

An illustration of two figures in military-style gear, including helmets and vests. The figure on the left is holding a microphone and pointing upwards, while the figure on the right is holding a camera. They are set against a background of stylized, swirling orange and yellow flames. The overall style is reminiscent of anime or manga art.

New Naratif

Beyond the Absence of Killings and Arrests

Exploring “Media Safety”
in the Context of Southeast Asia

Media Freedom in Southeast Asia Series No. 2
2022

Fadhilah Fitri Primandari

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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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ABSTRACT

This study explores media safety in Southeast Asia by looking into the various attacks on independent media workers in Southeast Asia. These attacks go beyond killings and arrests, and include those that are physical and online, and enacted by government authorities, members of the public and anonymous online entities. Employing an exploratory survey guided by the research team's qualitative research in 2021, this study makes several findings. First, more than half of our respondents have experienced reprisals from governments and the wider public. Second, men respondents reported more incidents of reprisals than their women counterparts, suggesting that experiences of reprisals due to media work is gendered. A possible explanation for this finding is that men respondents covered more risky and "hard" topics than women respondents. Third, experiences of reprisals due to media work positively correlates with whether respondents have felt unsafe due to their work media. Fourth, this study argues that the lack of safety in the media environment affects democracy by limiting the kinds of information that is available to the general public. It concludes that, since attacks on media workers are essentially targeted attacks on specific individuals, efforts to fight for media safety and freedom should include measures to equip individual media workers with the means to respond to and defend themselves in times of attack, in addition to the long-term goals of achieving change at the political and legal institutional level.

Keywords: media safety, Southeast Asia, media freedom, journalism, killings, arrests

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INTRODUCTION

Media workers in Southeast Asia are exposed to many risks, especially those covering issues that reflect unfavourably on governments with authoritarian tendencies or which are contrary to the interests of powerful socio-political groups. Reporters without Borders (2022) reported that from January to April 2022 alone, 21 media workers—including those who are not journalists—have been imprisoned across Southeast Asia, and one journalist killed. In 2021, four journalists were killed in Myanmar and Philippines, while 107 in Myanmar and 24 in Vietnam were imprisoned (Reporters Without Borders 2021). These figures paint a harrowing picture of the fate of media workers who “cross the line”, yet they still fail to capture the full range of attacks that media workers face in the course of their work.

Killings, kidnappings and arrests—whether conducted by the state or by vigilantes—are at the extreme end of the spectrum of attacks against media workers, but it would be a mistake to assume that the absence of killings and arrests means that a media worker is safe to do their job (Sarikakis 2017, 123; Torsner 2017). Media workers face a wide range of risks and dangers that impinge on their day-to-day work, including surveillance, intimidation and harassment, and these threats also deserve serious attention.

Scholars of journalism safety (see for example, Sarikakis 2017; Torsner 2017; Jamil and Sohal 2021; Hasan and Wadud 2020) have stressed the need to research the risks of working in media that are not recorded as regularly as killings and arrests because they may help us understand more about the challenges that

journalists—and other media workers—face in their day-to-day lives. A closer look at these risks may also help us to understand how we can better advocate for media safety and freedom. Given that this perspective is less commonly applied to studies of Southeast Asia than it is to regions such as Western Europe and South Asia, the scholarship on media freedom in Southeast Asia would benefit from such application.

This study explores the threats to media workers' safety by gauging their experiences of various kinds of reprisals and their sense of safety. Over September and October 2021 we conducted an exploratory survey of 277 independent media workers from or in nine Southeast Asian countries: Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor Leste and Vietnam. Despite not being representative of the whole media worker population in the region, this study makes several findings about media safety in Southeast Asia. First, despite not being covered regularly in the media or by many advocacy organisations, it is likely that reprisals are commonplace among independent media workers. Second, reprisals due to media work have a gendered dimension. Third, respondents' personal experiences facing government reprisals due to their media work is correlated with how they feel about their governments' attitudes towards independent media. Fourth, this study argues that the lack of safety in the media environment affects democracy by limiting the kinds of information that the general public can utilise in public discourse, which affects public decision making. It concludes that efforts to fight for media safety and freedom should include measures to equip individual media workers with the means to respond to and defend themselves in times of attack, in addition to the long-term goals of achieving change at the political and legal institutional level.



THEORISING MEDIA SAFETY AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO DEMOCRACY

This study distinguishes between the concept of media safety and that of media freedom, while recognising that the former is an important and inextricable component of the latter. The main reason for this distinction is to avoid conceptual conflation and to facilitate focus on a specific set of issues and conceptual attributes. Therefore, while recognising that media freedom is subject to a wide range of influences, including government regulations, violence against media workers, financial sustainability to journalistic ethics and technological infrastructure (Burrett 2020), we focus specifically on the unlikelihood of media workers to get hurt due to their media work.

Our conceptualisation of media safety builds on the established concept of journalism safety, which Sarikakis (2017, 123) grounds in the general concept of safety: “the everyday ability to perform one’s duties free from assault, intimidation and harassment, . . . free from physical and psychological violence”. In her study of journalist safety in Uganda, Selnes (2021, 168) uses a similar definition, wherein journalists and media workers are able to gather, write and publish information without physical or moral suppression such as “violence, assault, loss of property, imprisonment, kidnap or without fear for their lives”. Since other acts or forms of violations against media workers’ rights—such as surveillance, threats, intimidation and harassment—are also likely to cause media workers to fear for their lives, we argue they should also be considered relevant to the discussion of media safety. For example, in its assessment of the safety of journalists in Southeast Asian countries, the International Federation of Journalists (2019) not only counted the instances of journalist killings but also threats such as intimidation through legal means, assault and confiscation of media equipment.

We also take into account the recent development of digital media. The internet and the rise of social media has both benefitted and hindered the media. These benefits include facilitating the ability to interview and report remotely, easing collaboration

with other media workers and organisations, and enabling the timely circulation of information (Selnes 2021). Yet quicker access to information through the internet has prompted governments to seek control of the internet through censorship laws (Sinpeng 2020, 10–11). Furthermore, as the internet makes it easier for people to express their opinions and interact with each other, it has allowed actors beyond the state to attack members of the press who publish views that they find objectionable. These non-state actors include online “bots” and paid fake accounts on social media which are known by various terms such as “buzzers”, “trolls” or “cybertroopers”, and have allegedly been used by political groups to influence public opinion during contentious political events such as major demonstrations and elections (Reporters Without Borders 2018; Sinpeng and Tapsell 2020, 9). Our qualitative research in 2021 corroborated these findings, as we found that many of our research participants have been wary of using social media and some have faced online harassment themselves (focus group discussion, 13 July 2021; personal interviews, 15 July and 6 September 2021). Other forms of online attack such as the hacking of media workers’ personal online accounts and distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks have also been reported (personal interviews, 13 July and 6 September 2021).

In this study, we broaden the accepted understanding of journalism safety—including both the manifestation of harm against journalists and its consequences—to include other forms of information and media producers, such as illustrations and illustrators. The reason for this extension is twofold. First, the production of information is evolving; information can now be published in various forms beyond text in newspapers or news articles. Second and more contextually, in a region like Southeast Asia where criticism regardless of publication form can prompt state surveillance and reprisal (see for example BBC 2018; Yeluri et al. 2021), we need to acknowledge the political significance of these forms of publication. Though illustrations and comics might not explicitly convey news or investigative stories, and might even be satirical in nature, they can convey information and messages relevant to public interest nonetheless.

Any analysis of media safety also needs to consider the multidimensional nature of safety problems beyond their overt manifestations, including consequences for both the individual media worker and wider media environment (Harrison, Maynard, and Torsner 2020, 91). In many places, attacks against media have been successful in creating fear and dissuading media workers from covering sensitive issues (see Fadnes, Larsen, and Krøvel 2020). Both fear and its effects are thus relevant components in the assessment of media safety. In their study of Syrian journalists covering the civil war, Garcia and Ouariachi (2021) distinguish between the dangers that they face and the fear they feel, with each requiring personal responses that

vary from person to person. Similarly, Barrios and Miller's (2021) interviews with Colombian journalists in 2018 showed that the risks of reporting on sensitive issues foster a climate of fear and has led journalists to self-censor to protect themselves.

This hurts democracy in at least two ways. First, the chilling effect of attacks against media workers limits the media's capacity to provide information, the right of individual media workers' rights to do their jobs in safety. Second and consequently, restrictions on the media's function violate the rights of the general public to access information needed to learn about their surroundings, engage in discussion in society and make personal and public decisions.

This study therefore examines 1) legal, physical and online attacks against people whose profession is to provide information in both text and non-text format; 2) attacks carried out by governments, members of the public and anonymous entities; 3) whether reprisals against the media cause respondents to fear for their safety; and 4) the possible effects of attacks against media workers on what information gets published and is circulated in society.



METHODOLOGY

EXPLORATORY QUANTITATIVE SURVEY

This research is a continuation of a qualitative study we conducted in 2021 and is preliminary in nature. Similar to our previous study (Primandari, Hassan, and Melasandy 2021), we maintain an exploratory approach. Thus, we do not aim to test a particular theory regarding media safety but rather strive to understand more about the day-to-day risks that media workers in Southeast Asia face in their work.

A quantitative survey is appropriate to serve this purpose for two main reasons. First, it allows us to reach a large number of respondents in a short period of time. Given that this study is an extension of our earlier qualitative work (see Primandari, Hassan, and Melasandy 2021), expanding our sample and using a quantitative approach is a good way to further explore the issues of media safety that our earlier study uncovered. Second, the nature of surveillance, harassment, intimidation and media workers' fears makes it difficult to rely on observation or records made by an external party, such as newspapers, which tend to track more overt violations against the media, such as legal charges, killing and assault. A survey allows individual respondents to self-report their experiences of harmful incidents that are difficult for external parties to capture.

In analysing our survey, we tried to contextualise the numbers that we generate since numbers on their own have little explanatory value (Bevir and Rhodes 2016, 19; D'Ignazio and Klein 2020, 156–57). We complement our survey results with some of the qualitative findings that we obtained from the first iteration of our research in 2021 and supplementary interviews that we conducted while analysing our survey results.

SURVEYING AND ANALYSING MEDIA SAFETY AND ITS EFFECTS ON DEMOCRACY

The survey used in this study was distributed from 22 September to 25 October 2021. The master questionnaire covered a wide range of topics, including perceptions of media freedom during the period of the survey, access to information, financial sustainability,

the government’s and public’s treatment of independent media, and respondents’ activism. For the purposes of this study on media workers’ safety, we selected questions that specifically asks respondents about their experiences with attacks and threats due to their work, their sense of safety, concealing or making alterations to the content that they create due to pressure and having their requests for information declined from potential sources. The variables and attributes that we selected and their measurements are as follows:

a. Attacks against media workers

Attacks against media workers can manifest itself in various forms—legal, physical, online—and can be carried out by both state and non-state actors. We asked respondents whether they have faced any forms of these attacks, for which they could choose an option from a 5-point Likert scale for frequency (never, rarely, sometimes, often and always). For questions on experiences of online harassment, respondents were given an additional option (“I am unsure”), to recognise that sometimes it may be difficult to distinguish whether perpetrators are state or non-state actors due to the anonymity that social media and the internet allow. Table 1 summarises the attacks against media workers that we gauged through our survey.

TABLE 1:
ATTRIBUTES AND MEASUREMENT OF ATTACKS AGAINST MEDIA WORKERS BASED ON SOURCES AND GENERAL FORMS OF ATTACK

Sources of Attacks	Type	Measurement
Government authorities	Legal charges	5-point Likert scale for frequency
	Physical threats	5-point Likert scale for frequency
	Online harassment	5-point Likert scale for frequency
Members of the public	Legal charges	5-point Likert scale for frequency
	Physical threats	5-point Likert scale for frequency
	Online harassment	5-point Likert scale for frequency
Anonymous online entities	Online harassment	5-point Likert scale for frequency

To complement findings of the above, we also gauged whether respondents have experienced specific forms of attacks or threats. These experiences are described in Table 2 below.

TABLE 2:	Type of Attack	Measurement
ATTRIBUTES AND MEASUREMENT OF SPECIFIC ATTACKS AND THREATS AGAINST MEDIA WORKERS	Arrests, detentions, and/or convictions	Binary
	Threats to take down or close publishing platforms	Binary
	Physical surveillance (e.g., being followed)	Binary
	Digital surveillance	Binary
	Hacking of your personal online accounts	Binary
	Hacking company's online accounts	Binary
	Being forced to take down published content or material	Binary
	Being forced to change or alter your content for publications	Binary

The purpose of gauging respondents' experiences with the forms of attacks and threats described in Table 1 and 2 is to determine the number of respondents who have experienced at least one form of attack or threat, the frequency of attacks and threats, and to identify any demographic patterns among victims. We do not claim that our sample is fully representative of the situation across Southeast Asia, but a majority number would nevertheless show that the condition is dire, while even a large minority number is sufficient to indicate that Southeast Asia is an unsafe space for independent media workers.

b. Media workers' sense of safety

To acknowledge that a *sense* of safety is an important component of safety, we asked respondents about whether their governments' and the public's attitude towards independent media have made them feel unsafe. Since fear is likely to be shared with one's close relatives or friends, we also asked respondents

whether their friends and/or family have advised them to be careful about the content that they publish. Table 3 lists the attributes that we used to assess respondents' sense of safety in doing their media work.

TABLE 3:
ATTRIBUTES AND MEASUREMENT OF RESPONDENTS' AND THEIR FRIENDS AND/OR FAMILIES' SENSE OF SAFETY

Attribute	Measurement
Whether the government's attitude has made the respondent feel unsafe	5-point Likert scale for frequency
Whether the public's attitude has made the respondent feel unsafe	5-point Likert scale for frequency
Whether the respondent's friends and family has advised them to be careful with their publications	5-point Likert scale for frequency

In addition to presenting the descriptive statistics for these findings, we also tested the correlation between respondents' experience of receiving reprisals and their sense of unsafety, while controlling for their friends and/or families warning about their work-related safety. The latter is treated as a control variable because it is plausible that a respondent's fear of their work's repercussion is influenced by whether their families have expressed concerns over their safety.

c. The effects of attacks against media workers on the production of information

This study gauges the effects of attacks against media workers on democracy by assessing whether they influence the production of information in the media: what information gets curated, published and circulated. Due to the small sample size and the study's reliance on self-selected respondents' reports of their experience and feelings instead of a discourse and content analysis of publications circulated in the region, we were not able to make an empirical assessment of the direct effect that attacks against the media have had on particular types of stories or media content that is published and circulated in the region. We were, however, able to illustrate the way that attacks and the hostile climate against the media influence respondents' own actions and decisions in their production of information and thus infer how they may affect what we read, see or hear in media. We did this by gauging

respondents' experiences in changing their publication content due to fear, their perceptions of whether their colleagues have done so and whether potential sources have declined to give information due to reasons related to safety. We argue that the latter is appropriate given that the production of information does not rely on media workers alone but also the availability of information from potential sources. The main intuition here is that if the media is routinely targeted and if speaking up is likely to invite repercussions, potential sources would not be willing to engage with media workers and provide information. In such situations, potential sources would be more likely to decline requests for interviews and information. Table 4 lays out the attributes that we used to gauge how attacks against media workers affect the production of information.

TABLE 4:
ATTRIBUTES AND
MEASUREMENT OF
SPECIFIC ATTACKS
AND THREATS
AGAINST MEDIA
WORKERS

Attribute	Measurement
Respondents' experience in changing, concealing or taking down content	5-point Likert scale for frequency
Reasons for respondents to change, conceal or take down content	Binary
Respondents' perception of their colleagues' experience in changing, concealing or taking down content due to fear or direct pressure	5-point Likert scale for estimated amount, with an additional opt-out option
Respondents' experience of having requests for information refused by potential sources	5-point Likert scale for frequency
Reasons for potential sources to decline information requests	Binary

SAMPLING AND LIMITATIONS

This study mainly concerns itself with risks that independent media workers face in the Southeast Asian media landscape due to the likelihood that independent media workers have relatively more freedom in determining their stories and being critical compared to their state-affiliated counterparts (Begoyan 2009, 5;

Xu and Wang 2022, 358). Therefore, independent media workers are more likely to face reprisals or backlash for their work. As this study is a continuation of our earlier research, which also focused on independent media workers, we employ a similar definition of our target sample. We define independent media workers as those whose profession entails the collection, production and publication of information in either text or non-text format, such as illustrations, comics, radio and podcasts, who are not funded by or affiliated with their respective governments. This definition of “independent” recognises that although no media entity is truly free from influences and that money holds power in virtually all societies, the state can subject the media to tight control through state ownership and funding. This is especially significant in the case of non-democratic states. We also note that the state-linked media landscape in Southeast Asia differs from those in the mature democracies of Western Europe and the USA, where government funding for the media tends to be viewed as support for the media’s independence from corporations, rather than as an effort to co-opt them (Neff and Pickard 2021).

Unfortunately, no available sample frame currently exists for this specific population and constructing one is beyond our resources. To sample independent media workers for the purpose of this study, we employed the respondent-driven sampling (RDS) method. RDS was developed to sample populations with no available sample frames and who are difficult to reach, or where efforts to do so may be unethical (Salganik and Heckathorn 2004; Khoury 2020). RDS relies on the existence of social networks and respondents’ ability to pass on the survey (or information about the survey) to their networks; similar to snowball sampling, respondents recruited through RDS are not selected from a sample frame but rather from the sample members’ networks (Salganik and Heckathorn 2004, 196). Unlike snowball sampling, however, RDS allows the estimation of recruitment biases through its identification of the referral chains between initial respondents—called seeds—and their recruits, the number of recruitment waves that have occurred and each respondent’s network size. The aim of such estimation is to enable the researcher to make inferences about the respondents’ social networks and the general population of interest; theoretically, after a certain number of waves, the recruitment chain will reach equilibrium and the final obtained sample will be independent of the characteristics of the seeds (Wejnert and Heckathorn 2008, 107). To identify referral chains, each respondent is given a unique coupon to pass onto their recruits, who each will use it to enter the survey. Reaching equilibrium and ending up with a final representative sample, however, are not guaranteed features of RDS as these could only be determined once the survey has been concluded.

In the past, RDS has been used to survey drug users (Heckathorn et al. 2002), migrant populations (Tyldum 2021) and men who have had sexual intercourse with other men (Lachowsky et al. 2016)—populations which are difficult to reach unless one can gain access to these communities or has sufficient prior knowledge to construct a sample frame. Given that working in media often requires having relations or contacts with other people in the industry, even for those who work freelance and are not formally employed at a news outlet or media organisation, this method is appropriate for surveying independent media workers under our definition. As New Naratif is an organisation which has relationships with many media workers, our seeds were initially selected from the media workers with whom we have had relations and who we had interviewed for our initial qualitative study. Towards the end of the survey period, we also made efforts to contact media workers outside our initial list who we believed fit into our sample definition. The survey was administered online and at the end of the survey, the survey platform gave each respondent a unique code that they would need to pass on to their peers to recruit them. To incentivise respondents to recruit their peers, we rewarded respondents with \$5 for each person that they successfully recruited, up to 10 people.

Though we had initially hoped that our final sample would be representative, its small size, our inability to reach media workers in certain countries and the low number of recruitment waves meant that we had not obtained a sample that is representative of the overall population of independent media workers in the region. Although our overall sample of 277 respondents was obtained through 6 recruitment waves, which is more than the minimum of four waves that our post-survey calculation suggested would be needed to reach equilibrium, the number of recruitment waves were spread disproportionately across our seeds. Only a small number of seeds from certain countries achieved more than four waves, while others—such as those in Timor Leste—had zero waves. Therefore, only a small portion of the sample can be argued to be representative of their network of independent media workers, meaning that it would be best to treat the overall sample as a convenience sample.

Despite these shortcomings, the RDS method enabled us to identify invalid or manipulated entries by tracing respondents' chain of referrals and examining the patterns of their answers to our open-ended questions. The limited outreach of our survey also does not preclude us from presenting a “snapshot” of what working in media is like for independent media workers who are in close proximity to us or those who work in the same industry as New Naratif. Table 5 presents the overall makeup of our 277 respondents.

TABLE 5:
DEMOGRAPHIC
CHARACTERISTICS
OF RESPONDENTS

Characteristics	Frequency	%	
Country of coverage	Cambodia	22	7.9%
	Indonesia	189	68.2%
	Malaysia	11	4.0%
	Myanmar	4	1.4%
	Philippines	4	1.4%
	Singapore	6	2.2%
	Thailand	5	1.8%
	Timor Leste	4	1.4%
	Vietnam	6	2.2%
	Multiple *	26	9.4%
	Total	277	100.0%
* respondents may cover more than one country			
Gender	Female	121	43.7%
	Male	141	50.9%
	Non-binary	6	2.2%
	Prefer not to mention	9	3.2%
	Total	277	100.0%
Type of media produced*	Print news/articles	67	24.2%
	Digital news/articles	212	76.5%
	Print illustrations/graphics	16	5.8%
	Digital illustrations/graphics	29	10.5%
	Podcasts	19	6.9%
	Radio	8	2.9%
	Music	3	1.1%
	Films/videos	38	13.7%
	TV	19	6.9%
	* respondents may cover more than one country		

The makeup of our sample imposes several limitations on this study. First, due to the small sample size, the results of our survey are not generalisable to the whole population of media workers in Southeast Asia. Second, the disproportionality between sample sizes from countries renders it inappropriate to carry out by-country comparison. As more than half of our respondents were from Indonesia, our findings are skewed towards the Indonesian context. Therefore, rather than focusing on how different countries fare in terms of media freedom and ensuring the safety of their media workers, we chose to emphasise the experiences that our respondents have faced in carrying out their work in independent media.

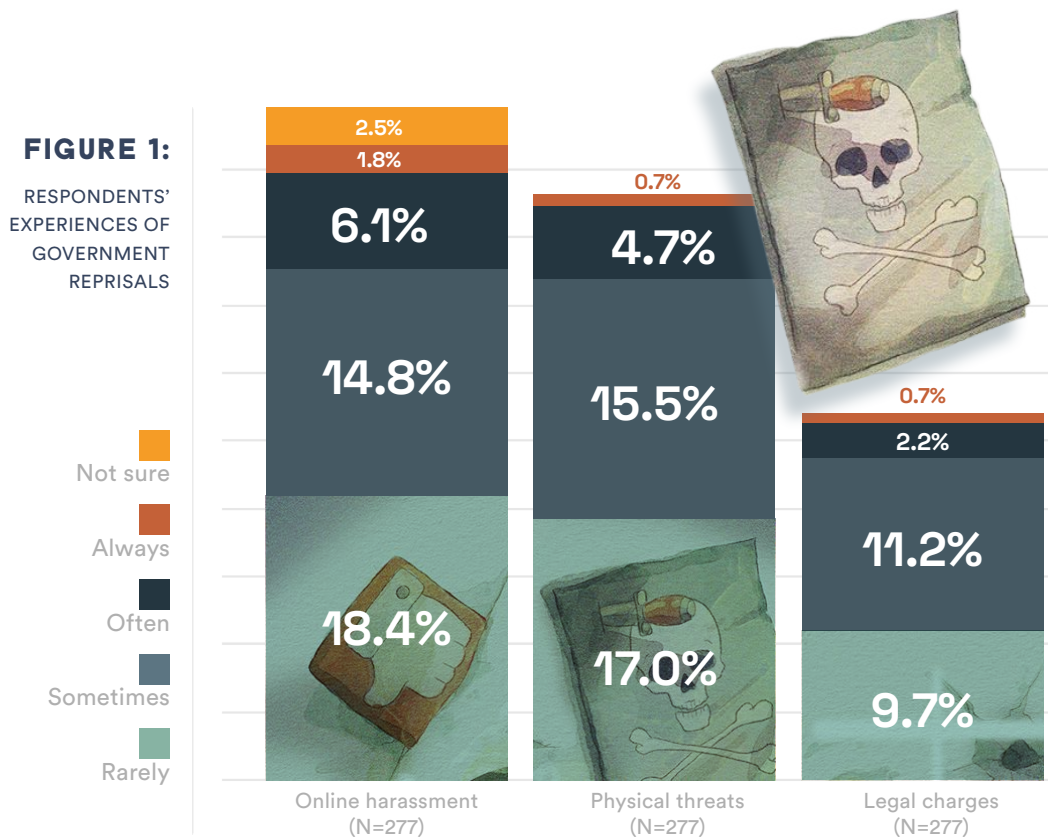
CONTRIBUTIONS

Despite its limitations, this study contributes to the scholarship on and the fight for media safety and freedom in three main ways. First, it presents a “snapshot” of the attacks that independent media workers within our proximity or connection have faced in their media work, showing that experiences of reprisals are very close to home and are not “distant”. Second, it emphasises that attacks against independent media workers are not limited to arrests and killings; independent media workers also faced other types of attacks that deserve serious attention. Third, it argues that attacks against media workers should not simply be seen as attacks against media freedom as a concept or the media as an institution, but also as attacks against individuals which warrant actions that deal with them as such. Efforts to ensure media safety and the fight for media freedom, therefore, cannot only centre on the amendment of restrictive laws, but also on investments in individual media workers’ capacity to resist and respond to repression.



Reprisals due to Work in Independent Media

Our survey found that 54.5% of our respondents have experienced some form of reprisal from the government due to their work in independent media. Figure 1 breaks down these experiences among those individuals based on the general type of attack or threat and perceived frequency.



Similarly, 54.9% of respondents said that they have faced some form of reprisal from the public. Figure 2 presents the details of these experiences.

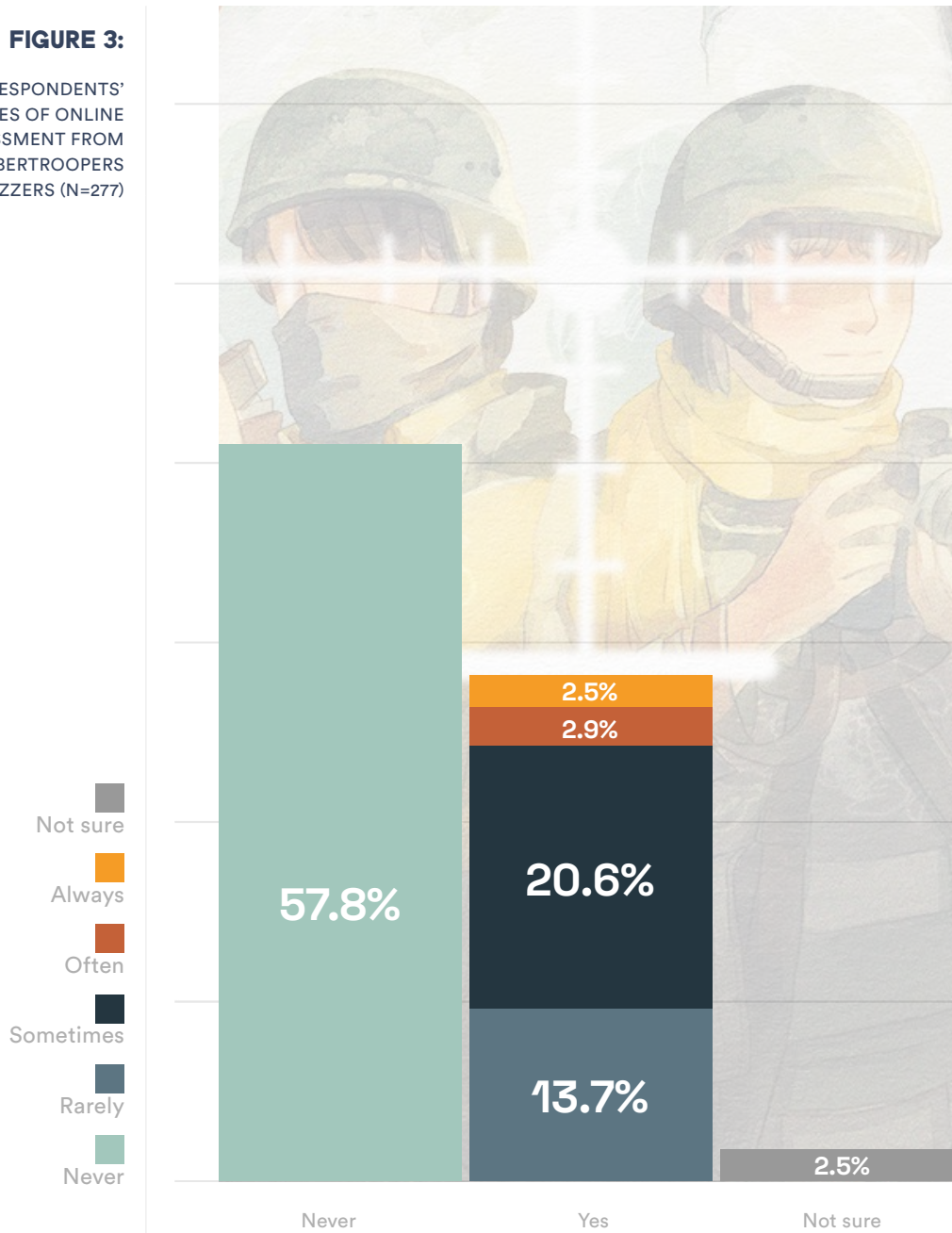


Figures 1 and 2 show that online harassment is the most common form of harassment among respondents. This finding suggests that online harassment is easier to carry out or more accessible for perpetrators of attacks and intimidation against media workers—that it can be conducted by anyone without having to acquire specific skills or expensive equipment and is relatively easier to get away with in comparison to legal and physical threats.

As we acknowledge that the internet allows people to browse and interact with anonymity and that online bots may be deployed to target people with critical views online (Timmerman 2021), which may make it difficult for victims of online harassment to discern who the perpetrators are, we asked respondents whether they have experienced harassment by such accounts. We found that 39.7% of respondents reported having experienced online harassment from trolls, cybertroopers or buzzers (Figure 3).

FIGURE 3:

RESPONDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF ONLINE HARASSMENT FROM TROLLS, CYBERTROOPERS OR BUZZERS (N=277)



We found a gendered pattern among respondents' experiences of attacks. Table 6 shows that across all sources of reprisals—government or the public—and be it online or offline, more men reported incidents of repression compared to their women counterparts. The correlations between whether the respondent was male or female and their experiences of reprisals were also statistically significant for both sources of reprisals, at Spearman's rho (255)=.215, $p=.001$ for government reprisals and Spearman's rho (258)=.154, $p=.013$ for those coming from the public.

TABLE 6:
DIFFERENCE IN
EXPERIENCES OF GENERAL
TYPES OF REPRISALS
BETWEEN MEN AND
WOMEN RESPONDENTS

Perpetrator	Type of Attack	Women (N=121)	Men (N=141)
Government authorities	Legal charges	14.9%	31.9%
	Physical threats	27.3%	47.5%
	Online harassment	34.7%	47.6%
Members of the public	Legal charges	20.7%	31.2%
	Physical threats	21.5%	46.1%
	Online harassment	37.1%	49.7%
Online bots/trolls	Online harassment	31.4%	46.9%

We also compared the gendered differences in respondents' experiences of specific attacks and acts of intimidation, as presented in Table 7.

TABLE 7:
DIFFERENCE IN
EXPERIENCES OF SPECIFIC
REPRISALS BETWEEN
WOMEN AND MEN
RESPONDENTS

Attacks/Harassment	Women (N=121)	Men (N=141)
Arrest, detentions and/or convictions	0.0%	4.3%
Threats to take down or close publishing platforms	16.5%	23.4%
Physical surveillance (e.g., being followed)	14.9%	21.3%
Digital surveillance	19.8%	25.5%
Hacking of personal online accounts	9.1%	13.5%
Hacking of company's online accounts	10.7%	7.1%
Being forced to take down published content or material	33.9%	33.3%
Being forced to change or alter content for publication	33.1%	36.9%

From the specific attacks and acts of intimidation listed in Table 7, we found a positive and significant correlation between whether a respondent was male or female and whether they have experienced arrests, detentions or convictions (Spearman's rho (260)=.142, p=.022). As arrests, detentions and convictions are acts or decisions that are enacted by the state whereas the other listed attacks could be carried out by either state or non-state actors, this correlation might indicate that, compared to women media workers, men media workers are more likely to cover topics that are unfavourable to hostile governments or topics that, if discussed, can amount to legal charges.

Our survey findings support this possibility. More male respondents cover “hard” topics such as domestic politics and crime and law compared to women respondents, while the majority of respondents who cover “soft” topics such as lifestyle and arts and culture are women. Table 8 breaks down the topic coverage of men and women respondents.

TABLE 8:
COMPARISON OF WOMEN
AND MEN RESPONDENTS’
ISSUE COVERAGE

Topic	Women (N=121)*	Men (N=141)**
Daily news or current affairs	57.0%	63.8%
Domestic politics	29.8%	39.0%
Foreign politics	7.4%	9.2%
Business and economy	30.6%	26.2%
Arts and culture	31.4%	22.7%
Crime and law	7.4%	33.3%
Sports	7.4%	17.0%
Health	24.8%	19.1%
Environment	27.3%	40.4%
Entertainment	29.8%	12.8%
Migration	8.3%	12.1%
Human rights	3.3%	2.8%
Gender	1.7%	0.0%
Science and education	5.0%	2.1%
Religion or faith	0.8%	0.7%

The data presented in Table 8 corresponds with the interviews that we had with four women journalists from Indonesia, Vietnam and Malaysia, who told us that women are less likely to be assigned topics or stories that are seen as “tougher” or riskier (personal interviews, 20 and 25 January, 3 February 2022). An Indonesian investigative journalist who has covered environmental issues shared that her editor has expressed concerns over her reporting alone and often insisted that she be accompanied by a male colleague (personal interview, 20 January 2022). Another Indonesian journalist recounted her experience of reporting the 2019 mass student demonstrations at the parliament office, where she was tasked to report from within the parliament grounds while her male colleagues were assigned to report from the streets, where the protests were taking place (personal interview, 3 February 2022). A Vietnamese journalist shared that it is a common perception that women journalists are less suitable for

jobs that require long travel, meaning that in comparison to their male counterparts, women journalists are more likely to be assigned “lighter” jobs at the office (personal interview, 25 January 2022).

The differences between men and women media worker’s beats or topics should not be equated with “women having it easier than men”; the specific challenges that women media workers face may not be captured because they may not be directly linked to “media work” per se but rather women media workers’ gender identities. For example, some of the women research participants from our 2021 study and follow up interviews earlier this year mentioned sexual harassment and violence to be an additional challenge that women media workers face (personal interviews, 15 July and 15 September 2021, 20 and 24 January 2022). Gender discrimination in the workplace—such as the gender pay gap (personal interview, 3 February 2022), fewer promotion opportunities for women (personal interview, 15 July 2021) and the perception that women are more suitable for certain stories than others (personal interview, 24 and 25 January 2022)—also impedes women media workers from having the opportunity to pursue stories of their interest. This caveat and the preliminary finding that our male respondents have experienced more reprisals than their female counterparts signal the need for further investigation into the role of gender as a predictor of media workers’ vulnerability to attacks and threats if men and women have the equal opportunity to pursue similar types of stories or topics.

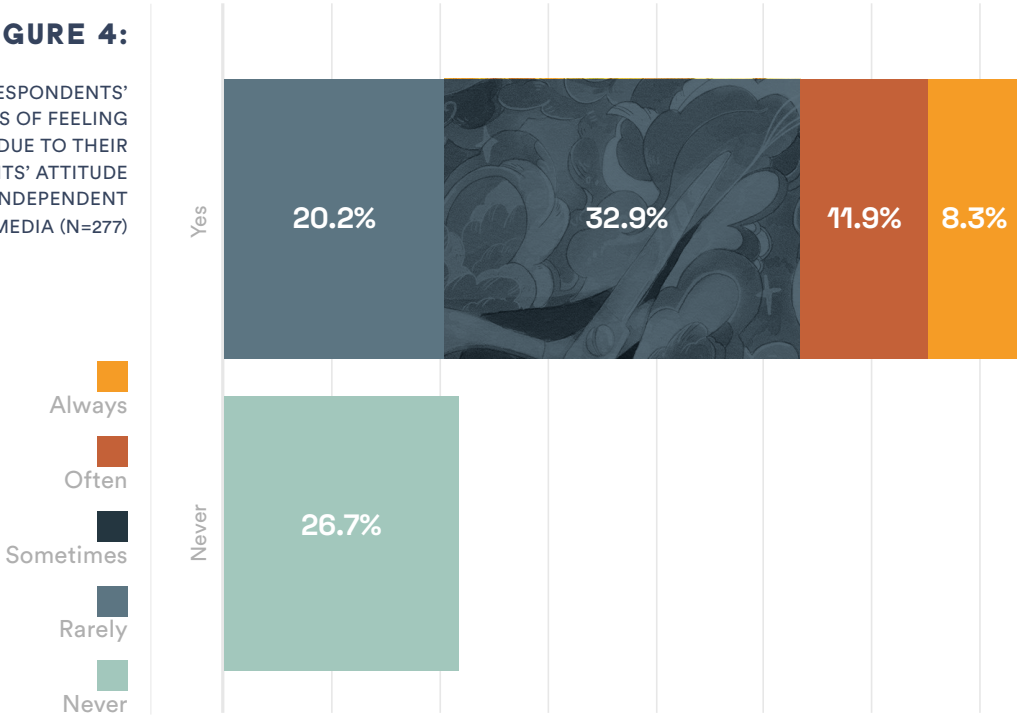
Overall, this section shows that attacks against media workers cannot be narrowly defined as the acts of arresting and killing media workers. The pattern of online harassment being the most common form of attack in comparison to legal and physical attacks also demonstrates the importance of understanding how developments in the media environment, such as the increasing use and role of the internet, open up more avenues for attacks against media workers. Although our findings were based on a small sample size, we were also able to show that the various forms of attacks which range from legal, physical to online threats are not uncommon against our respondents. Though the number of respondents who reported that they have often or always experienced attacks do not make up the majority, the overall frequency data illustrates that such attacks are still quite likely to happen and therefore are something that respondents are likely to worry about in their day-to-day jobs.

We suggest that more attention and regular recording be done to keep track of and study the nature of these attacks. Not only do they violate the individual rights of media workers, but they are also likely to have impacts on the mental wellbeing of media workers and the overall media environment that they work in. In the next section, we discuss how hostile attitudes against independent media, including the attacks and harassments that our respondents have experienced themselves, create a climate of fear.

Creating a Climate of Fear

Given that one of the main purposes of attacks on the media is to deter media workers from publishing views or information that are unfavourable to those in power or particular groups in society, we set out to measure the extent to which negative attitudes by governments and the public have caused our respondents to feel unsafe. As many as 203 or 73.3% of our respondents reported that they have felt unsafe due to their governments' attitude towards independent media. Figure 4 presents the frequency of these experiences in more detail.

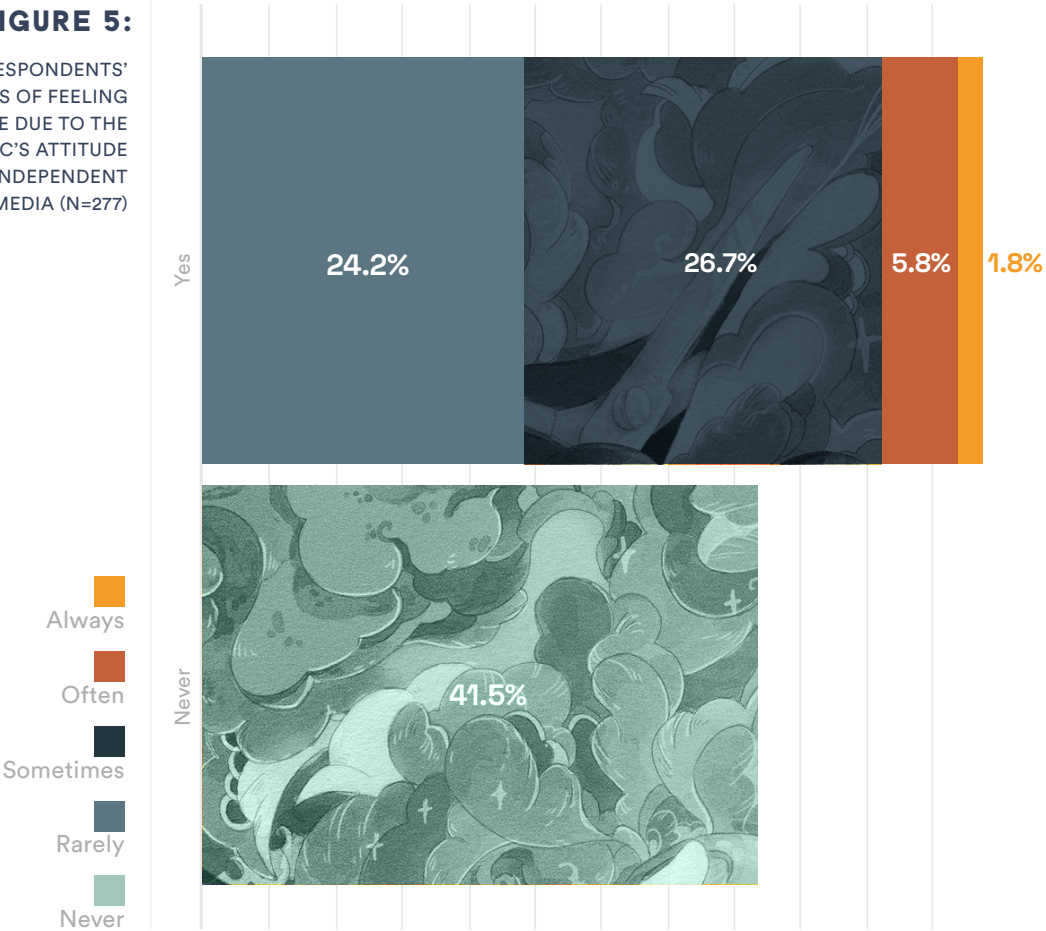
FIGURE 4:
RESPONDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF FEELING UNSAFE DUE TO THEIR GOVERNMENTS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS INDEPENDENT MEDIA (N=277)



Using a Spearman rank correlation test, we also found a significant and positive correlation between respondents' experiences in facing government reprisals and feeling unsafe due to the government's attitude towards independent media while controlling for friends' and families' concerns about safety (Spearman's $\rho(269) = .277; p < .001$). These results show that after accounting for respondents' experience in receiving advice or warnings from their friends and family about their work due to reasons concerning safety, those who have experienced some form of government reprisal—whether legal, physical or online—are likely to feel unsafe due to government's attitudes against independent media. In other words, a respondent's own experience in facing government reprisals may exacerbate the negative effects of governments' hostile attitudes towards independent media.

Next, we assessed how the public's attitude towards independent media affects our respondents' sense of safety. We found that 58.6% of respondents said that they have felt unsafe due to the public's attitude. Figure 5 presents the details of their frequencies.

FIGURE 5:
RESPONDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF FEELING UNSAFE DUE TO THE PUBLIC'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS INDEPENDENT MEDIA (N=277)




The number of respondents who have felt unsafe due to the public is lower than those who have felt unsafe due to their governments' attitudes, though is still the majority of respondents. This lower number could be influenced by respondents' perceptions about whether the public supports independent media—our survey found that 174 or 62.8% of respondents believed that the general public are supportive of independent media.

This section has been dedicated to demonstrating how hostile attitudes against independent media affect how safe our respondents felt about working in their media environment. The above findings correspond with the answers that our respondents gave to our open-ended question which gauged their aspiration and definition of media freedom. A significant portion of respondents associated media freedom with freedom from fear or reprisals due to their media work. In the next section, we explore the possible mechanisms through which attacks against independent media workers and the general hostile climate against the media affect the kind of stories that get published and circulated.







How a Hostile Media Environment Threatens Democracy

A free and independent media is often argued to be an important pillar of democracy due to its role as a watchdog over the government and providing information to the people (Whitten-Woodring 2009, 596). The proper functioning of this pillar depends heavily on media workers' freedom to work without being subject to pressure or threats. Prior research in contexts outside Southeast Asia has found that attacks and fear may discourage media workers from being critical in their news or information production (see for example Elbaz et al. 2017; Walulya and Nassanga 2020), affecting the information that gets published and read by the wider public.

Our survey results show that attacks against our respondents do affect what they end up publishing. We found that 49.8% of our respondents have concealed, changed or taken down their publication material or content for a variety of reasons, including acting in response to attacks and intimidation. Table 9 shows that attacks, threats and intimidation against media workers from both government authorities and the public have resulted in respondents changing, concealing or taking down their publication content and consequently affected what information gets distributed to the general public.

TABLE 9:
RESPONDENTS' REASONS
TO CHANGE, CONCEAL
OR TAKE DOWN THEIR
PUBLICATION CONTENT

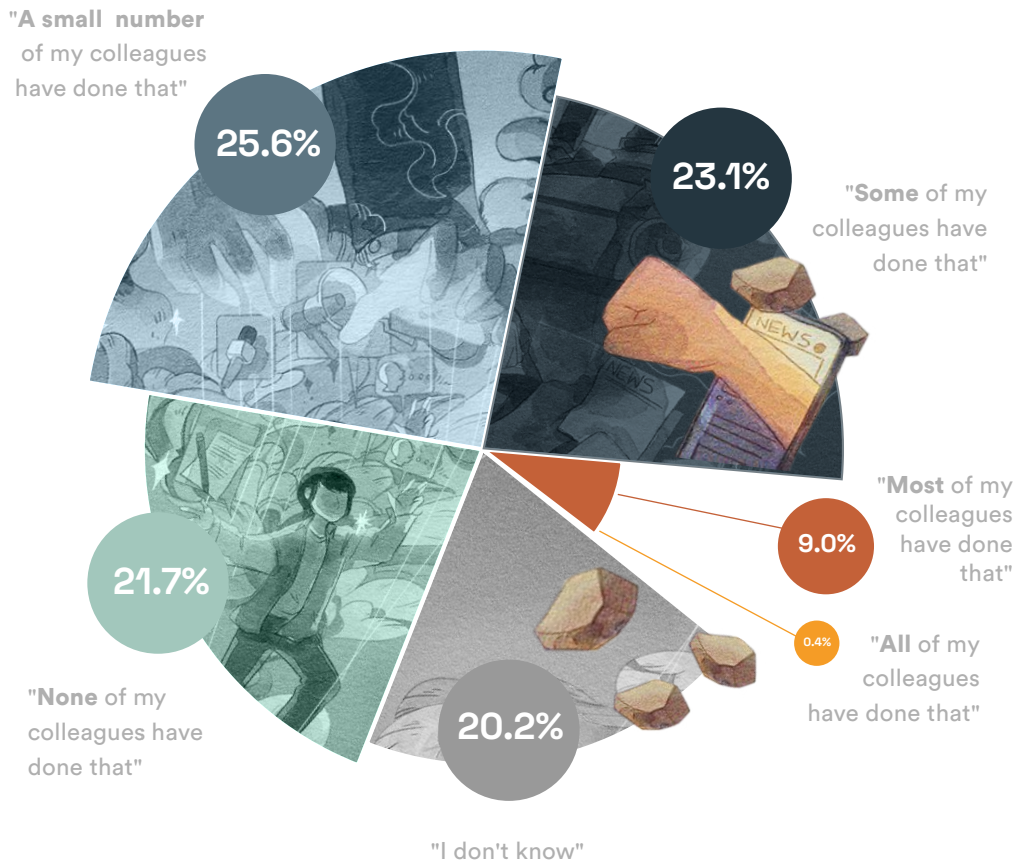
Reason	Frequency*	%**
Legal threats from the government	30	22.6%
Incorrect information	87	65.4%
Accusations of ethical violation	15	11.3%
Physical threats from the government	3	2.3%
Online harassment from the government	7	5.3%
Legal threats from members of the public	16	12.0%
Physical threats from members of the public	9	6.8%
Online harassment from members of the public	15	11.3%
Being offered gifts payment or rewards	2	1.5%
Pressure from colleagues	28	21.1%
Pressure from friends and/or family	8	6.0%
Possibility of losing income or clients	25	18.8%
Other	11	8.3%

* Missing data = 5 ** N = 133; options not exclusive.

We recognise that the act of concealing, changing or taking down one's own content may be viewed negatively by respondents, which may discourage them from answering truthfully. Due to this reason and the likelihood that the practice is not one that occurs in isolation especially if it is encouraged or shaped by the broader socio-political contexts, we also gauged our respondents' perceptions of whether their peers have had to conceal, change or take down their content due to fear or direct pressure. Figure 6 shows that most of our respondents have colleagues who have concealed, changed or taken down their content due to fear or direct pressure.

FIGURE 6:

RESPONDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THE NUMBER OF COLLEAGUES WHO HAVE CHANGED, CONCEALED OR TAKEN DOWN THEIR OWN CONTENT DUE TO FEAR OR DIRECT PRESSURE (N=277)

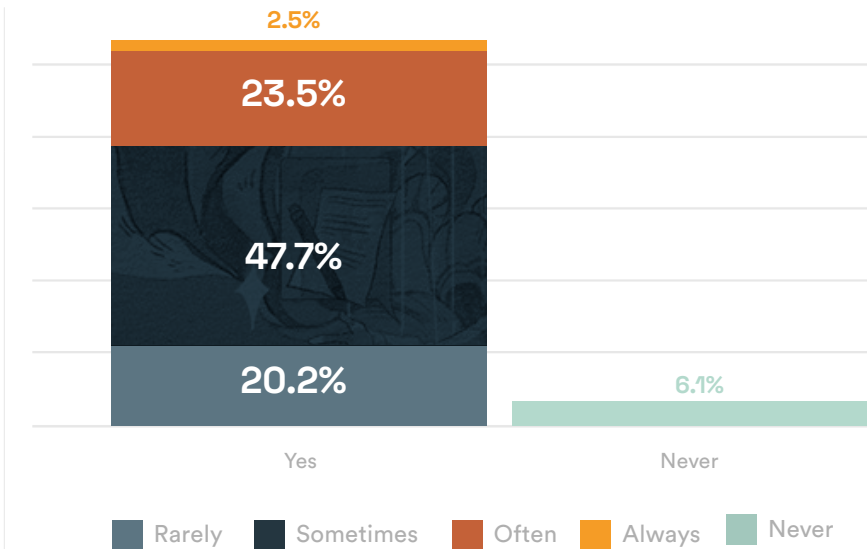


Pressure on media workers does not always come from external parties such as government authorities or members of the public; pressure and constraints on media workers' freedom to produce and publish information can also come from within their own newsrooms. Hanitzsch et al. (2019, 110) found that around the world, journalists tend to view seniors and procedures within their organisations as having more influence over work in comparison to personal networks and economic and political factors. Our earlier qualitative findings also show the critical role of newsrooms and media organisations in shaping what stories media workers can write and publish, and in the open-ended section of our survey several respondents mentioned that their vision of media freedom entails not being subject to the influence of media owners and their seniors in the newsroom.

It is worthy to note however, that the dynamics and decisions made within newsrooms are unlikely to be isolated from the role of personal networks and economic and political influences; newsrooms may act as “mediators” between these external influences and journalists. Certain practices within newsrooms such as self-censorship and agenda setting, which shape what journalists write and publish, may very well be the effects of the economic and political context (Hanitzsch et al. 2019, 113). For example, in Indonesia where media ownership is dominated by politicians or partisan conglomerates (Tapsell 2017), editorial decisions are embedded with political interests which may preclude politically-sensitive investigative stories from being published (focus group discussion, 13 July 2021).

The production of information does not only rely on media workers but also the ability and willingness of sources to provide information. In the open-ended section of the survey, 31 respondents (or 11.2%) associated their conceptions of media freedom with their ability to access information and 2 respondents included the ability of sources to be able to speak without facing reprisals for what they say as part of their definition of media freedom. To further explore the challenge of obtaining information, we asked respondents if their requests for information have been declined by potential sources. Figure 7 shows that 93.9% of respondents said that their potential sources have refused to provide them with information.

FIGURE 7:
RESPONDENTS’ EXPERIENCES OF HAVING REQUESTS FOR INFORMATION DECLINED BY POTENTIAL SOURCES (N=277)



We asked respondents whose requests for information have been refused what the reasons for the refusals were. Table 10 shows that potential sources’ reasons to refuse requests for information vary and that concerns over one’s authority to provide information and safety form two of the top three reasons.

TABLE 10:
RESPONDENTS' REASONS
TO CHANGE, CONCEAL
OR TAKE DOWN THEIR
PUBLICATION CONTENT

Reason	Frequency	%*
Safety concerns	94	36.2%
Lack of confidence in knowledge	97	37.3%
Lack of permission or authorisation to give comment	171	65.8%
Lack of trust in the media	55	21.2%
Legal concerns	56	21.5%

* N=260; options not exclusive

These findings illustrate the mechanisms through which various attacks against the media, whether offline or online, and whether committed by state or non-state actors, affect what media workers get to produce and publish. These effects can be direct or indirect. Direct influence can come in the form of demands to alter or take down a particular content or to prevent the publication of a particular story or content altogether, and negative consequences when these demands are not fulfilled. Indirect influence may come in various forms, such as through media workers' fears that are caused by the overall hostile climate against the media, the economic and personal ties that shape decision-making within media outlets and potential sources' fear of possible repercussions for revealing sensitive information.

Consequentially, these influences also shape what the general public get to know and learn from the media. This hurts democratic practice, which relies on the majority of the population having access to full information. First, the concealment of information violates the people's right to make informed decisions. Second, such concealment of information—or the conflation of certain perspectives—are likely to benefit those who are in power, therefore affecting how, or even whether, political figures are held accountable. In authoritarian political settings, these practices are likely to benefit incumbents and their political agenda through the imbalance of critical coverage, which is often heavily directed against the opposition or the issues and policies that they are advocating for. As a consequence, the media is likely to present a skewed picture of the socio-political reality. This results in an uneven playing field for political debates and competition, which makes the political process undemocratic.







Conclusion: A Demand for Safety Training and Collective Care for Media Workers

This study makes two main arguments. First, our findings show that attacks against independent media workers in Southeast Asia that are worthy of attention are not limited to assassinations and arrests. Our snapshot of respondents' experiences show that intimidation and harassment are common accounts among our respondents and that media safety involves many components such as online safety, physical safety, legal safety as well as the feeling of safety. Despite our small sample, our finding corroborates existing studies on the prevalence of threats and harassment against media workers and the argument that such attacks deserve to be paid more attention both academically and in

wider efforts to fight for media safety and freedom. Therefore, when we speak of media safety, it is not sufficient to point to records of assassinations and media workers in detention as its indicator.

Second, attacks on media workers should not be understood as mainly a violation of media freedom and attacks against the media as an institution, but also as attacks on specific individuals. These attacks are tied to an individual's identity as a media worker. This situation, however, should not be taken to mean that it is a problem that every media worker needs to solve on their own. Although attacks on media workers are attacks against individual

rights, the root causes of the problem are structural: these attacks are prevalent and continue to happen not only because there are actors with corrupt or ill intentions, but also because of the culture of impunity (Hayton 2021; IFJ 2020) and the lack of institutional support for media workers who are faced with such attacks. Holton et al (2021, 4) criticised how journalists are often left to fend for themselves in the face of the evolving forms of attacks, such as online threats and harassment, by following guidelines on how to respond to traditional forms of attacks. Our conversations with freelance journalists and artists in 2021 found that the overall situation is often worse for those who are not formally employed, who often lack the legal connections and resources that media organisations offer to their employees.

Therefore, efforts to combat attacks against media workers and foster a safer media environment must also focus on the personal nature of media safety. Although there is definitely a need for activism that pushes for changes in restrictive regulations, this goal is long-term. Advocacy for changes in laws and institutional commitments requires a significant amount of effort and time, in which the safety of the individual media worker cannot wait.

We suggest that addressing the personal nature of attacks against media workers, strategies to fight for media freedom include efforts to equip media workers with means to respond to attacks adequately on a personal level. We argue that safety trainings and resources should not only be made available to those who cover or report from high-risk environments such as conflict or warzones, but also those whose work entail covering issues that may lead to reprisals from a hostile government or public, regardless of the media workers' employment status. But what kind of safety training is appropriate?

Defining an exact and specific type of suitable safety training and resource provision is beyond the scope of this report, and any answer to such a question requires a consideration of the specific circumstances faced by the media workers that the trainings would target. Høiby and Garrido V.'s (2020, 69) assessment of several safety training manuals by international and local organisations concluded that safety training should consider the local contexts such as regime type, social institutions, legal issues, globalisation, technological advancement and differences in journalistic or media practices—as the aim of media safety training is to avoid the materialisation of threats against media workers, there needs to be comprehensive understanding of such threats before any training is designed. Other variables that may affect a media worker's experience and therefore need to be considered include gender, race, citizenship status, the specific role or job of the media worker and the intersectionality between them. For example, although the role of local fixers are essential for the media

industry, especially the success of foreign correspondence, the lack of recognition of their roles in comparison to foreign journalists from international outlets (Brooten and Verbruggen 2017, 442, 455; Baloch and Andresen 2020, 40) likely means that the dangers that fixers face are not paid as much attention, despite the fact that many fixers are also journalists themselves (Plaut and Klein 2019, 1699).

Another method of support is to establish a space for media workers to connect, share experiences and support each other. Due to the dangerous nature of media work in Southeast Asia, it is highly likely that taking up the job comes with fear and emotional distress (see for example Fishbein 2022; Ontheline 2022), suggesting the need for spaces for collective care. These spaces may allow media workers to access or participate various forms of resources or activities, from professional psycho-social support to informal sharing sessions with fellow media workers. In a context where non-democratic governments have the power to define and impose narratives that are in accordance with their interests, articulating one's own experiences and stories can be empowering. It is important to note that no one size fits all when it comes to collective care, as people may feel empowered and supported in different ways. We hope to explore these methods further in our next publication, which discusses the foundation of our upcoming media freedom network for media workers in this region.





"... efforts to combat attacks against media workers and foster a safer media environment must also focus on the personal nature of media safety ... We suggest that addressing the personal nature of attacks against media workers, strategies to fight for media freedom include efforts to equip media workers with means to respond to attacks adequately on a personal level."

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Appendix



A.
OVERALL
RECRUITMENT BY
EMPLOYMENT TYPE

Person who recruited	Freelance	Full-Time	Internship	Part-Time	Total
Freelance	28	33	1	14	76
Full-time	35	58	0	14	107
Internship	0	0	0	0	0
Part-time	7	19	1	1	28
Total recruits	70	110	2	29	211
Sample Proportions	0.358	0.515	0.007	0.12	1
Recruitment Proportions	0.332	0.521	0.009	0.137	1
Equilibrium	0.329	0.522	0.012	0.137	1
Mean Network Size, N	6.735	5.137	6.865	6.43	
Homophily (Hx)	0.121	-0.074	0.242	-0.709	
Standard Error	0.063	0.061	0.009	0.046	

B.
OVERALL
RECRUITMENT
BY GENDER

Person who recruited	Female	Male	Non-binary	Prefer not to mention	Total
Female	57	52	1	1	111
Male	34	60	1	5	100
Non-binary	3	0	0	0	3
Prefer not to mention	0	0	0	0	0
Total recruits	94	112	2	6	214
Sample Proportions	0.437	0.509	0.022	0.032	1
Recruitment Proportions	0.439	0.523	0.009	0.028	1
Equilibrium	0.422	0.519	0.019	0.04	1
Mean Network Size, N	5.394	5.628	100	8.206	
Homophily (Hx)	0.122	0.157	-0.997	0.229	
Standard Error	0.037	0.04	0.005	0.014	

C.
RECRUITMENT
WAVES
REQUIRED BY
EMPLOYMENT
TYPE

Number of Waves Reached 6

	Mean	Min	Max
Number of Waves Required	3	3	6
Tolerance	0.02		

Wave Number	0	1	2	3
Freelance	1	0.368	0.327	0.329
Full-time	0	0.434	0.524	0.521
Internship	0	0.013	0.015	0.013
Part-time	0	0.184	0.135	0.137

Wave Number	0	1	2	3
Freelance	0	0.327	0.331	0.33
Full-time	1	0.542	0.525	0.522
Internship	0	0	0.009	0.011
Part-time	0	0.131	0.136	0.137

Wave Number	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Freelance	0	0.25	0.299	0.322	0.327	0.329	0.329
Full-time	0	0.25	0.476	0.509	0.518	0.521	0.521
Internship	1	0.25	0.075	0.028	0.016	0.013	0.013
Part-time	0	0.25	0.15	0.141	0.138	0.137	0.137

Wave Number	0	1	2	3
Freelance	0	0.25	0.332	0.329
Full-time	0	0.679	0.51	0.522
Internship	0	0.036	0.013	0.013
Part-time	1	0.036	0.145	0.136

D.
RECRUITMENT
WAVES
REQUIRED
BY GENDER

Number of Waves Reached 6

	Mean	Min	Max
Number of Waves Required	4	4	5
Tolerance	0.02		

Wave Number	0	1	2	3	4
Female	1	0.514	0.434	0.42	0.421
Male	0	0.468	0.524	0.525	0.521
Non-binary	0	0.009	0.012	0.017	0.018
Prefer not to mention	0	0.009	0.03	0.038	0.039

Wave Number	0	1	2	3	4
Female	0	0.34	0.401	0.42	0.422
Male	1	0.6	0.532	0.518	0.518
Non-binary	0	0.01	0.022	0.02	0.019
Prefer not to mention	0	0.05	0.046	0.042	0.04

Wave Number	0	1	2	3	4	5
Female	0	1	0.514	0.434	0.42	0.421
Male	0	0	0.468	0.524	0.525	0.521
Non-binary	1	0	0.009	0.012	0.017	0.018
Prefer not to mention	0	0	0.009	0.03	0.038	0.039

Wave Number	0	1	2	3	4	5
Female	0	0.25	0.526	0.469	0.436	0.425
Male	0	0.25	0.33	0.463	0.508	0.518
Non-binary	0	0.25	0.067	0.027	0.019	0.018
Prefer not to mention	1	0.25	0.077	0.041	0.038	0.039

E.
 QUALITATIVE
 DATA
 COLLECTION
 TIMELINE
PHASE 1*

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		

*The full report of the focus group discussions and interviews in Phase 1 is published in Primandari, F. F., Hassan, S. & Melasandy, S. 2021. *Envisioning Media Freedom and Independence: Narratives from Southeast Asia*. Media Freedom in Southeast Asia Series. No. 1. New Naratif.

F.
QUALITATIVE
DATA
COLLECTION
TIMELINE

PHASE 2

No.	Event	Participants	Date	Notes
1.	Interview 22 (follow-up)	1	20 January 2022	Journalist
2.	Interview 23 (follow-up)	1	24 January 2022	Journalist
3.	Interview 24 (follow up)	1	25 January 2022	Journalist
4.	Interview 25	1	3 February 2022	Journalist



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