

Investigative Journalism in Malaysia: A study of two English Language Newspapers

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Abstract—The article entitled, “Investigative Journalism in Malaysia: A study of two Malaysian English Language Newspapers” intends to find out the level of coverage of investigative news by two English language newspapers in Malaysia, namely, *New Straits Times* and *the Star*.

The objectives of this study are to determine whether the two newspapers *engage* in investigative reporting, the frequency of their involvement, as well as knowing the perception of Malaysian journalists towards investigative journalism.

This research becomes imperative owing to the importance of investigative journalism to democracy in particular and to the society in general. Malaysia is seen as a regional actor in the ASEAN countries and one of the fastest developing countries in the world. With this in mind, the press in the country is expected to be developing in this direction, considering its social responsibility role to the Malaysian society.

Investigative journalism however owes its importance to the fact that it can *contribute* to democratic administration of public affairs. Its function is to watch over the public interest by making the government responsible for their actions. But this largely depends on the degree at which press freedom is being allowed in a country. There is always tension amongst the various parties who have vested interest in media contents. For instance, the publishers and editors emphasize on the need for freedom to publish; the journalistic codes aim to protect the autonomy of journalists from undue pressure of publishers and advertisers. The government on the other hand is trying to suppress press freedom.

Hence, it appears that investigative journalism walks on a tight rope through these conflicting demands and priorities, particularly when both private and state media control pose a threat to freedom of journalistic expression. The target of investigative journalism is not only to get professional satisfaction, but also enhancing a more healthy community at large.

Therefore, through the use of qualitative and quantitative research methods, this article explores how these factors have helped to advance or hinder investigative journalism in Malaysia. One significant findings in this research work is that *Malaysian* journalists have interest to do investigative reporting, but the various laws and regulations put in place by the government appears to undermine this interest.

I. INTRODUCTION

Journalists are not only the ones who carry out investigation. Police forces and sociologists all carry out investigations in their various fields. Archeologists do it in examining the ruins of ancient civilizations, and historians do it to analyze the past. Many other professions are led to practice investigations as well. But what makes journalistic investigations so strong and special is that it is not a practice that is expected from journalists. But more often than not the government and other investigative agencies fall short of investigating fraudulent practices by public office holders. In this regard, it lies on the shoulders of investigative journalists to bring this to public notice as part of its watchdog role to the society. Teamwork is needed in this type of reporting and so requires the collaboration of different types of expertise. Thus, reporters, news researchers, librarians, legal specialists, editors, statistical analysts and other relevant people are essential in the production of an investigative report.

As noted by Hugo De Burgh (2000) in his book, *Investigative Journalism: Context and Practice*, “when covering a story, investigative journalists face moral and ethical dilemmas which may bring them into conflict with the law. Most areas of dispute though they may turn on differing facts, centre upon the tension between the investigative journalist’s right to freedom of expression and competing rights associated with a variety of other interests”.

Having introduced the paper, it is imperative to note the objectives for which the research is set to achieve. The first is to find out the frequency at which investigative stories occurred in the newspapers. The second objective is to determine the perception of Malaysian journalists towards investigative reporting. Thirdly is to identify the various investigative journalism techniques employed by the *New Strait Times* and *Star* newspapers in gathering and writing of their investigative stories. The last one is to know some of the obstacles Malaysian journalists face in the course of carrying out investigative reporting.

As the case may be, research questions are formulated in other to ensure that the objectives are fully realized. They include the following:

- a. How often do the newspapers carry investigative stories?

- b. What are the investigative journalism techniques adopted by the newspapers in writing the stories?
- c. Are there follow-up stories in the investigative reports?
- d. Who are the subjects of the investigative stories?
- e. What are the various categories of the stories (political, economic, social, and religious)?
- f. Are there bylines in the stories?
- g. What page(s) of the newspapers do the stories appear?
- h. How many pages are devoted to the stories?

The research is anchored on three theoretical frameworks, namely, freedom of the press, Social responsibility theory and Agenda setting theory. Besides, a combination of both qualitative and quantitative methods was used in the study. This means that each of the two newspapers was content analyzed for a period of 12 months (October 2004 to September 2005) as shown in the table below.

A. Frequency of investigative stories in the *New Straits Times* newspaper

Figure 1 shows the number of times investigative news appeared on the pages of *New Straits Times* over a period of twelve months. Each month bears the number of times the paper published investigative news. In the same vein, the total number of occurrences per days of the months is totaled at the extreme right corner of the table. It must be noted however that all the months do not end on 31st, and this is indicated in the table. For instance, February ends on 28 while April, June, September and November end on 30th. The table for the *New Straits Times* newspaper shows that from October 2004 to September 2005, the paper did not carry any investigative news. The same applies to the months of March, May, July and September 2005. But in February 2005, two investigative stories were recorded. In the same vein, one investigative story each was recorded in April and June 2005 respectively. The newspaper recorded the highest number of investigative stories in August 2005 with a total number of 3. This brings the number of investigative stories to seven (7) for a period of one year.

B. Frequency of investigative stories in the *Star* newspaper

Figure 2 shows the number of times the star carry investigative stories over a period of twelve months. It could be seen from the table that within this period, the star carried a total of six (6) stories. From October 2004 to February 2005, the newspaper did not carry any investigative story. In the same vein, the paper did not carry any investigative story in May, June, August and September 2005. However, in March 2005, I carried three (3) investigative stories. Again, two (2) stories were recorded in April 2005 and one (1) in July 2005. This brings the total number of investigative news for the period to six (6).

C. Analyzing questionnaires from the respondents (*Malaysian Journalists*).

The data was analyzed by using percentages (%). In this regard, the answers given by the respondents were based on 100%. Therefore, the differences of opinion for each question answered and the degree of interest shown by Malaysian journalists towards investigative journalism was considered in taking decisions concerning the accuracy or otherwise of the findings of this research work.

A total number of 80 questionnaires were distributed to the Malaysian journalists. Out of this number, 53 were answered and returned. The respondents are journalists from the *New Straits Times* and the *Radio Television Malaysia* (RTM). Meanwhile journalists from the *Star* newspaper refused to participate in the exercise.

On the issue of freedom of the press in Malaysia, 11.3% or 6 of the total number of respondents said there is freedom of the press in the country while 15.1% or 8 of the total number said there is no freedom of the press in the country. Again, 73.6% representing 39 of the total number of respondents said there is partial freedom of the press in Malaysia while there was no response for "others". On whether the media in Malaysia have freedom to do investigative reporting, 30.2% representing 16 of the total number of respondents said all the media in Malaysia have freedom to do investigative reporting. In the same vein, 24.5% or 13 of the total number of respondents said they were "not sure" while 1.9% or 1 of the total number of respondents said "others".

The third part is on the social responsibility role of the press. This part of the questionnaire dwells on the social responsibility theory of the press, particularly as it concerns the Malaysian environment. Here, 94.3% representing 50 of the total number of respondents said that the Malaysian media is playing their social responsibility role very well while 1.9% or 1 of the total number of respondents said they are not doing it very well.

Moreover, out of the total number that were asked to comment on whether Malaysian journalists have interest to do investigative reporting, 50% representing 27 of the total number said they have interest, while 11.3% representing 6 of the total number said they have no interest. Besides, 37.8% representing 20 respondents said that there is partial interest to do investigative reporting. Responding to future of investigative journalism in Malaysia, 52.8% representing 28 of the respondents are optimistic that the future of investigative journalism in the country is bright while 37.8% representing 20 respondents said that the future will remain same as now and 9.4% representing 5 respondents said the future of investigative journalism in Malaysia will be worse than now.

II. FINDINGS

Having analyzed both the content of the newspapers and the questionnaires, the following findings are noted.

1. The rate at which the two newspapers carry investigative issues in Malaysia is alright considering the fact that investigative reports take up

months and even years to be completed. For a period of 12 months, *New Straits Times* reported only seven (7) cases while *the Star* reported only six (6), making a total number of thirteen (13) in all.

2. It is noted here that though Malaysian journalists see investigative journalism as a difficult task to do, yet they still have interest in it.
3. It is observed that the difficulty in doing investigative reporting is the direct consequence of lack of press freedom in the country. This means that though Malaysian journalists have interest to do investigative reporting, yet the numerous obstacles which work against the journalism profession in the country are subduing this interest. These restrictions include the internal security Acts (ISA), the Printing and Publishing Act (PPA), censorship and organizational policy among others. Under this situation, the Malaysian media finds it difficult to operate.

A. Evaluation of Findings

The evaluation of findings of this research is based on the three theoretical frameworks guiding it. They include, freedom of the press, social responsibility theory and Agenda-setting theory. This becomes necessary in view of the fact that each of these theories plays a vital role in determining the content of the investigative reports. For instance, the social responsibility theory talks about how the press should operate in playing her social roles to the public. In this theory, the press is expected to be socially responsible to the public and to the government. It therefore requires a balancing of private enterprise rights with vital social interests. Again, the press itself should acknowledge that considerations of public welfare could override unfettered utterances. Besides, individuals should realize that they cannot demand the media to publish anything they say. There is a duty to think before anything is published in newspapers. The right to freedom of expression in most cases is not absolute; it is conditional upon acceptance of this social duty or obligation. If a publication systematically panders to vulgarity, sensationalism, or degradation of the human race, it has forfeited its moral right to freedom of the press. Individuals are also not allowed to deliberately lie, libel, slander, or defame other individuals because doing so forfeits their social bond with others.

As could be seen from the findings, *New Straits Times* reported seven investigative cases while the star reported six over a period of 12 months. Though this may not be enough in view of Malaysian public expectations for a socially responsible press, yet it has set a pace for reporting issues of social concern such as health, environmental degradation and transportation.

The Agenda-setting theory sets out to ensure that the news media creates public awareness and concern on salient issues. According to the proponents of this theory, "Agenda setting describes a very powerful influence of the media – the ability to tell us what issues is important". This includes telling people not only what to think but also what to think

about. Agenda-setting is believed to occur because the press must be selective in reporting news.

More so, news outlets act as gate-keepers of information and make choices about what to report and what not. What the public knows and cares for at any given time is mostly a product of media-gate keeping. This implies that the public becomes aware of a particular issue when the media has raised it through the media of communication. Moreover, the public becomes interested on such issues based on the manner in which the media handles it.

There are two reasons for agenda-setting. One is that the public has a limited attention span for an issue. If an issue does not echo with the public's interest, it will not appear on the public's agenda. Second is the limited capacity for an issue to appear in the group, the public, the press or the government because of constrained sources, space and money. So the focal point of agenda setting theory is to find consensus among the differences in the individual point of views. Increased exposure to the news results in increased consensus about public agenda. Again, in the words of Shaw and Martin (1992), agenda setting works to bring some groups within the community closer together. Moreover, agenda-setting helps us to know what to think and how to think about it. The first level of agenda setting is the selection of object or issue for attention (what to think about). The second level is the selection of attributes for thinking (how to think about it).

It must be stated therefore that Malaysian journalists are willing to do investigative journalism; hence they try to set the agenda by pointing the public to the ugly state of some of the social utilities in the country. But the extent they carry out this role is still in question. This is so because no individual or group of individuals was held accountable for these issues.

On freedom of the press, it should be stated that no media can perform its work creditably in an environment where freedom of the press and that of expression is lacking. There is no doubt that a free press plays key role in sustaining and monitoring a healthy democracy. It also contributes to accountability, good governance and economic development. But Malaysia's 1984 Printing Presses and Publication Act requires all print media to obtain a permit and renew it annually. The Home Affairs Ministry can restrict or ban a publication outright if it is considered likely to be prejudicial to public order, morality, or security; likely to alarm public opinion; likely to be prejudicial to national interest. Also, article 7(1) says that if the Minister refuses to grant or renew a permit, no legal remedy or judicial review is available. So any decision of the Minister to suspend a license or permit shall be final and shall not be called in question by any court on any ground whatsoever, and no person shall be given an opportunity to be heard with regard to suspension of the license or permit according to the Act. In addition, maliciously publishing false news is a crime under Article 8A of the law. Malice is presumed the defendant has the burden of proving that he or she took reasonable measures to verify the truth of the news. Strict licensing laws, self-censorship, and pervasive political influence dominate the press in Malaysia. Under the country's severe Internal

Security Act (ISA), journalists are also subject to indefinite detention without trial, as well as harsh libel penalties.

The ruling National Front coalition and corporations allied with government control all major newspapers and broadcast stations, ensuring that a substantial degree of official influence over the news published in the country. The only exception is the internet, which has so far remained censorship-free. Since 1998, mainstream journalists have been pushing the government to repeal the respective laws in favour of a self-regulatory press but to no avail. Under this situation, it should be noted that Malaysian journalists tread on the murky waters of repressive laws, hence they find it extremely difficult investigate those in authority.

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Figure 1. Frequency of investigative stories in the New Straits Times newspaper

DATE	OCT.04	NOV. 04	DEC.04	JAN.05	FEB.05	MAR. 05	APR. 05	MAY 05	JUNE. 05	JULY 05	AUG. 05	SEPT. 05	TOTAL
1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	YES	-	-	-	1
6	-	-	-	-	YES	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
7	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	YES	-	1
8	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
9	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
10	-	-	-	-	-	-	YES	-	-	-	-	-	1
11	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
12	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
13	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
14	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	YES	-	1
15	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
16	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
17	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
18	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
19	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
20	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
21	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	YES	-	1
22	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
23	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
24	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
25	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
26	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
27	-	-	-	-	YES	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
28	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
29	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
30	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
31	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0

TOTAL	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	1	0	3	0	7
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Figure 2. Frequency of investigative stories in the Star newspaper

DATE	OCT.04	NOV. 04	DEC.04	JAN.05	FEB.05	MAR. 05	APR. 05	MAY 05	JUNE. 05	JULY 05	AUG. 05	SEPT. 05	TOTAL
1	-	-	-	-	-	-	YES	-	-	-	-	-	1
2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	YES	-	-	1
4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
6	-	-	-	-	-	YES	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
7	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
8	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
9	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
10	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
11	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
12	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
13	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
14	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
15	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
16	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
17	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
18	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
19	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
20	-	-	-	-	-	YES	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
21	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
22	-	-	-	-	-	YES	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
23	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
24	-	-	-	-	-	-	YES	-	-	-	-	-	1
25	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
26	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
27	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
28	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
29	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
30	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
31	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
TOTAL	0	0	0	0	0	3	2	0	0	1	0	0	6