent media ecosystem?

We argue that sustainability is not simply about existing; it is also about improving and creating a robust independent media environment. This may mean different things in different places. For example, a regeneration of media workers who control major newsrooms may be crucial in contexts where generational domination matters for media output. One of our Indonesian research participants speculated that it might take 10 years for younger and braver people to enter the Indonesian media landscape and take over older newsrooms, which would hopefully result in less editorial censorship in Indonesia (focus group discussion, 13 July 2021). Regeneration, however, relies on young people’s eagerness to work in independent media.

In some places, independent media does not spark much interest due to the safety risks that one must incur to work in the field, alongside its low pay. A Cambodian journalist said:

“There’s a restricted environment for younger journalists, or the next generation to actually be inspired or be motivated to work in this field.”

Focus group discussion, 13 July 2021

This sheds light on a tricky and chicken-and-egg situation: it is difficult to create a strong and robust culture of independent media without people who are committed to stay or enter the profession and strengthen independent media from within. However, it is challenging to encourage people to join independent media precisely because it is not yet robust or immune from attacks by the state and hostile public.

We expect to see the challenges we have discussed to persist for the foreseeable future. Hostile governments will not simply vanish; years and even decades of social movement activism around the world have shown us that resistance and protests may take a long time before succeeding or failing altogether. As the COVID-19 pandemic lingers, it is likely that it will continue to be used as a pretext for authoritarian governments and those with authoritarian tendencies to curb dissent and construct and consolidate narratives in their

favour. Independent and critical media will be among the first to feel these effects.

However, despite the dangerous and challenging terrain, we remain hopeful. It is unlikely that the intimidation, threats, attacks and financial pressures will force independent media into extinction. For decades, independent media and critical voices in Southeast Asia have survived pressure and attacks, even in the toughest of places and during the most testing times. Critical voices were present throughout the New Order's rule in Indonesia (Aspinall, 2005). The press played the role as an agent of change in Thailand's 1992 political transition (McCargo, 2003). Even today, independent journalists, activists and bloggers in Vietnam continue to document and oppose government officials' misconduct, despite the associated dangers (Nguyen-Thu, 2018). Independent voices may be quieter at certain times, but they exist. Independent media and critical voices are here to stay, but their strength and vibrancy depend on public efforts to support them.

The recounts of challenges discouraging people from working in independent media suggest the need to discuss who will remain in the industry to sustain it. Answering this question requires a reflection on recent developments in the Southeast Asian media space. Some of our Cambodian, Thai and Vietnamese participants encouraged us to recognise that more actors are now shaping public discourse and non-professional journalists—sometimes called “citizen journalists”—have played an important role in providing information to the public (personal interviews, 13 and 29 July, 15 September 2021). A Thai reporter argued that the definition of the media should be broadened to include freelancers as well as digital content creators, such as artists (personal interview, 29 July 2021).

These statements show that when we speak of the media going forward, we should do so with a broad conception of it in mind. In many countries governed by authoritarian governments (or governments with authoritarian tendencies), it is difficult to rely on established outlets for information as governments may exert control on what gets published and what does not. Therefore, we should not dismiss the roles of people who do not fall under the conventional category of journalists, such as bloggers or “citizen journalists” in exposing public officials' misconducts and other information that “established” media outlets are not willing to publish (Kakar, 2018; Le, 2019; Rinith, 2020; Zeng et al., 2019). Furthermore, many governments get to define who is a legitimate journalist and who is not—media organisations that do not align with the state agenda may be denied a license to operate. This shows that we need to problematise *who gets defined* as a journalist or media worker, and *who gets to define* one.

Part III



Conclusion



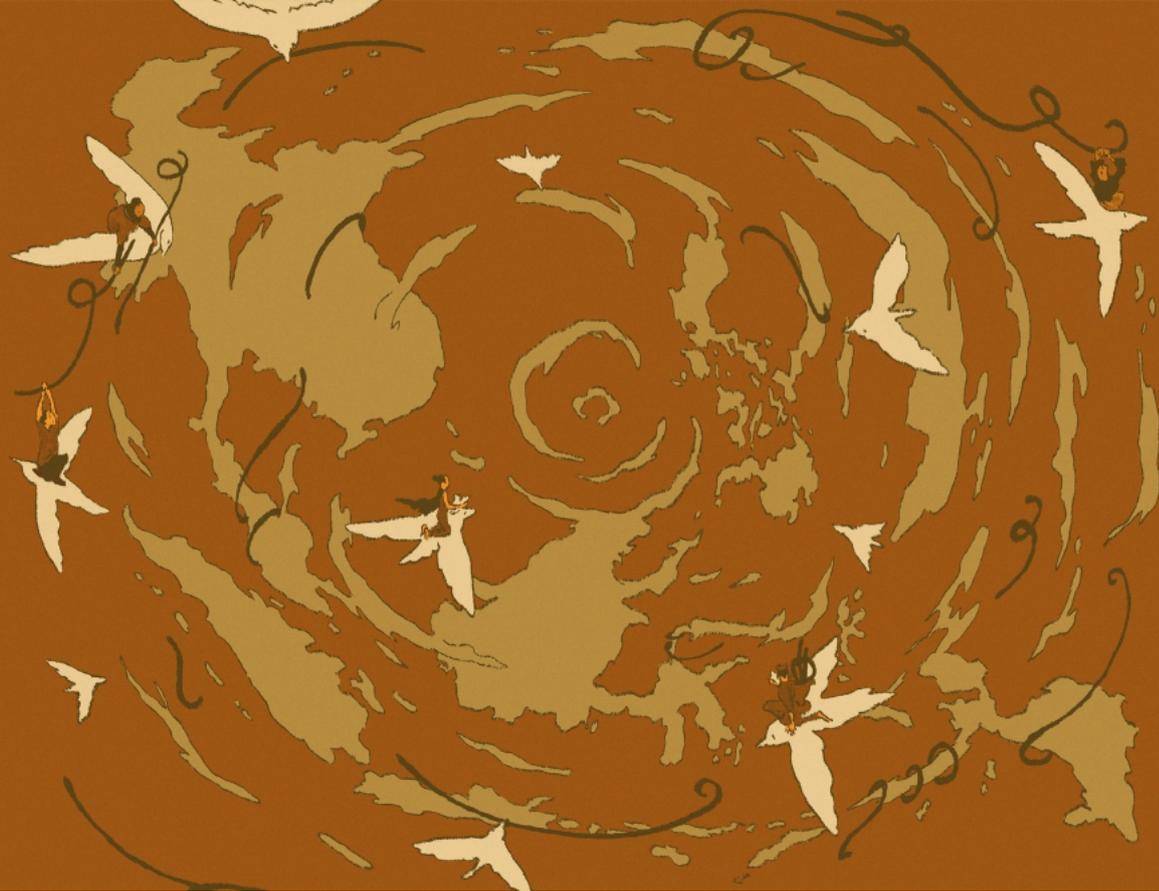


Illustration: Nadhir Nor

➤ 1. RETHINKING MEDIA FREEDOM

“Press freedom is not about simply personal safety of the reporters or the outlets. It is about the freedom to carry out the duties of a reporter, to be able to interview individuals without any . . . self-censorship. [It means] there are no repercussions for covering the news responsibly, if you have fulfilled all the ethical duties of what a reporter should do.”

Personal interview, 3 August 2021

“There’s the reporting side, where it would mean . . . the ability to go anywhere to access information, to be able to get all the necessary raw materials to make a good story without fear, without intimidation, without unnecessary logistical challenges. And I guess the other side is also, press freedom also means that there are opportunities to publish stories because there is a thriving media ecosystem, and journalism is a field that has ample funding . . . The financial side is also important because if you don’t have the resources to report, it doesn’t matter how much press freedom there is because you still won’t be able to do it.”

Personal interview, 28 July 2021

CONCLUSION: RETHINKING MEDIA FREEDOM

“[It is] the freedom for every journalist to report on all issues without having to concern or fear . . . about punishment . . . legal punishment or harassment or being threatened or intimidated by the government or by the powerful people in the business.”

Focus group discussion, 13 July 2021

The conversations we had with our research participants pushed us to reflect and rethink what it means for a media worker or organisation to be “free” and “independent”. Our research participants’ stories told us that being a free and independent media worker goes beyond the absence of legal restrictions and physical threats. Financial precarity and uncertainty can also influence the way media workers and organisations operate and publish stories. Furthermore, access to information, in addition to the freedom to publish information, also shapes what can be documented and distributed to the public. Media workers’ personal attributes, such as race, ethnicity and gender identities, as well as the issues they illustrate and write about, influence the types of challenges they face in their work, the strategies they use as well as the various ways through which they think about media freedom.

In illuminating the many “fronts” of media freedom, we are also left with more questions. For example, while it might be straightforward to say that state censorship, legal punishment for critical coverage and funders’ influence over media output are restrictive and should be eliminated, we find it more difficult to take a bold position against the influence of social media algorithms and the expectations of audiences in shaping media workers’ and organisations’ editorial decisions. What we can posit for now is that the current funding models are insufficient to achieve genuine independence. Subscription and membership models and grants that are currently used to fund the media may, for the time being, bring their incentives closer to the public interest. However, the limited scope of audiences as well as donor interests may limit the media organisations’ freedom in publishing stories of wider public importance. For the media to be truly free and independent, its incentives must be aligned with the public interest, and therefore, a funding model that cultivates these incentives is crucial.

Second, we argue that “writing and drawing in media” can be a political act because it does not only entail “showing what is happening” but also working to make certain things relevant and raise public awareness. Many of our research participants emphasised the struggles they go through to have their stories told—it is only respectful that we acknowledge the meanings they attribute to their discursive work. Here we follow the arguments of those who contest the conventional claim that the media should be “objective” and value-free; rather, all media work serves some kind of purpose (Blanding, 2018; Hanson, 2019; Plaut, 2014, p. 842).

Following from the argument that media work is inherently political, we return to the notion that media freedom and independence are aspirational (see Bennett, 2015b): what exactly are we working toward? The aspirational nature of these concepts necessitate us to consider the wishes, hopes and expectations of the people who work and fight at the centre of the media landscape. Listening is thus the first step toward this goal. Reflecting on the problems raised by our research participants, we put forward at least four semi-operationalisable goals: 1) eliminating violent and legal repercussions for publishing critical or non-conforming views; 2) securing better pay and living conditions, without these rights being jeopardised when media workers publish critical or non-conforming views; 3) expanding access to information; and 4) creating more opportunities to publish critical or non-conforming views.

One implication of these findings is our argument that the conceptualisation of “media freedom” and “media independence” require a thorough reflection of what media work entails and the various challenges that media workers face. The challenges facing independent media go beyond physical dangers—they also include digital attacks, financial precarity, censorship and lack of access to information, which are shaped by factors beyond hostile governments. Additionally, we must reflect on the socio-political and cultural contexts in which these problems are situated. The media scene in Southeast Asia is complex and messy. A holistic conceptualisation of media freedom and independence will guide us in our search for strategies that are contextually unique to the circumstances and challenges faced by media workers in the region.





Illustration: Amita Sevellaraja

➤ 2. WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

This study does four things. First, it shows that the challenges that independent media workers face in Southeast Asia go beyond violent threats and legal repercussions. Second, in doing so, it shows that the challenges faced by media workers arise not only from the state, but also from the societies in which they are situated. Relationships between the media, the state and the public are only becoming more complex with the evolution of communication technology and the persistence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Third, by highlighting the role of financial constraints, lack of access to information and various layers of censorship that result from interactions between various actors in the media landscape, we aim to expand common understandings of “media freedom” and “media independence” in Southeast Asia.

Fourth, we illuminate how the media workers in this study aspire and fight for media freedom through their work. News stories and illustrations are used to counter not only narratives produced and endorsed by the state, but also those imposed by outsiders painting a simplistic picture of Southeast Asia. Thus, the line between the conventional definition of professional media work and activism can be blurry. Being an independent media worker in Southeast Asia

often means being political, and we should not misinterpret the link between activism and media work as contradictory. Rather, we should acknowledge the link as a call to re-examine what it means to work in media. We call for a framework that understands the Southeast Asian media space as contested rather than stable with definite boundaries.

This study's findings prompt the question of what we need to do next. The challenges we fleshed out throughout this report signal the need for support and solidarity with and between independent media workers and organisations. For media workers in Southeast Asia, a regional, transnational network that builds on the good practices of local and national coalitions may be able to provide support, facilitate collaboration as well as share resources and knowledge. Another takeaway from this study would be for activists and the wider public to push for the reform or abolition of laws that allow powerful people and institutions to interfere with media work. Raising awareness of the repression experienced by media workers, and supporting them in resisting or pushing back against it, would be helpful. At the same time, media organisations, especially sustainable ones, must be held accountable for paying fair living wages to both staff and freelancers. Finally, for those seeking a more radical solution, one possible path suggested by our findings is to remove the profit motive from media work and have media work funded directly by the wider public. This would address the issue of sustainability while bringing the incentive structure of the media in greater alignment with the public good. The technicalities of bringing this idea to reality is, however, beyond the scope of this research.

Finally, it is important to note that our findings are preliminary. We are still in need of more research that pays closer attention to the nuances of media workers' experiences in navigating the Southeast Asian media landscape and those of structural forces that shape media freedom. Our brief section on identities in an earlier part of this report shows that we would certainly benefit from more studies on the significance of identities in shaping media workers' experiences and content as well as public discourse. Research on media freedom that is conscious of the role that nationality, race, ethnicity and gender, to say the least, play in shaping the process of media production and discourse would allow us to not only understand how media workers' experiences may vary but also facilitate our efforts to support media workers. These research projects may come in many forms, such as small-N case studies or large-N surveys, as long as we realise their implications and how they can encourage us to listen more closely to media workers. We intend for this study to be the first in a long, iterative series that seeks to further unpack the issues of media freedom.



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“Being an independent media worker in Southeast Asia often means being political, and we should not misinterpret the link between activism and media work as contradictory. Rather, we should acknowledge the link as a call to re-examine what it means to work in media.”

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Appendix



DATA COLLECTION TIMELINE

NO.	EVENT	PARTICIPANTS	DATE	NOTES
1.	FGD 1	3	6 July 2021	Freelance journalists
2.	FGD 2	7	8 July 2021	Freelance artists
3.	FGD 3	3	13 July 2021	Freelance journalists
4.	Interview 1	1	13 July 2021	Media organisation
5.	Interview 2	1	14 July 2021	Media organisation
6.	Interview 3	2	15 July 2021	Media organisation
7.	Interview 4	2	15 July 2021	Media organisation
8.	Interview 5	1	16 July 2021	Media organisation
9.	Interview 6	2	19 July 2021	Media organisation
10.	FGD 4	4	27 July 2021	Freelance journalists
11.	Interview 7	2	28 July 2021	Media organisation
12.	Interview 8	1	28 July 2021	Media organisation
13.	Interview 9	2	29 July 2021	Media organisation
14.	Interview 10	1	3 August 2021	Media organisation
15.	Interview 11	1	18 August 2021	Media organisation
16.	Interview 12	1	19 August 2021	Media organisation
17.	Interview 13	1	19 August 2021	Media organisation
18.	Interview 14	1	6 September 2021	Media organisation
19.	Interview 15	1	8 September 2021	Journalist
20.	Interview 16	1	9 September 2021	Journalist
21.	Interview 17	2	15 September 2021	Media organisation
22.	Interview 18	1	15 September 2021	Journalist
23.	Interview 19	1	16 September 2021	Journalist
24.	Interview 20	1	28 September 2021	Media organisation
25.	Interview 21	1	6 October 2021	Journalist
26.	Follow up Communication	(repeat)	28 October - 5 November 2021	Freelance journalists and media organisations
Total		44		

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Note: The following questions are standard questions. During our focus group discussions and interviews, we tailored the wording of each question to the exact profession of the research participant and our prior knowledge of them (e.g. their specialisation, background). Sometimes we switched the order of the questions depending on the flow of the conversation. We often also asked follow-up questions, which may not be captured in the following list.

NO.	QUESTION
1.	Before we begin, we would like to know a little bit more about you, particularly your work in media. Could you please let us in on how long you have been working in media, what countries and issues you usually cover, and which organisations you have worked with?
2.	What have been the challenges that you faced during your work in media?
	a. Are these challenges related to any specific coverage? What are the sensitive issues in your country?
	b. Have you faced challenges in getting access to information?
	c. Have you faced digital attacks?
3.	d. Has the pandemic made it more difficult to work in media?
	How have you navigated these challenges?
4.	Have you ever felt that you need to refrain from reporting certain issues or to tone down the way that you write/draw?
5.	How does the general public usually react to your work?
	What does the activism for media freedom look like in your country?
6.	Do you mind telling us about the funding/pay you receive for your media work?
	Is it difficult to pitch/obtain funding?
7.	Are you currently part of any media solidarity network?
	What resources do you think would be useful for you as a media worker?
8.	What does media freedom mean to you?



“The media scene in Southeast Asia is complex and messy. A holistic conceptualisation of media freedom and independence will guide us in our search for strategies that are contextually unique to the circumstances and challenges faced by media workers in the region.”



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