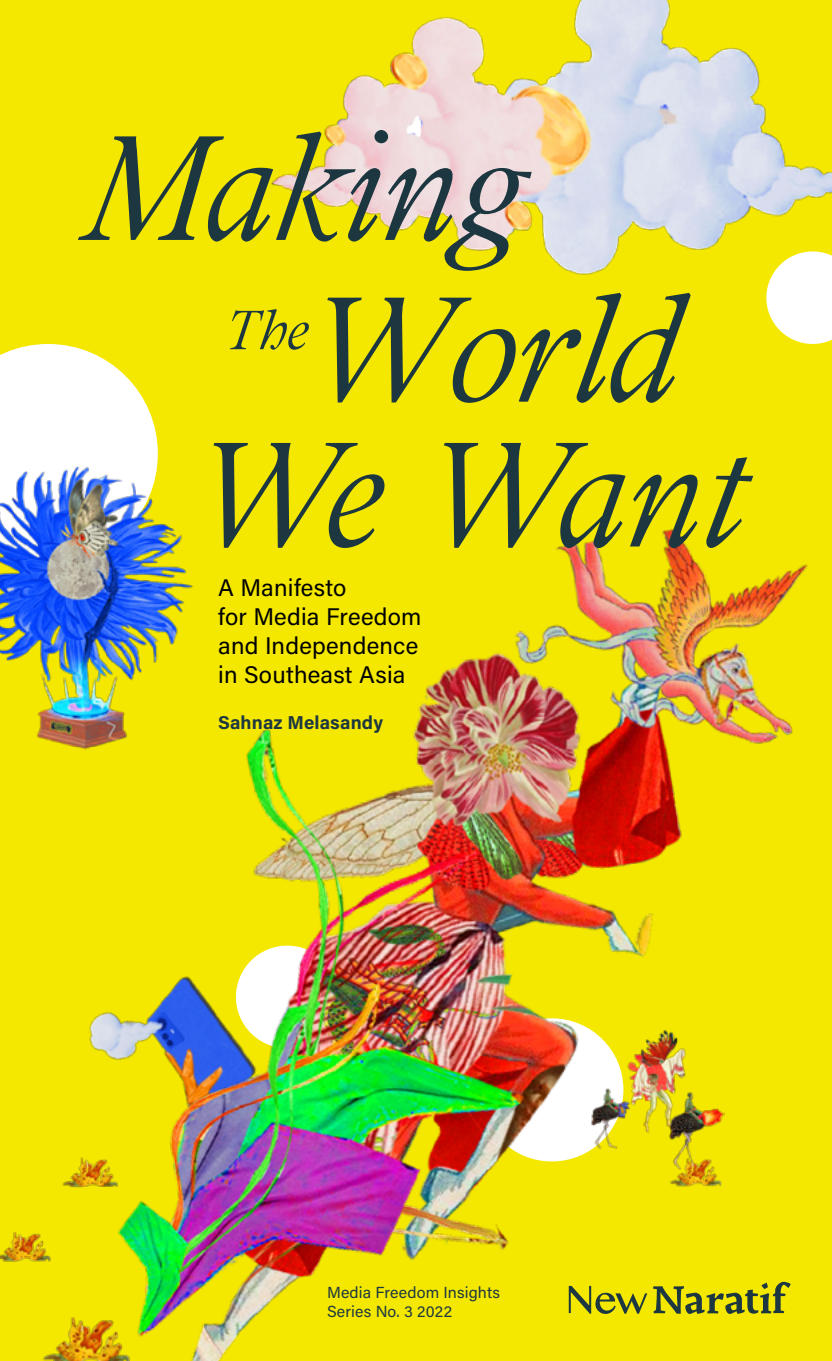


# *Making* *The World* *We Want*

A Manifesto  
for Media Freedom  
and Independence  
in Southeast Asia

Sahnaz Melasandy



*Making*

*The World*

*We Want*

A Manifesto  
for Media Freedom  
and Independence  
in Southeast Asia



## **MAKING THE WORLD WE WANT: A MANIFESTO FOR MEDIA FREEDOM AND INDEPENDENCE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**

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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 INSIGHTS** 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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# INTRODUCTION



# New Naratif believes that independent media is vital to building Southeast Asian democracy.

Having conducted qualitative and quantitative research to investigate the problems facing independent media, we present this manifesto as a foundational living document informing the establishment of a Southeast Asian Media Freedom Network.

At the outset, the Network aims to

- a)** improve the safety and security of independent media workers,
- b)** promote gender equality and platform marginalised voices,
- and **c)** empower collective action by media workers to create financially, physically, and mentally sustainable lives.

# OVERVIEW



This manifesto builds upon findings from two previous publications in our Media Freedom Insights series. After conducting interviews and focus group discussions with 44 independent media workers from June to July 2021 and running an exploratory survey of 277 respondents from September to October 2021, we tried to capture the nuances of the emergent challenges to, opportunities for, and resistance by media workers, specific to the Southeast Asian context. Based on these conversations, we gather that achieving media freedom and independence requires the collective effort of various communities in the region.

In *Envisioning Media Freedom and Independence: Narratives from Southeast Asia* (Primandari, Hassan, and Melasandy, 2021), we explored some of the most pressing issues faced by independent media workers. We define independent media workers as:

“... those who identify themselves as working in media and are not funded or employed by state-owned and state-sponsored media”, including freelancers and formal employers in the region and the diaspora, producing non-fiction media outputs whether in textual or non-textual formats

(Ibid., 22-23).

We asked the crucial question, “What does media freedom mean and look like to you?” and uncovered dimensions beyond the absence of legal restrictions and physical threats such as gender, nationality, race, geographical location, and employment status.

Furthermore, in *Beyond the Absence of Killings and Arrests: Exploring “Media Safety” in the Context of Southeast Asia* (Primandari 2022), we discussed three aspects of media safety: (1) legal charges, physical threats, and online harassment from state and non-state actors alike; (2) the sense of safety as influenced by government and public attitudes as well as concerns expressed by friends and family members; and (3) the effects of said attacks such as self-censorship, being pressured to alter the content of their work and being refused by potential sources when requesting information. Our conception of media safety builds upon Sarikakis’s (2017, 123) concept of journalism safety which is “the everyday ability to perform one’s duties free from assault, intimidation and harassment, ... free from physical and psychological violence”.



We believe that the Southeast Asian media space is a contested landscape without definite boundaries. Being an independent media worker often implies engagement in an inherent fight or activism for specific public causes and efforts to reclaim the space that has been long-dominated by hegemonic narratives that favour those with power and influence. In addition to the long-term goals of political and legal institutional reforms, we believe that the pursuit of media freedom and independence should start at the individual level, where media workers are equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate the hostile media space. As such, we call for a more holistic and intersectional approach to bring about positive changes for media workers and, by extension, every element of our societies.

We further emphasise the role of public participation in supporting more comprehensive access to information. Our democracy depends on how we perceive our surroundings, engage in critical discussions, and ensure that decisions are made for the public good. As one of our research participants said:

“ . . . 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 . . . As public opinion expands, media freedom and freedom of speech also expand.”

Focus group discussion, 6 July 2021

# PRINCIPLES



We intend to implement the following proposals as part of our Media Freedom Network. They are in no way exhaustive, since we understand that we may not be able to fully represent the situation in every part of Southeast Asia. While we do not try to be prescriptive in terms of the steps laid out, everyone is welcome to adopt any suggestions that might fit their context or situation.

PRINCIPLE 01.

Media  
freedom,  
concurrently  
freedom of  
expression  
and  
information,



— as established  
in Article 19 of the  
Universal Declaration  
of Human Rights.


is a universal  
human right.

## PRINCIPLE 02.

The labour rights  
of media workers  
should be protected

and workers should  
have the right to  
collectively bargain  
for improved  
working conditions.

## PRINCIPLE 03.



Media  
organisations  
should be  
free from  
discrimination  
and sexual  
violence




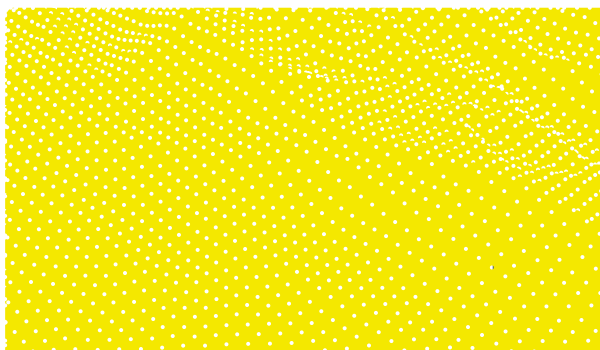
while employing  
a victim-centred  
approach when  
such violence  
does occur  
internally or out  
in the field.



PRINCIPLE 04.

Inclusive,  
collaborative,  
and empowering  
practices are  
crucial

for the  
sustainability  
of the  
Southeast  
Asian media  
landscape.

A yellow rectangular area with a white dotted pattern, partially overlapping the text 'Asian media landscape'.



**We are  
strongest  
when we  
work together.**

Collective action  
and care must be  
at the heart of  
our community.

Thus, power and  
resources should  
be distributed  
rather than  
centralised,  
and exercised  
collectively rather  
than directed from  
the top down.



#01

# SAFETY AND SECURITY



“[It is] the freedom for every journalist to report on all issues without having 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



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

Focus group discussion, 8 July 2021





In understanding how independent media workers in Southeast Asia experience safety and security, our first two reports (Primandari, Hassan, and Melasandy 2021; Primandari 2022) note the following concerns:



Media safety does not only pertain to killings and arrests—dangers and threats may be manifested in surveillance, doxing, verbal harassment, and other forms of intimidation. These challenges may also vary depending on each media worker’s attributes, such as gender identity, geographical location, employment status, and citizenship.



When covering sensitive issues, media workers have had to employ various strategies to circumvent censorship, such as altering the tone and framing of pieces, thoroughly checking and editing their work, using creative visual metaphors and publishing in specific languages, which may invite less adverse reactions. While these strategies have worked for our research participants, such measures should not be the norm.



Online attacks are rampant and still increasing. Evolutions in internet usage have brought about unintended consequences for media websites and individual media workers on social media platforms when they publish stories unfavourable to specific demographics. Our survey confirms that online harassment is the most common form of harassment compared to physical threats and legal charges.

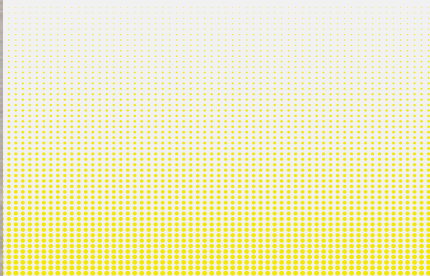


The overall political climate across Southeast Asia is increasingly hostile towards media workers. Several laws and regulations are being used to hinder media work.

# PROPOSALS

Southeast Asian media work takes place in the context of both authoritarian and neoliberal profit-oriented systems, and no single proposal can unravel them.

We suggest several possible approaches below, while bearing in mind that these are not solutions in and of themselves.



## PROPOSALS

### 01.

We must normalise conversations around the various dangers and threats towards media workers' safety and security. We need to facilitate a shared awareness of struggle through a support network where media workers can share their personal experiences and exchange modes of resistance and safety practices across borders, as a first step toward unravelling a system that has continuously skewed incentives towards profit accumulation rather than (or even at the expense of) the welfare of people.



### 02.

We must open up trusted spaces to build emotional support between independent media workers. One example could be regular check-ins among workers. International Press Institute (IPI)'s [Ontheline programme](#) (2022) researched emotional impacts of attacks on journalists, arguing that not only is professional psychological help necessary for media workers, but more importantly is their ability to talk with trusted people about such attacks. They found a positive correlation between access to networks and lower levels of emotional burdens – these networks can be places to find relief and draw strength from.

### 03.

Media workers should be provided with training(s) on digital hygiene and holistic security in responding to online attacks. In these training sessions, they should be able to discuss issues suited to their needs, such as handling doxing of personal accounts, securely communicating with sources and colleagues, and other topics critical to their safety. Afterwards, they can collectively develop formal and peer support mechanisms in responding to such attacks.

### 04.

Safety training should consider local contexts such as regime types, social institutions, legal issues, globalisation, technological advancement, and differences in journalistic or media practices (Høiby and Garrido V. 2020, 69). We also need to ensure that such training is available to media workers who cover high-risk situations such as open conflicts and warzones, and those who report on sensitive issues that may attract reprisals from hostile governments and the public, regardless of their employment status.



## PROPOSALS

05.

Additionally, formulating toolkits and guidelines for specific contexts around media work in Southeast Asia (e.g., what to do when you are interrogated, how to cover protests safely) will be helpful and may ensure knowledge exchanges beyond the network.

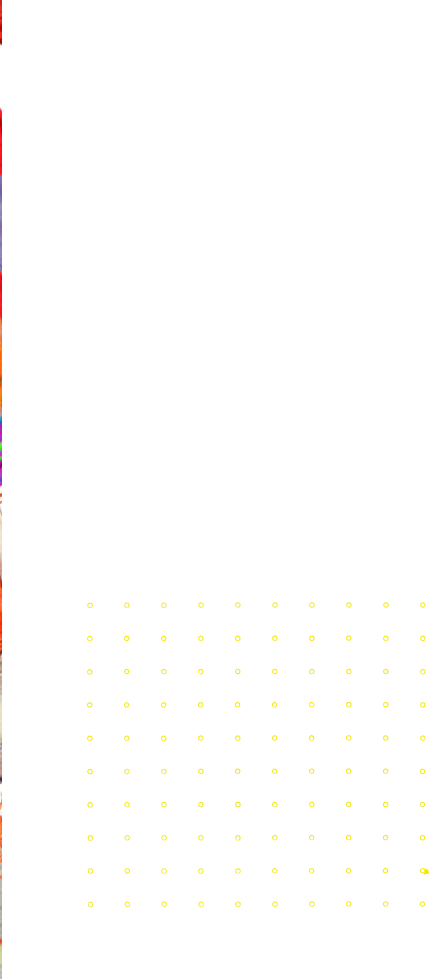
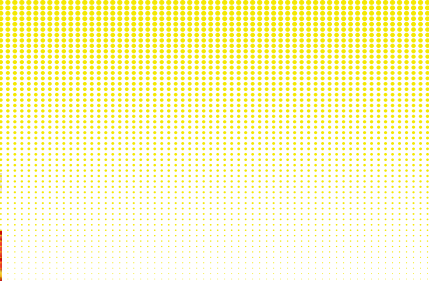


06.

Although the current political climate in Southeast Asia may seem bleak, it is always a good idea to learn more about how current laws and regulations impact media work through contextual legal briefings so that media workers are kept well-informed of their position from a legal perspective and can come up with mitigation strategies in worst-case scenarios.

07.

We should support local coalitions pushing for institutional regulatory reforms and amplify local initiatives that offer alternative modes of responding to attacks against media workers.

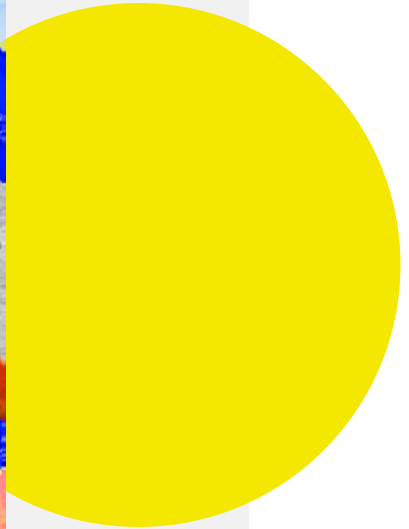






#02

# GENDERED AND MARGINALISED EXPERIENCES



“ ... if you travel together with your co-worker, they treat you different. They think that I’m the assistant, and my assistant is—because he's a male photographer—my assistant is the journalist. So that's happened.”

Personal interview, 20 January 2022

“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



We examined how identity markers attributed to independent media workers affect their work. Here are some of our key findings (Primandari, Hassan, and Melasandy 2021; Primandari 2022):



Reprisals against media work have a gendered dimension. In more than one instance, our research participants shared their experiences dealing with discrimination and harassment, among colleagues or in the field when reporting, based on their gender identities or outward appearances.



In addition, some issues that female research participants mentioned included discrimination—such as gender pay gaps, fewer promotion opportunities compared with males and the perception that they are more suitable for “light” stories than others—these collectively impede opportunities to pursue stories based on their own merit. This was further corroborated by our survey results below.

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%

### Comparison of Women and Men Respondents' Issue Coverage

Source: Primandari 2022, 20



Some of female independent media workers observed that male journalists tended to feature more men as their sources, thus essentially excluding their's and others' voices. This could lead to blind spots, especially when reporting gender-based violence, resulting in insensitive coverage causing further harm to or re-victimising survivors.

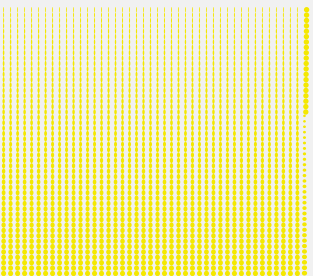


One's citizenship status proved to be a determining dimension. Refugee media workers generally face a unique challenge compared to their counterparts. Since most countries in Southeast Asia are refugee transit countries, they are barred from accessing fundamental rights and legal privileges that come with being a citizen—not to mention threats of deportation. Displacement puts them in a highly vulnerable position because they need to be mindful of the kinds of stories and content which they produce.



Resources are commonly centred in capital cities, which has resulted in unequal access to opportunities for media workers in the peripheries. Moreover, our research participants based in rural areas face challenges such as lower wages and more deadly threats to their safety compared to their urban counterparts. Similarly, emergent blind spots in these aspects may overlook important stories that could be crucial for helping us make important decisions.

# PROPOSALS





## PROPOSALS

### 01.

A safe environment for media workers of all genders starts within the workplace. Media organisations should prioritise having survivor-centred, anti-sexual violence regulations. The International Labour Organisation (2015) has produced a sample Sexual Harassment Policy which organisations can adopt. At the very least, comprehensive gender sensitivity training should be mandatory for all media workers.

### 02.

All media workers should be able to pursue, or be assigned to pursue, stories of personal interest without being discriminated against based on their ascribed identities.



## PROPOSALS

### 03.

Media workers should be equipped with a trauma-informed approach to reporting violence, especially in marginalised communities. There are guidelines on reporting on specific issues published by local media advocacy organisations and international research centres. For example, the Journalism Initiative on Gender-Based Violence Team published *Silence and Omissions: A media guide for covering gender-based violence* (Thompson, 2021) to help the media and other entities report on gender-based violence and protect journalists who risk their lives in the course of their work. Such guidelines should be better distributed among regional media workers (e.g., translating them to local languages, organising workshops) to avoid exploiting sources or informants and treating them with dignity instead.



## PROPOSALS

04.

Resources should be redistributed to media workers from marginalised backgrounds, including those outside urban areas. One way is for media organisations to support their careers is by accommodating these workers through remote workshops, while ensuring that such training is fully participatory by providing rigorous feedback and stipends to compensate them for their time and resources incurred for joining such programmes.

05.

Furthermore, sponsoring refugee communities could also help level the playing field. For instance, [The Archipelago](#), a volunteer-run non-profit organisation amplifying refugee voices, welcomes anyone who would like to offer their services free of charge in areas such as translation, writing, and literary editing. Such communities exist in many parts of Southeast Asia. It is also imperative that the media community in Southeast Asia welcomes and treats refugee media workers as one of their own when carrying out their roles. Refugees should be judged on their qualifications and ability to work, not their "legal" status.





#03

# SUSTAINABILITY AND ALTERNATIVE FUNDING MODELS



“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



“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



Our research noted the following concerns :



Precarity is a severe issue in media work. Many of our research participants have had to take on additional jobs because the pay from their media work is barely enough to cover their expenses. This is primarily the case for independent media workers who often have to wait weeks or months for payment after filing their invoices.



Our research participants and journalism lecturers/trainers have shared that younger journalists are more prompted to choose other career tracks due to job insecurity. Moreover, there is a general lack of appreciation for media workers.



An underlying issue is how the current economic order is prompting media organisations to rely on venture capital or local conglomerates. Studies have shown that the existing funding structure—such as capital provided by governments, organisations, tycoons, and political personas—may influence what information can and cannot be published.



On top of the stiff competition for limited funding, grants—whether individual or institutional—are sometimes only afforded to those publishing conforming, non-critical views, and whose values align with the donors'. Those who dissent from those views, regardless of their validity, are often marginalised and left to fend for themselves. Even in cases where media outlets have received funding from donors, sometimes they still need to look for other ways to acquire money.



# PROPOSALS



## PROPOSALS

### 01.

Sustainability must be considered holistically. It pertains to both (1) how long a media company can operate and (2) how long it can guarantee its workers' job security as well as fair and living wages. The financial, physical, and mental sustainability of individual workers within an organisation should be considered alongside the sustainability of the organisation itself. With economic precarity and fears of losing jobs shadowing media workers, these workers should be allowed to collectively bargain to fight for better workplace policies and wages.

### 02.

The sustainability of independent media workers must also be considered. The issue of precarity can be more complicated for freelancers since they are in no position to raise their rates – other freelancers are willing to replace them on short notice.

Nonetheless, Wood et al. (2018) found that internet-based communities enable workers to support each other and share information. This in turn increases security and protection despite the non-existence of unions. However, these communities are fragmented by nationality, occupation, and platform, which can hinder collective action unless mediated by other coalitions.





## PROPOSALS

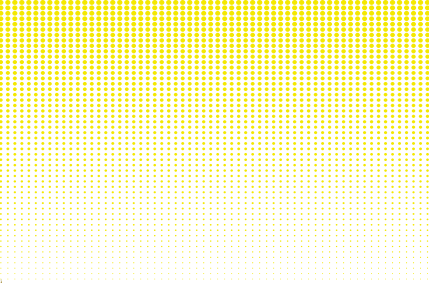
**06.**

Moreover, there is an increasing need for further research into alternative funding models such as memberships, mutual aid, and co-operatives because relying on donors may not be sustainable in the long run.

**07.**

More importantly, media organisations and workers should engage the community. For media outputs to be meaningful and impactful enough to push for positive societal changes, we need to understand our communities more and learn how to best engage them. If the goal is media freedom and independence, one sure way to achieve them is by having public support for media workers' work.





# WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?



The proposals in this manifesto may evolve as the Southeast Asian media space progresses or regresses. Thus, they are intended to be evaluated regularly so that we may respond to novel forms of attacks appropriately. While the proposals may react to immediate threats, the ultimate goal is to push for transformation. This can only occur if the efforts from all key actors—media workers and the wider public alike, as well as those holding decision-making positions in organisations or governments—are mutually synergised.

What might an ideal world look like? Here's one example. If we agree that

■ we need to unravel the profit-oriented system that prioritises capital accumulation over the **public good**, and that the profit motive dehumanises media workers and introduces incentives that dilute their public mission;

■ independent news coverage and fact-checking is a **public good** with an important role in upholding democracy by holding those with power to account and ensuring transparency;

■ That **public goods**—such as the civil service, police, or firefighters—must remain free from political interference in order to do their work properly;

For media organisations to fulfil the important role that the media needs to play in a vibrant democracy that holds those with power accountable, they need to be non-profit, collectively funded, and independently run.

Since our work is exploratory, we do not desire to speak for and over everyone. We invite you to reimagine the world with us by asking yourselves these questions:



What kind of  
society do you  
wish to live in?  
How do we get  
there?



In what ways  
do media  
freedom and  
independence, or  
the lack thereof,  
affect you?



How would  
you redesign  
the media  
landscape in  
Southeast Asia?





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# *Making The World We Want*

**New Naratif**

2022

