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**ESTABLISHING MALAYSIAN PRESS FREEDOM  
FRAMEWORK FOR SOCIAL JOURNALIST**



**MASTER OF ARTS (COMMUNICATION)  
UNIVERSITI UTARA MALAYSIA  
2024**

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## Abstrak

Kewartawanan sosial muncul sebagai satu fenomena baharu dalam bidang kewartawanan menimbulkan berbagai persoalan berkaitan kredibiliti mereka dalam bidang tersebut. Kebebasan penggunaan pelbagai platform media oleh wartawan sosial menyebabkan pemahaman mereka terhadap kebebasan media dipersoalkan, terutamanya di dalam konteks Malaysia. Penyelidikan ini bertujuan untuk meneroka bagaimana wartawan sosial mengkonsepsikan kebebasan media, mengenal pasti factor-faktor yang mempengaruhi dan mengawal kebebasan media dalam kewartawanan sosial, serta mencadangkan rangka kerja yang sesuai bagi kebebasan media dalam konteks kewartawanan sosial. Kajian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif melalui kaedah temubual dengan lapan wartawan dari pelbagai latar belakang yang beroperasi di Malaysia yang dipilih melalui kaedah pensampelan bebola salji. Temu bual separa berstruktur digunakan untuk mengumpul data dan menganalisis penemuan dengan menggunakan analisis tematik dalam Nvivo12. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk meneroka konsepsualisasi wartawan sosial dengan menumpukan kepada tiga komponen utama iaitu pemahaman, status semasa dan jangkaan terhadap kebebasan akhbar. Hasil kajian menunjukkan terdapat faktor yang mempengaruhi kebebasan akhbar dalam bidang kewartawanan sosial ialah peranan garis panduan, pendidikan, dan etika; manakala faktor yang mengawal kebebasan akhbar ialah polisi syarikat, tekanan ekonomi, serta undang-undang dan peraturan. Kajian ini juga mencadangkan kerangka kerja untuk pendekatan yang seimbang dalam mengamalkan kewartawanan yang bebas dan kritikal. Kajian ini juga menyumbang kepada pemahaman yang mendalam terhadap konseptualisasi kebebasan akhbar oleh wartawan sosial, dengan menjelaskan faktor-faktor yang mengawal kebebasan akhbar dalam kerja mereka. Kerangka kerja kebebasan akhbar yang dicadangkan bertujuan untuk membimbing wartawan sosial dalam menghadapi landskap media yang kompleks, dan mengekalkan kredibiliti mereka sebagai sumber maklumat yang dipercayai.

Kata Kunci: Kewartawanan Sosial, Kebebasan Malaysia, Amalan Kewartawanan

## Abstract

Social journalism has emerged as a novel phenomenon in the field of journalism, raising questions about the credibility of those practicing it. With various mediums at their disposal, social journalists face scrutiny regarding their understanding of press freedom, particularly within the context of Malaysia. This research aims to delve deeper into how social journalists conceptualize press freedom, identify the factors influencing and controlling of press freedom in social journalism, and ultimately propose a suitable framework of press freedom in social journalism. Through a qualitative research approach, this study has picked snowball sampling where eight social journalists from various background operating in Malaysia was interviewed to gain insights of their perspectives on press freedom. Semi-structured interviews is employed to gather data and analyse the findings by using thematic analysis in NVivo 12. Based on the findings, a framework of press freedom in social journalism is proposed. This framework suggests the need for a balanced approach that takes into account ethical considerations, professional standards, and legal frameworks while allowing for independent and critical journalism. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the conceptualization of press freedom by social journalists, shedding light on the factors influencing their understanding and identifying the controlling factors that shape press freedom in their work. The proposed framework of press freedom aims to guide social journalists in navigating the complex landscape they operate in, while maintaining their credibility as trusted sources of information.

**Keywords:** Social journalism, Malaysia Press Freedom, Journalism practice

## Acknowledgement

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background

Social journalism is a contemporary approach to news reporting that has gained momentum in recent years. It represents a new paradigm in journalism, characterized by the collaborative efforts of both professional and unprofessional journalists in producing news content (Sussman, 2014). This innovative approach emphasizes the involvement of ordinary citizens and community members in the news creation process, thereby broadening the range of perspectives and experiences represented in media narratives.

The rise of social journalism can be attributed to changing reader preferences. With the advent of digital technology and social media platforms, readers are increasingly seeking a more participatory and citizen-focused approach to news consumption (Dalton, 2015). This shift in preferences has prompted media outlets to adapt their practices and engage more actively with their audiences, blurring the lines between traditional journalists and ordinary citizens who contribute to news stories.

However, in the context of Malaysia, press freedom remains a contentious issue. Despite constitutional guarantees of press freedom, journalists and media organizations in the country face numerous challenges (Jomo, 2015). One of the primary concerns is government censorship and restrictions, which can impede the free flow of information and limit journalists' ability to report on certain topics or criticize those in power. These constraints can hinder the media's role as a watchdog and limit the public's access to unbiased and comprehensive news coverage.

Additionally, there have been instances of self-censorship by media outlets in Malaysia (Negrea, 2019). Faced with the fear of government reprisals or legal consequences, some media organizations may choose to withhold or tone down critical reporting, compromising their independence and impartiality. Such self-censorship can also contribute to a narrowing of the information available to the public and limit their ability to make informed decisions.

To address these challenges and explore the unique perspective of social journalists in Malaysia, this study seeks to delve into the conceptualization of press freedom within the realm of social journalism. It aims to understand how social journalists perceive and navigate the complexities of press freedom in the context of a nation grappling with censorship and media restrictions. Furthermore, the study will investigate the factors influencing press freedom in the domain of social journalism, and will shed light on the controlling factors in social journalism. By understanding these factors, the research aims to propose a comprehensive press freedom framework for social journalists in Malaysia. Such framework could serve as a guide to promote press freedom, journalistic integrity, and a thriving media landscape that benefits both journalists and the public they serve.

## **1.2 Problem Statement**

Press freedom is a broad topic that has been widely debated among scholars, with varying perspectives across different countries. Saidah Che Yussof and Rohaida Nordin (2021) define press freedom as the right to express opinions without interference, and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers. Maniou (2023) interprets press freedom as part of broader rights including freedom of speech and freedom of information.

In Eastern European countries, journalists can exercise press freedom without state interference (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Rupar et al., 2019). However, it's different in Malaysia where various laws govern journalism, ensuring adherence to certain standards. According to Reporters Without Borders (2024), Malaysia ranks 107th out of 180 countries in press freedom. However, Datuk Chamil Warya (as cited in Bernama, 2021) argues that the ranking actually does not accurately reflect Malaysia's media landscape, as it is based on Western perspectives. Malaysia's unique media dynamic is influenced by its Constitution, which sets limits on freedom of speech, especially regarding sensitive issues like race and religion. Despite a relatively free and diverse media landscape, there are concerns about government interference and restrictions on freedom of expression. This study aims to explore how social journalists in Malaysia conceptualize press freedom, offering insight into the current media landscape.

Traditional news outlets once relied heavily on editors and gatekeepers to filter sensitive information before it reached the public. However, the rise of social journalism has disrupted established news production systems, affecting gatekeeping practices, ethical considerations, and regulatory mechanisms. Social journalism, as defined by Sussman (2014), involves both professional and amateur journalists working together to produce news content. The lack of a well-defined framework for press freedom in social journalism has led to controversies, undermining the credibility of news sources and fuelling the spread of misinformation.

In Malaysia, the transition from traditional print media, radio, and television to digital media has significantly altered the journalism landscape. Howe (2024) notes that 42.6% of Malaysians use social media as a news source, with Facebook being the leading platform. This shift has reshaped journalism, prompting the creation of numerous news portals to stay relevant in the industry. Mohd Nor, Taufek, & Jaludin (2024) emphasize that the rise of digital platforms and news portals has not necessarily improved credibility, but rather intensified existing challenges. With 33.03 million internet users and an internet penetration rate of 96.8% (Kemp, 2023), maintaining credibility is increasingly difficult.

The spread of misinformation is a major issue affecting the credibility of online news portals, creating a harmful cycle in our lives. While these portals are widespread, they have become a gateway for misinformation (Liang and Tiung, 2024). Both mainstream and alternative online news portals distribute vast amounts of content, but the rise of clickbait worsens the problem, distorting public perceptions of reality (Ireton & Posetti, 2018). In today's digital age, sharing news is effortless, allowing information to spread quickly from user to user. Duffy et al. (2019) stress that online news portals must ensure validity and present factual news to the public.

The value of information has also transformed. In traditional media, information was a commodity controlled by media institutions. With digital media, the speed of information dissemination has become the commodity. 'Freedom of information' evolved into 'freedom of the mass media' when mass media was powerful, then to 'freedom of media' as media lost its mass, and back to 'freedom of information' with new technologies (Richter, 2016).

Social journalism allows anyone to become a content provider, even without journalistic qualifications, posing a threat to traditional structures and national security. This phenomenon has changed journalistic norms, with social journalists often prioritizing profit over ethical and professional responsibilities (Hermida, 2012).

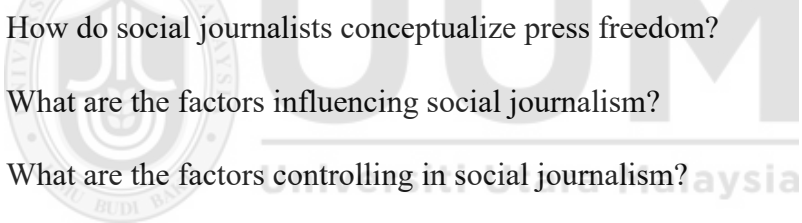
The advancements in communication technology have significantly impacted journalism. Social journalism has become more influential than professional journalism, and the open platform provided by new media has diminished government control over public information. This power struggle over information control, particularly for the government, creates a theoretical gap that needs addressing. Traditional media control was essential for maintaining the status quo and national development. Despite the changing media environment, media influence remains necessary. Therefore, researching social journalism is crucial for understanding and addressing these challenges.

Siebert et al. (1963) outlined traditional press systems where media is often associated with government control, suggesting that press freedom can be achieved by reducing government influence. The ability of media institutions to resist government control depends on political, economic, and legal circumstances. In traditional media, political control had the most significant influence over content, followed by economic and legal control. Politically affiliated entities either owned media institutions or regulated their content through laws.

Social journalism significantly shapes the Malaysian media landscape by breaking down conventional news production and gatekeeping systems. The rise of social media platforms and citizen journalism enables individuals to participate in news reporting, challenging traditional media institutions. However, the lack of institutional control in social journalism raises concerns about the quality and accuracy of news, leading to misinformation and fake news. Therefore, a suitable framework for press freedom in social journalism in Malaysia is needed, considering political, economic, and legal conditions to ensure quality news while promoting press freedom.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

Based on the problem statement mentioned, this research is focusing on studying:

- 
- a) How do social journalists conceptualize press freedom?
  - b) What are the factors influencing social journalism?
  - c) What are the factors controlling in social journalism?
  - d) What is the suitable framework to illustrate press freedom in social journalism?

### **1.4 Research Objectives**

- a) To study on how social journalists conceptualize press freedom.
- b) To identify the factors influencing in press freedom.
- c) To identify what are the controlling factors in press freedom for social journalism.
- d) To illustrate a suitable framework of press freedom in social journalism.

## **1.5 Conceptual Definition**

It is crucial to explain a concept in every study. By giving conceptual definitions, it will give a framework to illustrate clearly the concept discussed. A concept is an abstract used by researchers as a method in any proposition and theory to explain and estimate the phenomenon. This research used some identified concepts to a clear definition.

### **1.5.1 Press Freedom**

Press freedom can be defined as the ability of media institutions and journalists to operate independently without any external control or interference, and to report news and information without fear of censorship, harassment, or violence. This definition is supported by several studies conducted in recent years. According to a study by Nyamnjoh (2017), press freedom refers to the ability of media institutions to operate without any external influence or control, and to report news and information freely and independently. This includes the freedom to investigate and report on sensitive or controversial issues, without fear of censorship or retaliation.

Similarly, in a study by Freedom House (2018), press freedom is defined as the ability of journalists and media institutions to report news and information freely and independently, without fear of government censorship or repression, or other forms of harassment or violence. A more comprehensive definition of press freedom is provided by Hanusch (2019), who argues that press freedom involves not only the absence of external control and interference, but also the presence of enabling conditions that allow for the free flow of information and the diversity of voices and perspectives in the media landscape.

Furthermore, in a study by Ibrahim and Choon (2021), press freedom is seen as a crucial component of democracy, enabling citizens to access accurate and reliable information, and to hold those in power accountable. This definition emphasizes the role of press freedom in promoting transparency, accountability, and good governance. Lastly, in a recent study by Abdul-Raheem and Abdullah (2022), press freedom is defined as the ability of media institutions and journalists to operate freely and independently, without any interference or control from political or economic elites. This definition highlights the importance of media independence in ensuring the integrity and credibility of news reporting.

### **1.5.2 Social Journalism**

Social journalism can be defined as the practice of using social media platforms and other digital tools to engage with audiences and report news in a collaborative and participatory manner. According to a study by Kim and Lee (2017), social journalism is characterized by the use of user-generated content and social media platforms to create a two-way conversation between journalists and audiences.

Similarly, in a study by Hermida and Thurman (2017), social journalism is defined as a new form of participatory journalism that emphasizes collaboration, transparency, and engagement with audiences. This definition is further supported by a study by Zubiaga and colleagues (2018), which highlights the role of social media platforms in facilitating the co-creation of news content between journalists and audiences.

Additionally, in a study by Mair and colleagues (2019), social journalism is seen as a response to the challenges of declining trust in mainstream media, with the goal of increasing transparency, accountability, and credibility in news reporting. Finally, in a

recent study by Lasorsa and colleagues (2021), social journalism is conceptualized as a process of networked collaboration between journalists, sources, and audiences, enabled by digital tools and platforms.

Social journalists and citizen journalists differ in their approach and impact on the media landscape. Social journalists are professional journalists who embrace a new paradigm of news reporting, collaborating with both professional and non-professional journalists and engaging with audiences through social media and digital platforms. On the other hand, citizen journalists are ordinary individuals who actively participate in news gathering, reporting, and disseminating information without formal training or affiliation with traditional media organizations. While social journalists have formal education and experience in journalism, citizen journalists lack formal training and operate independently.

There is a fine line between social journalism and citizen journalism. Allan and Thorsen (2009) defined citizen journalism as informing world news ecology with its overlapping formations and flows of news, mainstream and alternative news media, and new interactive technologies of news dissemination and user-generated content. While Hirst (2019) defined social journalism as the act of curating, commenting on and creating a news feed through social media channels that enables and increases the critical understanding of both media and social issues for those who consume and/or produce it.'

In a study by Hermida (2014), the author defines social journalism as a form of journalism that emphasizes community engagement and participation, where social media platforms are used to facilitate conversations between journalists and their

audience. In contrast, citizen journalism refers to the practice of non-professional individuals reporting news and information, often using social media or other digital tools to disseminate their content. The author highlights the difference between the two practices, noting that social journalism involves a more collaborative and inclusive approach, where the journalist acts as a facilitator rather than a gatekeeper of information.

Similarly, in a study by Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton (2012), the authors define social journalism as a form of journalism that incorporates social media and user-generated content into traditional news reporting. They note that social journalism is distinct from citizen journalism in that it involves professional journalists working alongside non-professional contributors to create a more collaborative and participatory approach to news gathering and reporting. The authors suggest that social journalism has the potential to increase audience engagement and improve the quality and diversity of news coverage.

Despite their differences, both social journalists and citizen journalists contribute to representing diverse perspectives and empowering individuals to participate in the news creation process.

## **1.6 Research Significant**

The significance of establishing a Malaysian press freedom framework for social journalists in its thorough exploration of how press freedom is evolving in the context of social journalism in Malaysia. The findings will have multiple important implications for different groups, including policymakers, media professionals, academics, and the general public.

Analysing how social journalists in Malaysia conceptualize press freedom as stated in the first objective will provide valuable insights for policymakers. These insights can help them understand the current challenges and opportunities in the media landscape, leading to the creation of better media regulations that balance press freedom with national security and public order.

By identifying the factor influencing press freedom and the controlling factors in press freedom for social journalism, it also highlight the ethical and professional challenges posed by the rise of social journalism. This knowledge can guide journalists and media organizations in adopting best practices that uphold high journalistic standards. On top of that, it will offer findings that are relevant beyond Malaysia. The insights can provide comparative lessons for other countries facing similar challenges in balancing press freedom with the rise of social journalism and digital media.

Lastly, illustrating a suitable framework of press freedom in social journalism (Objective d) will provide insights that can help in developing media literacy programs. These programs can teach the public how to identify reliable news sources and understand the nature of misinformation, thereby improving overall media literacy in society.

## 1.7 Research Scope

This study is free from any intentional bias towards the current state of press freedom in Malaysia. Research on press freedom is a complex and comprehensive process, particularly when it involves technology such as online news portals and social media platforms that serve as tools for disseminating information. With the advent of various online news portals and social media channels, anyone can now deliver news to the public. Therefore, to gain a deeper understanding of this practice, this research will focus only on experienced journalists in the field of Malaysian journalism. Many journalists have shifted from traditional mainstream media to online media to convey information to the public.

The selected journalists for this study are among those who have previous experience in the Malaysian media industry either professionally or through personal capacity via blogs and social media with a significant number of followers.

As such, this study will concentrate on the conceptualisation of press freedom, given the broad scope of the term. It is crucial to understand how social journalists conceptualise press freedom, the factors influencing press freedom, and the controlling factors in press freedom for social journalists. The research aims to develop a Malaysian press freedom framework for social journalists based on their conceptualisation of press freedom. The framework will contribute to the development of an effective regulatory framework for social journalism and aid in the establishment of press freedom standards that are inclusive and representative of the needs and aspirations of the Malaysian society.

The research will have significant implications for Malaysian media industry stakeholders, policymakers, and journalists alike. By providing a comprehensive understanding of social journalists' conceptualisation of press freedom and the factors that influence their conceptualisation, this study will inform the development of policies and regulatory frameworks for social journalism. It will also contribute to the development of an ethical and responsible approach to social journalism that considers the needs and expectations of Malaysian society. Furthermore, this research will serve as a significant contribution to the existing literature on press freedom in Malaysia, providing insights into the changing landscape of media in the country and the role of social journalism in promoting a free and democratic society.

In conclusion, this research will provide a valuable contribution to the field of press freedom and social journalism in Malaysia. By exploring the conceptualisation of press freedom and identifying the factors that influence it, this study will inform the development of a Malaysian press freedom framework for social journalists. The framework will contribute to the establishment of press freedom standards that reflect the needs and aspirations of Malaysian society and promote the development of a responsible and ethical approach to social journalism. The study's findings will be useful for policymakers, media industry stakeholders, and journalists in Malaysia, as they seek to navigate the changing landscape of media in the country and promote a free and democratic society.

## 1.8 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, the subject of social journalism is introduced with a historical background and explanation. The chapter also provides a detailed explanation of social journalism in terms of its conceptual definition. The problem statement of the research justifies the need to study the current practice of journalism in Malaysia, particularly with regards to social journalism, which involves both professional and unprofessional journalists working together to create content for online news portals. This is important because during the era of journalism being attached to media institutions, there were professional routines, culture, and ethics that governed the conduct of institutional journalism, ensuring quality and neutrality. The differences in practice between social journalism and professional journalism highlight the need for this study.

The main focus of this research is to examine how social journalists conceptualize the term "press freedom," including the factors that influence the press freedom and the controlling factors that affect press freedom for social journalists. To achieve this goal, the researcher formulated four research questions, which will be answered through empirical research. Additionally, the chapter discusses the importance of establishing a suitable framework of press freedom in Malaysia to provide a concept of the status quo of press freedom.

The chapter concludes by providing a conceptual definition of social journalism, which involves both professional and non-professional journalists working together to produce content for online news portals. The need for this study is further highlighted by the differences in practice between social journalism and professional journalism. By examining how social journalists conceptualize press freedom, this research aims to provide insights into how the Malaysian press freedom framework can be improved.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents a comprehensive literature review on the establishment of a Malaysian press freedom framework for social journalists. The literature review aims to explore the conceptualization of press freedom, understand the various dimensions of press freedom, and analyze the current status of press freedom in Malaysia. By investigating these three main factors, this review will provide valuable insights and inform the development of an effective press freedom framework that addresses the needs and challenges faced by social journalists in Malaysia.

#### **2.2 Exploring Press Freedom Apparatus**

Press freedom is a fundamental pillar in democratic societies, serving a crucial function in fostering transparency, accountability, and informed decision-making. The press freedom apparatus encompasses the conceptualization of press freedom, the diverse factors that can positively or negatively influence it, and the factors controlling press freedom. This investigation will delve into these interconnected elements to gain a comprehensive understanding of the intricate landscape surrounding press freedom.

In this research, conceptualization of press freedom can be view from three different perspectives consists of the understanding of press freedom, the current-status of the press freedom and the expectation of it.

### **2.2.1 Conceptualization of Press Freedom**

According to Maniou (2022), various social, economic, cultural, and managerial factors can limit press freedom. McQuail (2000) further explains that press freedom includes both the freedom given to the media and the access citizens have to media content. The media needs enough independence to ensure the free and open expression of ideas and information.

The conceptualization of press freedom in Malaysia and its relationship with social journalism is a topic of significant contemporary relevance. Recent studies have shown that while Malaysia's press freedom index has seen fluctuations, with its position dropping to 107th in 2024 from 73rd in 2023, there remains an ongoing dialogue on improving media practices to align with both local values and global standards (The Star, 2024). This dynamic context underscores the importance of press freedom in fostering a democratic society where citizens are well-informed and can hold the government accountable.

According to Gan et al. (2019), the Malaysian media landscape has been shaped by various political, economic, and social factors that influence the level of press freedom. Their study highlights the crucial role that social journalism plays in this ecosystem, particularly in providing alternative narratives and scrutinizing government actions. This aligns with the broader understanding that press freedom is not just about the absence of censorship, but also about the media's ability to operate independently and provide a platform for diverse voices.

In the broader Asian context, research by Lee and Yu (2020) explores similar issues in countries like South Korea and Taiwan, where social journalism has been pivotal in promoting transparency and civic engagement. Their findings suggest that a robust press freedom framework is essential for social journalism to thrive, allowing journalists to fulfill their roles as watchdogs and informants effectively.

Overall, these studies underscore the complex interplay between press freedom and social journalism in Malaysia and other Asian countries. They highlight the need for ongoing efforts to create a media environment that supports independent reporting and critical inquiry, which are fundamental to a healthy democracy. By examining these dynamics, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of how press freedom can be conceptualized and protected in the digital age.

### **2.2.2 Factors Influencing Press Freedom**

Press freedom is shaped by various factors including guidelines, education, and ethics, all of which play significant roles in the media landscape. According to Sa (2020), highlights that external factors like advertisers, internal factors such as media owners, and media laws, policies, and ethics are crucial in determining the level of press freedom. In addition to that, legal frameworks, including libel laws and complaints procedures, heavily impact journalistic practices by potentially limiting critical reporting to avoid legal repercussions

A research from Donsbach (2019) affirmed that a journalist should adhere to five fundamental principles. Firstly, they should have a deep understanding of relevant history and current events, along with strong analytical thinking, expertise in the specific subjects they report on is essential, possessing scientifically-based knowledge about the communication process, journalists should have honed their journalistic skills and they must conduct themselves in accordance with the norms of professional ethics. All of these principles mentioned can be attained through education.

According to a study by Meyer (2020), he emphasized that, in journalism, the student will be exposed and taught of the process on knowledge-tested reporting where it acts in assisting them to be truth seekers in the scientific sense. This is where the module of providing evidence that is rigorously tested against alternative explanations will be nurtured. In fact, Meyer also advocated for the journalists to implies the logic of the scientific method to their work, including techniques like replication, to ensure that other journalists can obtain consistent results.

Based on this study, when a journalist has a scientific principles in journalism, such as replication, it strengthens the credibility and consistency of journalistic work, benefiting both journalists and the audience.

Another study by Detenber (2020) stated that through education journalists will be well-informed about their role in the democratic process and it involves the understanding of their loyalty to the audience rather than the advertiser or owner. However, the journalist are also taught that they must also recognize the limitations of their rights concerning others, including their sources or subjects of coverage, be they individuals or institutions.

In addition, journalists should respect their audience's right to form their own opinions on various matters. Research has indicated that education in this area is linked to ethical ideologies and the perceived significance of ethical codes. Ethics and education is closely interconnected between each other. By having the strong basis in journalism that can be achieved via education, the journalist will be exposed on ethics and this core guide them in journalism by upholding ethics as the main principle.

In discussing ethics, Ang (2021) emphasized that guidelines and regulations are essential in maintaining a balance between press freedom and social responsibility. In Malaysia, for instance, media operations are governed by strict laws that can restrict press freedom. However, these guidelines are also intended to ensure responsible journalism and prevent the spread of misinformation. Ethical guidelines are crucial for journalists to navigate the complex landscape of press freedom, providing a framework for ethical decision-making and protecting the integrity of the press.

Additionally, a study by McBride and Rosenstiel (2019) believed that a journalist should not giving up on their dedication to truth, accurate and transparent on behalf of public. This study emphasized that journalist should find the truth and report it as fully as it can. Honesty, courage and be fair in gaining, inform and also interpreting information are the principle that has been stressed. On top of that, transparency is where the journalist must expose on how the story or report was done and why it is worth for people to trust it. This is where the journalist should explain their source or evidence that they gained. By practicing transparency, it will also nurtured the accountability principle.

Journalist have a complex role and must follow important principles in producing a credible, accurate and trustworthy work. The combination of strong subject knowledge, journalistic skills, ethical values, and a scientific approach cultivated through education enables journalists to fulfil their crucial role as truth seekers, informers, and stewards of public trust in the dynamic and interconnected ecosystem of journalism.

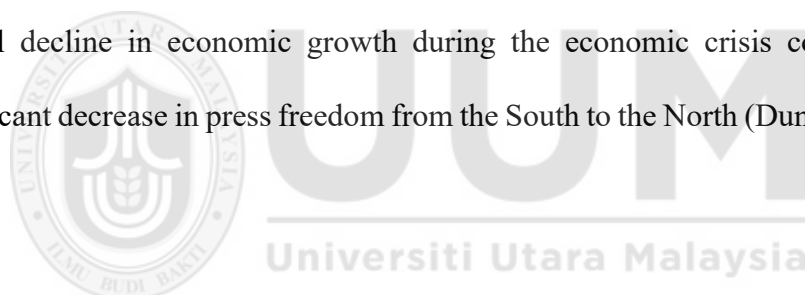
### **2.2.3 Factors Controlling Press Freedom**

Press freedom varies in each country, with different practices and beliefs governing its implementation. Various factors influence press freedom in different contexts. As Hallin and Mancini (2017) have noted, media systems are not static and undergo long-term, short-term, and medium-term variations due to a combination of external and internal factors. These include economic pressures, company policies, and laws and regulations.

Economic factors play a critical role in shaping press freedom. In Malaysia, media organizations often face financial constraints that can impact their editorial independence. According to Md Salleh et al. (2021), economic pressures can lead to self-censorship among journalists, as media outlets may avoid publishing content that could jeopardize their advertising revenue or financial stability. This economic dependency can limit the scope of investigative journalism and critical reporting.

Additionally, according to Alam and Ali Shah (2018), economic growth has become one of the main factors that contributes to the factor influencing press freedom. Economic growth and development progress are different at every country, leading to different characteristics in each country's media system concerning organization and ownership frameworks. Consequently, these characteristics can result in varying levels of press freedom.

For instance, Italy's press traditionally faces high ownership concentration and comparatively lower freedom of the press compared to other advanced democracies. These features became more pronounced after the Great Recession of 2008 (Morlino and Piana, 2014). Similarly, documented research reveals that in EU countries, the overall decline in economic growth during the economic crisis coincided with a significant decrease in press freedom from the South to the North (Dunham and Csaky, 2013).



On top of that, Rahim et.al (2020) discuss how ownership structures in Malaysia dictate editorial lines and limit the ability of journalists to report freely. This concentration of ownership can reduce the diversity of media content and lead to homogenized news coverage that aligns with the interests of media owners.

In recent years, research has highlighted various ways in which legal frameworks influence journalism. For instance, Schuldt (2021) discusses how governmental fact-checking mechanisms in Southeast Asia, including Malaysia, influence media practices by enforcing regulations that aim to combat fake news but can also lead to self-censorship among journalists.

The implementation of laws such as Malaysia's Anti-Fake News Act 2018, although repealed later, initially created a chilling effect on press freedom, making journalists wary of reporting on sensitive topics that might be construed as false information under the law (The Star, 2018).

Moreover, the regulatory environment in Malaysia often intertwines with political dynamics, affecting media independence. According to a report by the Center for Independent Journalism (CIJ) Malaysia, media laws such as the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) and the Communications and Multimedia Act (CMA) provide the government with significant control over media content. These laws require media outlets to obtain licenses that can be revoked if they publish content deemed offensive or against national interest, thus restricting journalistic freedom and encouraging self-censorship (CIJ, 2020).

The role of laws and regulations in shaping journalism practices is not unique to Malaysia. Globally, regulatory frameworks often balance the need for press freedom with the need to protect national security, public order, and individual reputations. For instance, Jamil (2022) notes that in Pakistan, the introduction of digital media laws has reshaped journalists' practices by imposing stricter content regulations, which can both limit and protect journalistic integrity depending on their implementation. Recent studies have highlighted the impact of commercial interests and managerial decisions on journalistic autonomy. Hanusch and Tandoc (2019) found that media organizations frequently prioritize profit-driven content, which can lead to sensationalism and reduced coverage of socially significant issues. This trend is particularly pronounced in regions where media revenues are declining, prompting companies to adopt cost-cutting measures that further constrain journalistic practices.

In Malaysia, for example, corporate policies and government regulations intersect, creating a complex environment for journalists. Research by Tapsell (2015) demonstrates that media companies in Malaysia often enforce self-censorship due to political pressures and the threat of legal repercussions. This results in a media landscape where critical journalism is stifled, and journalists are compelled to align their reporting with the interests of their employers and the state.

Overall, the factors mentioned collectively shape the landscape of press freedom and the practices of social journalism. Further discussion and detailed analysis of these factors will be provided at the end of the chapter.

### **2.3 Social Journalism and Press Freedom**

Social journalism and press freedom are two interconnected concepts that have been widely studied in recent years. Press freedom is the ability of media institutions and journalists to operate independently without any external control or interference, and to report news and information without fear of censorship, harassment, or violence. On the other hand, social journalism refers to the collaboration between professional and non-professional journalists to create content for online news portals.

Several studies have focused on the relationship between social journalism and press freedom. In a study by Hanusch and Mellado (2017), the authors examined the relationship between social media use and press freedom in Latin America. They found that the use of social media by journalists in the region was positively correlated with press freedom, as it allowed for greater transparency and accountability.

Similarly, in a study by Ben-Othman and Al-Badi (2019), the authors explored the role of citizen journalism in promoting press freedom in the Arab world. They argued that citizen journalism, which involves ordinary citizens reporting on events and sharing information through social media, has become an important tool in promoting press freedom in the region, where traditional media outlets are often subject to government control and censorship.

In the context of Malaysia, several studies have examined the state of press freedom and the role of social journalism. In a study by Baharom and Darmawan (2018), the authors explored the perceptions of journalists in Malaysia regarding press freedom and censorship. They found that many journalists in the country felt that press freedom was restricted by government control and interference.

Another study by Tandoc et al. (2017) focused on the role of social media in promoting press freedom in Malaysia. The authors argued that social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook had become important tools for journalists and activists in the country to bypass government censorship and disseminate information to the public. Annany (2018) believe that to practice press freedom, we need to create separations and reliance that enable democratic self-governance. The focus is on the separations and dependences that create its power and obligations to know and defend the publics. Petley (2012) defined press freedom as the absence of statutory regulation. He asserted that press freedom should consist considerably more than the freedom of press owners, editors, or managers to express their views as they wish and that any genuinely democratic notion of press freedom should also include the freedom of readers to access a wide range of trustworthy news and views.

He also claimed that press freedom is not only about the right to publish, but it also represents the right of readers to receive the information. These arguments suggest that press freedom is not just about the freedom of the press to report and publish information without interference, but it is also about the ability of the public to access reliable and diverse sources of information. Press freedom is therefore crucial for democratic self-governance, as it allows citizens to make informed decisions and hold those in power accountable.

Next, Giannone (2014) stated that press freedom is an individual legal right that, the less the State intervenes in trying to regulate media systems. Indeed, the media, therefore, provide a free 'marketplace of ideas' where dissenting points of view compete without state interference for public recognition. In contrast to regulation, freedom of information is primarily understood; it follows that deregulation and privatisation are the paths forward. The concept of freedom of information is the right of economic actors (both individuals and corporations) to generate and sell information freely and the right of consumers to purchase the information they like.

The concept of freedom of information is a part of the discussion on press freedom, and it is the right of economic actors to generate and sell information freely and the right of consumers to purchase the information they like. The marketplace of ideas provided by the media allows for dissenting points of view to compete without state interference for public recognition. The discussion of press freedom and freedom of information is relevant to this study as information plays a crucial part in illustrating the suitable framework of press freedom.

Phillipson (2019) claimed that the concept of press freedom is providing the audience with important stories and enable their participation in democratic self-government. However, this will let the press keep seeking absolute freedom. Saifuddin & Cho (2019) also supported that press freedom has long been positively correlated with political participation. These online news portals are also delivering information related to political issues. In Malaysia, the current practice of press freedom is not absolute. Some regulations and laws need to be followed by the journalist.

Malaysia has a mixed record when it comes to press freedom. While the country has a relatively free and diverse media landscape, there are concerns over government interference and restrictions on freedom of expression. In a study by Baharom and Darmawan (2018), the authors found that many journalists in Malaysia felt that press freedom was restricted by government control and interference.

Similarly, a study by Tandoc et al. (2017) argued that social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook had become important tools for journalists and activists in the country to bypass government censorship and disseminate information to the public.

In a separate study by Abdul Rahman et al. (2019), the authors examined the role of independent online news portals in promoting press freedom in Malaysia. They found that these portals had emerged as an important alternative to mainstream media outlets, providing a platform for critical and independent reporting. However, in a more recent study by Ramli et al. (2021), the authors highlighted concerns over the increasing use of defamation lawsuits against journalists and media outlets in the country, which they argued had a chilling effect on freedom of expression.

Overall, while Malaysia has made progress in terms of media diversity and independence, there are ongoing challenges in terms of government control and restrictions on freedom of expression.

#### **2.4 Social Journalism and Digital Media**

The social media era has spawned a culture in which anyone can now claim to be a journalist in some capacity. The advancement of the technology nowadays are giving people a free access to browse the information. In fact, it open an opportunity to ordinary people outside of the journalism profession a new platform to become content creators rather than content consumers.

Nielsen, Cornia and Kalageropoulus (2016) stated that we're going toward a more digital, mobile, and social media-driven world with more fierce competition for attention. People are increasingly getting news through digital media, accessing it through mobile devices (particularly smartphones), and relying on social media and other intermediates to access and find news. Social journalism according to Dalton (2015) is a new avenue of journalism that encompasses many other facets of the field, such as human-centred design, development, citizen journalism, advocacy journalism, solutions journalism, and entrepreneurial journalism.

Information is no longer hard to obtain in this era. The Internet has created a culture of information creation, tagging, sharing, and remixing that is open to all (Lewis, 2012). Sussman (2014), social journalism is a new hybrid of content created by professional journalists, paid and unpaid contributors, and readers. They have their own digital publishing house and use social media to reach out to a larger audience.

It is exacerbated by the culture of viral news, which is shared and disseminated indefinitely via digital platforms, primarily social media. The main concern in the credibility of the social journalist on the news sources such as the validity of the news and the code of practice such ethics and integrity that has been used while gathering the information has been questioned by the public.

When corporations see participatory culture as a monetization opportunity (Lewis, 2012), social journalists are forced to become entrepreneurs to attract and gain more followers. The end-users now have control over content due to the convergence culture. It drives them to act like savages, breaking no rules, having no ethics, and having complete control over their content. This explains on why certain media nowadays are practicing clickbait that exaggerates the information to catch the attention of the reader.

Understanding the concept of digital media is critical. With the introduction of digital media, an influx of user-generated content appeared to compete with that of traditional media in terms of speed of dissemination, accessibility, and ubiquity of usage (Jack, 2010). According to Digital Logic (2020), digital media refers to any form of media supplied via electronic means. This sort of media can be created, viewed, modified, and distributed using electronic devices. Digital media includes software, video games, movies, websites, social media, and online advertising.

In this case, social journalism is operating through websites and social media to distribute the news and information. The journalist has used online mediums to convey the information to the public. Based on the literature review, social journalists operate fully utilising digital media to interact with the public.

Media Pod (2022) reported that Malaysia has approximately 30 news portals, with their rankings based on website traffic. Some of the ranked portals include Malaysia Gazette, The Vibes, MalaysiaKini, The Edge Malaysia, and others.

Such platforms in Malaysia include the Sarawak Report, with 479,000 followers on Facebook and Free Malaysia. Today, 718,000 followers are two other active news portals that publish a lot of investigative reports. They publish content in response to user demand, with a focus on issues of public concern. Siakap Keli has 217,000 Instagram followers; Says.com, which has 32,300 followers; Pen Merah.com, which has 715,000 followers; and Oh Bulan, which has 63,000 followers, also has become among of the resources of the readers. Unfortunately, in their rush to be the first to publish something and gain more followers, these news portals occasionally publish unverified or controversial information that may cause public outrage. It is even more concerning when they have more clout than the mainstream media these days.

For example, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC), the country's internet regulator, blocked access to the Sarawak Report website in 2015 for reporting on "unverified content." According to their statement, such action was necessary because "such content could cause unrest and threaten national stability, public order, and economic stability" (Beh Lih Yi, 2015). The Sarawak Report, based in London and founded by Clare Rewcastle Brown, has covered a slew of sensational bribery and financial mismanagement allegations involving Najib and the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB).

The Malaysian public reacted angrily to MCMC's action, as the government had previously stated that it would not censor the internet when Mahathir launched the Multimedia Super Corridor in the 1990s. In 2014, however, then-communications and multimedia minister Ahmad Shabery Cheek claimed that the MCMC had blocked or shut down at least 1,400 websites because of complaints received directly or indirectly to opinions shared on social media platforms that went viral.

In today's media, social journalism is gaining traction, and it's continuing to reshape traditional journalistic roles, values, and practices. The ability to get news and information at one's fingertips is critical, and newspapers and broadcasting industries are concerned that citizen journalism will eventually supplant professional and mainstream journalism.

The distinction between trained journalists and their audience appears to be blurring, as this type of "participatory" journalism appears to add a new dimension that calls into question previous boundaries as well as professional journalism definitions (Domingo et al., 2008).

Journalism has long been associated with the media institution, which relies on dedicated paid labor - journalists - to produce news (Domingo et al., 2008). In the last decade, new communication technologies, particularly networked communication, have enabled almost anyone to publish content for a potentially global audience (Domingo et al., 2008). On the other hand, social journalists lack a basic understanding of the rules of good journalism. Despite long-standing concerns about the credibility and professionalism of social journalist-based online news, mainstream journalism is struggling to keep up with the rise of social journalism.

The instant gratification of news has been made possible, according to recent literature on journalism and the changing media landscape. The news is becoming more mobile, instantaneous, and "on demand," according to Peters (2015). Because there are so many citizen journalists around the world, timely updates are expected (Peters, 2015). Due to the ability to access "news" at any time without much hassle, many people's experiences with journalism are likely to change as technology advances (Peters, 2015). It has aided in the emergence of social journalists to meet the needs and demands of online readers.

Research studies into audience perceptions of mainstream media and digital media's credibility and professionalism have yielded mixed results over the decades, with some revealing that digital media is viewed as more credible (, while others reveal the opposite (Johnson & Kaye, 1998; Wilson et al., 2011). Other researchers have looked into the relationship between media exposure and audience perceptions of media credibility and trustworthiness (Tsfati, 2010; Tsfati & Cappella, 2005; William, 2012).

Next, it is crucial to understand the concept of digital media. With the introduction of digital media, a flood of user-generated content appeared to compete with mainstream media content in terms of speed of dissemination, accessibility, and ubiquity of use (Jack, 2010). Any form of media distributed through electronic devices is referred to as digital media, according to Digital Logic (2020). This type of media can be created, viewed, modified, and distributed using electronic devices. Digital media includes software, video games, videos, websites, social media, and online advertising.

In this case, social journalism is operating through websites and social media to distribute the news and information. The journalist has used online mediums to convey the information to the public. Types of digital media can be classified into owned media, paid media, and earned media. It is important to understand these three media fully. Owned media, according to Preston (2020), can be defined as any online asset over which you have control. This type of media is usually reserved for your business. Examples of digital media platforms include your website, social media channels, blogs, videos, and other digital media platforms.

By boosting online content, paid media increases traffic to media assets. Paid search advertisements, display advertisements, and Facebook advertisements are all instances of this form of media. Simultaneously, earned media is customer-generated advertising that promotes a business by word of mouth, social media, reviews, testimonials, shares, and re-posts, among other methods.

Social journalism and digital media are where social journalism can be classified into paid media where they generate income through the news that they delivered on their website. On the website, it displayed various stories and included with the display or Facebook ads. Social journalists can point out their ideas on the website with unlimited freedom.

Therefore, social journalism and press freedom research must be continued to explore a suitable press freedom framework for the social journalist. On top of that, it is important to know how the social journalist applies their understanding of press freedom while practicing social journalism. Overall, this research is to illustrate a suitable framework of press freedom for a social journalist.

## 2.5 Theoretical Framework

In this research, the Four Theories of the Press proposed by Siebert et al. (1963) is used to guide the exploration. These theories are considered as one of the oldest typologies for press systems. It emphasized the concept of press freedom that is closely related to government control. According to this theory, press freedom will exist if the press has freedom from government control. Christians et al. (2009, p.5) addressed one of the four theories' lasting contributions, i.e., "the consolidation of thoughts on the responsibility of the media to society." It justified why the Four Theories of the Press are relevant to this study because there are close links to social journalism between press freedom and the responsibility of the media to society.

Four different concepts have been highlighted by Siebert et al. (1963) under these four theories of the press. It can be divided into Authoritarian, Social Responsibility, the Soviet Communist and Libertarian. The four theories emerged from Authoritarian and Libertarian contexts, and then the other two concepts were eventually evolved: Social Responsibility and Soviet Communism.

The oldest of these theories is an authoritarian theory, which emerged in an authoritarian climate and is based on political thought from Plato in ancient Athens to Machiavelli during the Renaissance. According to this theory, the media is completely controlled by the government and serves as an important tool for achieving the government's goals. The government's policies will be supported and advanced by the media to achieve its goals.

Due to the authority will take responsibility for finding solutions to public issues, the concept of free ideas exchange between the masses and the government does not exist. Only government-approved information was published in the media, and it was not in the form of solutions for the public to choose from, but rather a decision made by a few "wise men." They were only given one-sided information on government affairs, issues, and arguments. In that kind of society, the truth was thought to be created by a few powerful "wise men."

Because authoritarian systems were primarily governed by the idea of maintaining the status quo, they had complete control over their press. The ruling regime was keen to avoid criticism and exposures that could jeopardize its positions.

The Soviet Communist press theory is another branch of Authoritarian press theory. This theory is like the Authoritarian framework, but it differs in a few keyways. It was based on Marxism, Leninism, and Stalinism and the actual outcomes and policies of the Communist Party dictatorship in the now-defunct Soviet Union. According to this theory, the state places a premium on the press's ability to raise political awareness among the public, rally the populace behind the leaders and their programs, and improve worker efficiency.

The press has always had a close relationship with the government. It is a planned system that is integrated into the entire communication system and the entire government, rather than being controlled by the government as in the Authoritarian framework. Party and auxiliary organizations, word-of-mouth agitation, control and surveillance machinery were seamlessly integrated into Soviet mass communications.

Although the Soviet Communist states had a different approach to the press than the Authoritarian states, they all shared the same belief in the importance of press control for survival. On the surface, the Soviet Communist press appeared to have more freedom than the Authoritarian press because the Soviet Communist press was allowed to criticize the government and perform "fourth estate" functions. However, a closer look at this system reveals that this is not the case. It had tighter control over the press because the integration of the press institution with the state instilled loyalty to the regime. "Watchdogs do not bite their owners," says the adage (Waisbord, 2000, p. 6).

Next, according to Bajracharya (2018), *social responsibility* theory is an ethical standard that controls all actions, whether in the media or other organizations, that have an obligation to the environment, society, culture, and economics. As with any other industry, the media should avoid environmental degradation and encourage sociocultural components of the local economy. The theory of media social responsibility is a relatively recent concept that evolved in the mid-twentieth century and is mostly applied in developing and least developed countries.

The hypothesis began in Europe and was formalized in 1949 by the Commission on Press Freedom in the United States. It advocates for complete press freedom without censorship, but it must be governed by societal obligations and external constraints. Filtering content is also accomplished through public pressure and interference.

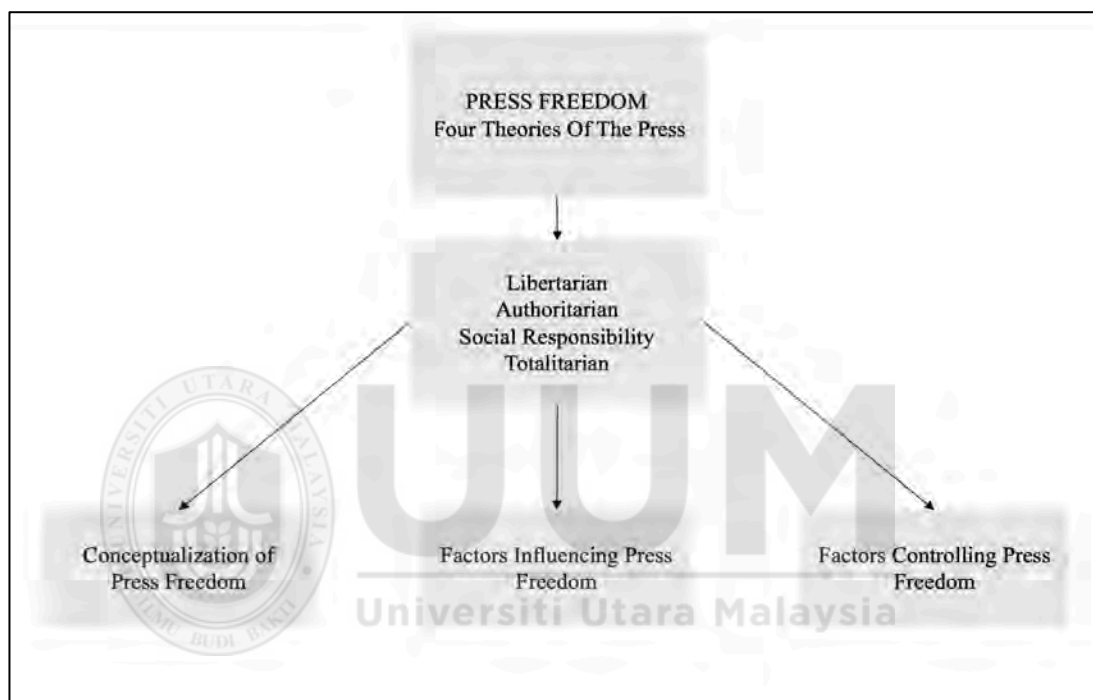
The Free Press or Libertarian Theory is one of the Normative Theories of Mass Communication in which the media or press is granted complete freedom to publish anything at any time and serves as a watchdog. When confronted with contradictory data and options, this theory asserts that "man is seen as a rational entity capable of distinguishing between truth and deception, between a better and worse alternative" (Siebert et al., 1963, p. 3). The exchange of viewpoints between the government and the public is beneficial, as a few "wise men" no longer determine reality. The press is envisioned as a collaborator in the pursuit of truth, facilitating this communication. The social journalist is defined as an individual who communicates the truth about this research within the communication process.

In addition, libertarian theory explains that the media's purpose is to seek the truth and to aid in the process of resolving political and social problems by giving a variety of information and perspectives on the grounds for judgments (Siebert et al., 1963, p. 51). This is pertinent to this study.

The researcher will examine whether social journalists play a role in pursuing the truth and communicating the information they obtain to the public to assist the public in making decisions.

Social journalism characteristic is similar with the concept of Libertarian theory as the concept of social journalism is that there is no censorship, and there should be no government authority to control and suppress the media. Libertarian theory claimed that there is an exchange of information of all kinds. The press, even criticising policies, should not restrict any data.

This research focused on analysing the conceptualisation and how the journalist applies their understanding of press freedom in their practice as a journalist. This research will identify to what extent the journalist's understanding and express their views without any limitation. A conceptual framework is illustrated below to clearly explain the concept involved in this research:



*Figure 2.1. Conceptual Framework*

According to the framework above, the research started the exploration by examining the characteristic the Four Press System in the Four Theory of the Press. From the previous discussion, it is postulated that there are three characteristic that differentiate the Four Press system under the Four Theory of Press which are conceptualization of press freedom, factors influencing the conceptualization and the controlling factors of press freedom.

The Libertarian theory posits that the press should operate free from government control and interference, promoting a free exchange of ideas. This theory is rooted in the Enlightenment ideals of individual liberty and free speech. According to Siebert et al. (1956), the press serves as a marketplace of ideas where truth emerges from diverse viewpoints and public debate. Social journalism thrives on the principles of the Libertarian theory by utilizing digital platforms to share information freely and openly. This aligns with the belief in minimal restrictions and maximum freedom for the press. McQuail (2010) highlights that the Libertarian theory supports the idea of a free press as an essential component of democracy, where journalists act as watchdogs, holding power to account. This is increasingly relevant in social journalism, where citizen journalists often bring issues to light that mainstream media might overlook.

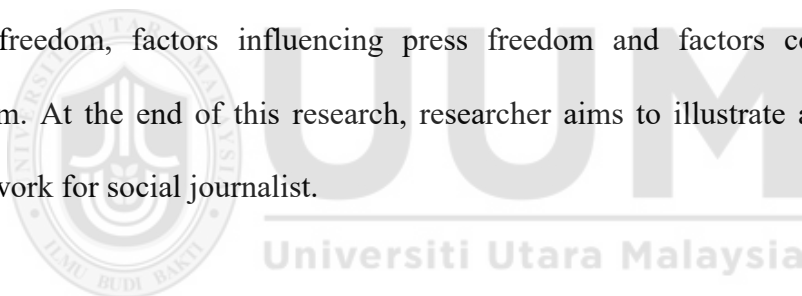
In social journalism, multiple perspectives are shared and debated, fostering a vibrant public discourse. This is crucial in a digital age where information is rapidly disseminated. Yoanita, Hadi and Setiawan (2018) argue that a free press is vital for a functioning democracy, as it provides the information necessary for citizens to make informed decisions. Social journalists contribute to this democratic function by offering diverse viewpoints and unfiltered news.

In terms of the conceptualization, the Four Press system mainly differ in terms of their freedom from government control. On the other hand, these differences in conceptualization were influenced by various factors. It can also be concluded that controlling factors of this Four Press System are also different. A framework of press freedom for social journalist is established at the end of this research.

## 2.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter starts by explaining in general in exploring press freedom apparatus where researcher have outlined it into three parts which consists of – conceptualization of press freedom, factors influencing press freedom and factors controlling press freedom. The second section discussed on social journalism and press freedom where it entails the interconnected between social journalism and press freedom. The third section explains on social journalism and digital media. The last part connects all the theories and concepts with an explanation of theoretical framework that provides a structured and a conceptual basis of conducting a research.

Therefore, this research must identify how the journalist conceptualises the terms of press freedom, factors influencing press freedom and factors controlling press freedom. At the end of this research, researcher aims to illustrate a press freedom framework for social journalist.



## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

The main objective of this research is to examine how social journalists perceive and apply the concept of press freedom in the context of social journalism. The study aims to develop a suitable framework for press freedom in social journalism through an analysis of their understanding of this concept. Qualitative research using interviews will be employed to collect and analyze data. This chapter will outline the procedures for data collection and analysis, which will be guided by the research questions. The collected data will be processed and analyzed with the aid of NVivo 12 software.

#### **3.2 Research Design**

Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2018) defined research design as a comprehensive blueprint that used to guide a research study where it outlined the methods and process for collecting and analysing data.

This study utilise qualitative methods by deploying semi-structure interviews in understanding further about social journalism in Malaysia. Qualitative methods, such as semi-structured interviews, are particularly valuable in studying the conceptualization of press freedom because they allow for a nuanced exploration of individual perspectives and experiences. Press freedom is a complex and multifaceted concept that varies across different contexts and among stakeholders. By using qualitative methods, researchers can delve further into how individuals understand and interpret press freedom, uncovering diverse viewpoints and underlying meanings.

According to Adhabi and Anozie (2017), the critical component of qualitative research is the data's quality, which is determined by the data gathering method. According to Stewart et al. (2008), a qualitative study's objective is to examine and justify why a certain phenomenon exists in the way that it does. A frequent qualitative research technique is the interview, in which the researcher obtains data directly from participants. Qualitative research aims to explore and understand phenomena in depth, emphasizing participant perspectives and contextual insights (Bryman, 2016). This approach is suitable for exploring complex social phenomena like conceptualization of press freedom on social journalism in Malaysia.

On top of that, a qualitative methods facilitate an in-depth exploration of how various stakeholders conceptualize press freedom, capturing the richness and diversity of perspectives on social journalism in Malaysia. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research is well-suited for examining complex social phenomena and understanding participants' subjective experiences and interpretations.

This research will employ a semi-structure interview technique to analyse and identify different conceptualizations of press freedom and to better understand social journalists' attitudes about the word. By utilizing semi-structured interviews, the researcher will be able to create a framework that is conducive to press freedom. The researcher will prepare a list of questions about the topic instead of specific questions, there will be no sequence to be followed and as the discussion on-going, different questions will come out as the researcher to probe further depending on the information given by the informant.

Semi-structured interviews offer a balance between flexibility and structure, allowing researchers to explore participants' views while maintaining a focus on key research questions (Fontana & Frey, 2005). This method facilitates detailed exploration of how journalists and media professionals perceive and navigate press freedom issues.

### **3.2.1 Population and Sample**

Qualitative research typically focuses intensively on a deliberately chosen, smaller sample size (Patton, 2005). In this study, which aims to explore the conceptualization of press freedom in Malaysia, informants were purposefully selected based on their extensive experience in journalism industry such mainstream media and consists huge followers on their news portal medium or social media in Malaysia. Initially, identifying suitable informants posed challenges as journalist does not recognize them as a social journalist.

To address this issue, snowball sampling, as conceptualized by Goodman (1961) and adapted by Heckathorn (2011), was deemed appropriate to access this relatively hidden population. This research using exponential non-probability sampling as it is suitable for exploratory and qualitative research design where the goal of this study is to explore new phenomena which is social journalism in Malaysia. According to Simkus (2022), the process starts when the first subject recruited to the sample provides multiple referrals. By each new referral, the researcher will have access to more potential research subjects.

This geometric chain sampling sequence is repeated until the study has enough informant where in this study, there are eight (8) informants have been interviewed. Researcher deployed this method as this will assist the study to find enough informant to represent the population. To avoid the bias, the researcher advised the informant to suggest an informant from different organisation and different background. After interviewing eight informants, and the answer given is according to the current situation and thoughts from the scholar, the researcher achieve the saturated data.

### **3.2.2 Data Collection Method**

The qualitative method used in this study was a semi-structured interview with social journalists to understand their conceptualization of press freedom in Malaysia and to investigate the factors influencing and controlling their press freedom in social journalism. This study has identified the ideal candidates to provide a comprehensive view of the issue raised in this study based on their personal experience and expertise.

As this study employed semi-structured, this approach allowed the researcher to extract comprehensive insights from informants (Patton, 2002). The interview protocol was divided into two parts: Part A collected demographic information, including full name, job title, age, gender, educational background, years of experience in journalism, and specifically in journalism. These details were crucial for contextualizing and interpreting the data provided by each informant.

Part B of the protocol consisted of fifteen open-ended questions organized into six thematic areas, directly derived from the research questions. These themes guided the discussion and exploration of key topics relevant to the study's objectives.

The duration of the interview takes about between 60 – 90 minutes. Due to the different background of the informants, the language used during interviews depending on their choice, either Bahasa Melayu or English. Notes were taken by the researcher, and at the same time, the interviews were recorded with informants' permission to ensure the accuracy of transcription and no important information would be omitted. Certain of the informants interviewed via face-to-face and some of them was via Zoom as a medium due to their unavailability and tight schedule.

The interview protocol allowed informants to express their opinions on the current status of press freedom in Malaysia, and their expectation of press freedom in future. On top of that, researcher able to explore different perspectives towards their understanding of press freedom in Malaysia.

The criteria of the informants are well-experienced in Malaysian journalism and have worked with various media organizations before switching to digital media. Some of the informants in this research holding a high position in the news media organization, such as Chief Editor and the Advisor for the media organization. In fact, the informant have experience in mainstream media then switched to digital media. This is to ensure this research gained various information from various backgrounds to understand press freedom and social journalist better. Other than that, the informant are from digital media and suitable with the current situation which is to study on social journalism.

Informant	Credential
1	Youtuber
2	Blogger and professional journalist at mainstream newspaper
3	An author at alternative media and independent writer at Facebook who have extensive experience in political writing
4	Founder of online news portal
5	Advisor of independent news portal
6	Journalist at popular news portal
7	Journalist at independent news portal
8	Famous political blogger at famous blog

*Table 3.1: List of Informants*

Through semi-structured interview, researcher can extract more detailed information as the informant are encouraged to discuss in-depth about the subject matter in this study. The difference between survey interview and semi-structured interview, it works like a moderator guide which seems like journalistic interview. The informant in this study can express their views and not like rating it in a scale. In-fact, the researcher may rearrange the questions as needed according to the situation.

In this study, data saturation was achieved after conducting eight interviews. Data saturation occurs when no new information or themes are observed in the data (Fusch & Ness, 2015). This means that further interviews are unlikely to produce additional insights or variations in responses. As researcher interviewed each informant, recurring patterns and themes began to emerge consistently. By the eighth interview, it became evident that the answers provided were similar, and no new themes were being introduced.

According to Fusch and Ness (2015) assert that data saturation is reached when data collection no longer offers new or relevant information, and the inclusion of additional participants fails to yield further insights. This principle guided researcher to conclude the interview process after observing repetitive and redundant information across the interviews.

### **3.2.3 Data Analysis Method**

The analysis process was done by using NVivo 12.0 to organize and analyze the data. The first step involved importing the recorded interviews into NVivo, with each informant labelled from In01 to In08. The interviews were then analyzed using the six steps of thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), a systematic method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data.

Caulfield (2020) defined thematic analysis to characterize a collection of materials, such as interview transcripts. The researcher carefully analyses the data for recurrent themes - subjects, ideas, and patterns of meaning.

In brief, according to Braun and Clarke (2006), this method is a widely used technique for analysing qualitative data in a wide variety of disciplines and fields. It may be applied in a variety of ways and with a variety of datasets to address a variety of research objectives. It is one of several strategies for identifying recurrent patterns in a dataset.

Thematic analysis can be viewed of as a catch-all phrase for a variety of qualitative data analysis techniques that all aim to find themes (meaning patterns) within the data. While several approaches to thematic analysis share certain theoretical flexibility, they might diverge significantly in terms of underlying philosophy and methodology for creating themes.

There are six (6) approaches or phases in doing thematic analysis, which can be divided into *familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes, and writing up.*

The first step that was done in this research during the analysis process was the familiarization of data. It involved transcribing the data, reading, and re-reading it, and noting initial ideas. Initially, the researcher listened to the recordings without transcribing to get a general sense of the themes and to become familiar with the informants' accents. The recordings were then listened to multiple times and transcribed directly into NVivo. Interviews conducted in Bahasa Melayu and were translated into English to facilitate analysis.

The challenge on this process is when some recordings were unclear due to background noise, particularly those conducted in busy environments like restaurants. To ensure data validity and reliability, unclear words or sentences that could not be clarified with interview notes were excluded from the analysis. During transcription, cross-references were made with interview notes to ensure accuracy. Important and interesting points mentioned by informants were highlighted at this stage.

It is critical to understand the data. This step entails reading and rereading the data to become fully immersed in its content and thoroughly familiar with it. The researcher will read the obtained data to become engaged and acquainted with the material, which will prepare them for the coding step. The coding process will result in brief labels (codes) describing significant data characteristics that may be relevant to answering the research questions. It requires categorizing the entire dataset and then combining all of the codes and pertinent data extracts for future analysis.

In the second step, initial codes were created by systematically identifying and labeling interesting features across the entire data set. This involved organizing relevant data under each code. The researcher compiled these coded data segments from each informant to identify suitable themes.

The third step develops first themes, which requires poring over codes and amassing data to uncover meaningful larger patterns of meaning (potential themes). It then involves assembling data pertinent to each proposed theme to work with it and determine its viability. Three themes was generated which consists of conceptualization of press freedom, factors influencing and controlling press freedom in social journalism.

After generating the initial themes, the researcher will review them to determine whether they tell a compelling story about the data and address the research question. Typically, this phase is used to refine themes, which may include dividing, combining, or rejecting them. In the thematic analysis technique, themes are described as a pattern of shared meaning that is anchored by a fundamental concept or idea.

The fifth stage of thematic analysis, defining and naming themes, entails doing a deep examination of each topic, establishing its scope and focus, and establishing the theme's 'story.' Additionally, it includes developing a descriptive name for each subject. The final stage of the thematic analysis required weaving together the analytic narrative and data extracts, as well as contextualizing the study considering previously published literature.

According to Nowell, Norris, White, et al. (2017), by choosing thematic analysis as a data analysis method, thematic analysis provides a highly flexible approach that can be tailored to the needs of numerous studies, providing a rich and detailed yet complex account of data due to its academic freedom. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) and King (2004), theme analysis is an effective tool for exploring the viewpoints of diverse research participants, identifying commonalities and contrasts, and generating surprising findings.

Additionally, it is excellent for summarizing significant characteristics of a huge data set. It compels the researcher to manage data in a structured manner, resulting in a concise and well-organized final report (King, 2004). While there are various advantages to thematic analysis, it is also necessary to acknowledge the method's disadvantages.

Using NVivo 12, data from the interview will be thematically analysed and interpret to answer the phenomenon investigated in this study. When thematic analysis is compared to other qualitative research methodologies, its drawbacks become more evident.

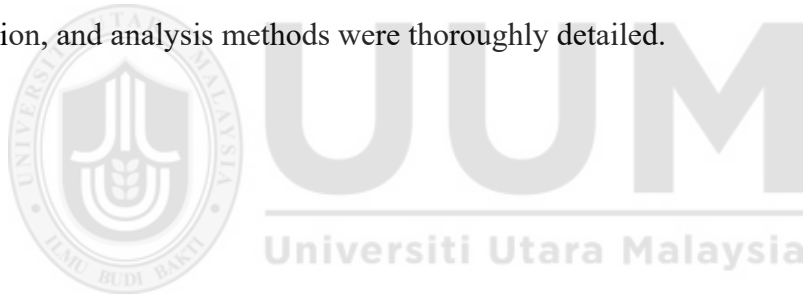
While Holloway and Todres (2003) asserted that thematic analysis is adaptive, they asserted that when constructing themes based on research data, it can result in inconsistencies and a lack of coherence. Consistency and cohesiveness can be enhanced by using and making explicit an epistemological position that can logically support the study's empirical claims.

Thus, a researcher must establish trustworthiness in this study, which can be accomplished using credibility and conformability. According to Guba and Lincoln (1989), a study's credibility is established when coresearchers or readers are presented with and recognize the experience. While confirmability is concerned with establishing that the researcher's interpretations and findings are derived from the data, it also requires the researcher to demonstrate how those conclusions and interpretations were reached (Tobin & Begley, 2004). The rationales for theoretical, methodological, and analytical choices are given throughout this research as markers to help others understand how and why decisions were taken. Overall, all these stages mentioned will be completed by the researcher in order to address the study's research questions.

### 3.2.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter described the methods employed in the writing of this thesis. The researcher used semi-structured interviews and qualitative theme analysis to examine how Malaysian press freedom is conceptualized, to identify the factors influencing and controlling press freedom in social journalism.

Researcher used snowball sampling as it is a suitable approach for an explanatory where the ultimate goal is to explore new phenomena which in this research, the researcher would like to explore further on social journalism in Malaysia. Researcher have interviewed eight informants by using semi-structured interviews to probe further on the conceptualization of press freedom. The purpose, sample design, data collection, and analysis methods were thoroughly detailed.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

#### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter will discuss the analysis of the data that has been studied by the researcher. The first objective in this research is to study on how social journalists conceptualize press freedom. Eight informants was interviewed in this research and below is the list of informants that have been interviewed.

Informant	Credential
1	Youtuber
2	Blogger and professional journalist at mainstream newspaper
3	An author at alternative meda and independent writer at Facebook who have extensive experience in political writing
4	Founder of online news portal
5	Advisor of independent news portal
6	Journalist at popular news portal
7	Journalist at independent news portal
8	Famous political blogger at famous blog

*Table 4.1:* List of Informants Interviewed

The second objective of this research is to identify the factors influencing the understanding of press freedom. There are few factors that contributing to the understanding of the social journalist towards the conceptualization of press freedom. Researcher found that factors such the company policy, the laws and regulations, culture, education, upbringing, ethics and the company of source income were the main factors that contributed to the understanding of press freedom.

It is crucial for researcher to analyse and understand those factors influence the understanding of press freedom. The third objective of this research is to analyse on how the social journalist apply their understanding of press freedom while practicing social journalism. Lastly, the objective of this research is to illustrate a suitable framework of press freedom in social journalism.

## 4.2 Conceptualization of Press Freedom

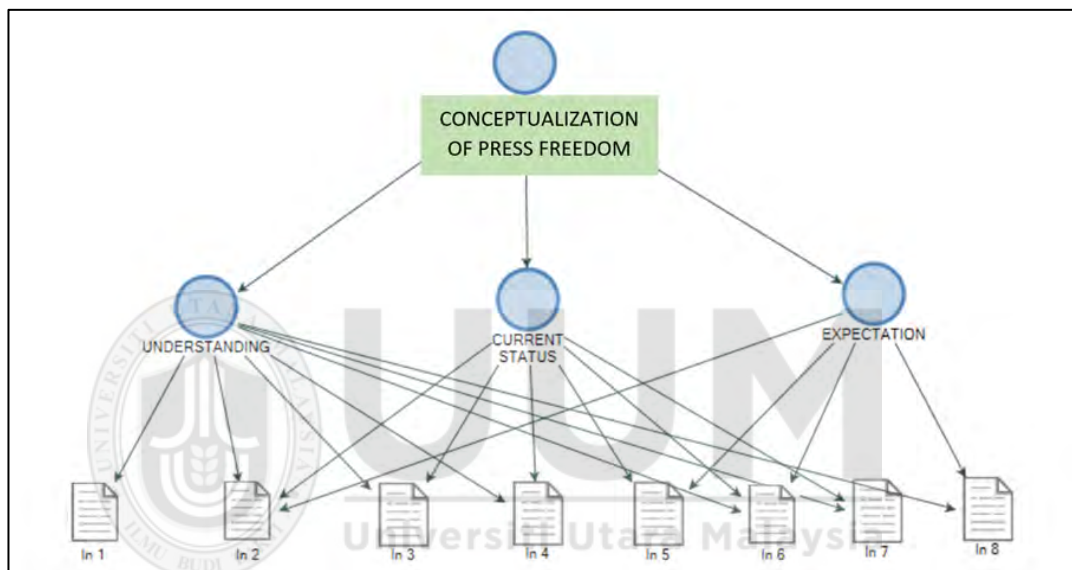


Figure 4.1. Conceptualization of Press Freedom

Analysis on the conceptualization of press freedom from the perspective of social journalist in Malaysia revealed three components which are understanding of press freedom, its current status and the expectation.

### 4.2.1 Understanding of Press Freedom

To assess social journalists' overall conceptualization, this research has attempted to investigate how they comprehend the concept of press freedom. The study discovered that the informants' definition of press freedom was the limitless ability to express any news, information, ideas, or thoughts in their writing.

Reporting on ruling parties in Malaysia, where the media is constrained in its ability to educate the people, revealed clear problems with media freedom. The informant believe that they should be able to report any news that they consider to be true.

‘Press freedom is a freedom of media. A freedom to voice out any news without any limitations. There is a limitation to report certain news, there’s a possibility to get demoted or terminated, it is not free to report the news like back then. Media freedom means that he/she is free to report anything that is true and no speculations. There is no freedom, and we can’t deliver the news to hide or cover certain leaders. (Informant 1)

Informant 1 is a YouTuber that created a video to create awareness in the community.

Apart from that, researcher asked if Informant 1 do have any guidelines to be followed in writing, and this is his statement:

‘My principle is aligned with the community guideline that has been setup by YouTube. The only reason on why YouTube came out with the community guideline is because they are concern with the community and it is aligned with what I wanted to convey.’ (Informant 1)

Informant 2, a social journalist writer that write in his own capacity using a social media for 10 years, argued that a press freedom is not obsolete. He mentioned that no matter how free the press is, it will always be within the laws. He claimed that every writer must be responsible on their own writing. On top of that, he also added that

‘The writers should be free to express their opinions, and everyone is free to give a judgement too. It is up to the writer to write whatever they want but it is depends on how people judge the statement.’ (Informant 2)

However, it is different with informant 3 who against the existence of press freedom. He mentioned that Malaysia has no independency in press freedom as we are not allowed to freely express our thoughts especially through media. He also made a comparison between our country and other country such Indonesia/US that are freely to voice their thoughts through media. During the interview, he asserted:

‘In Indonesia, it is a big country, and the vibrancy of media is happening after Suharto’s time. The press freedom is not obsolete but to do any debate, it is totally free to do so. People are allowed to have a public discussion about any news, especially related to the political matters or any serious issues that connected to the policy that bring concerns to the people. (Informant 3)

Informant 7 is a journalist from a famous news portal and have six million subscribers.

He also has the same opinion by saying:

‘A freedom should be a total freedom. Looking at the current practice, there is a limitation. We are not allowed to touch any issues related to racism, politics, religious. Let’s take a case that is happening in Indian community, we are not allowed to use terms like ‘pariya’. Our news portal is registered, and we applied all laws and regulations that related to media.’ (Informant 7)

He pointed out that social media platforms such as Facebook have a set of guidelines referred to as the "Standard Community" which outlines the acceptable dos and don'ts on the platform. This includes rules relating to issues such as fake news, religion, and race, which if violated, can result in users flagging the content, leading to temporary shutdown or blocking of the Facebook page. This can have negative consequences on the reputation and sustainability of media organizations. He further highlighted that his news portal heavily relies on user engagement, and every click on an article is crucial.

Therefore, any content that does not adhere to the guidelines set by the organization is promptly removed to maintain the integrity and credibility of their platform.

In conclusion, press freedom in Malaysia is a topic that is widely debated and understood in different ways by various stakeholders. While the Malaysian Constitution guarantees freedom of the press and the government has taken steps to promote media freedom, the reality on the ground can be more complicated. There are concerns that media outlets are influenced by political and economic interests, and that the government may use laws and regulations to restrict media freedom. Additionally, the rise of digital media and social journalism has created new challenges and opportunities for press freedom in Malaysia.

#### **4.2.2 Current Status of Press Freedom**

Since gaining independence in 1957, the Malaysian government has progressively increased its official control over the media. The government's stance is that allowing greater freedom of expression could lead to political instability and interethnic tensions, which in turn would hinder the nation's economic growth. As a result, the government has imposed restrictions and regulations on journalistic freedom within the country, as reported by the International Federation of Journalists in 2021.

In a recent study, Salman, Yusoff, Salleh, and Abdullah (2018) noted that social journalists in Malaysia have started using various new media channels like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. However, these social journalists are still bound by the laws and regulations established by the government. Before publishing news, social journalists are required to verify the source of their information and ensure that it adheres to the set rules and regulations.

Informant 2 has expressed their opinion that media freedom is limited as the court holds the ultimate power in deciding whether a statement is defamatory or not. They believe that despite being able to write whatever they want, media outlets will always be at risk of facing legal consequences if their content is deemed to be against the law. In their view, media freedom has never truly been on the side of the media, as they are often on the losing end in court cases related to defamation.

Then, Informant 3 holds the view that social journalists enjoy a high degree of freedom, as they are not closely monitored by any authority. While they acknowledge that some social journalists may contribute to racial tensions through their reporting, they believe that many of these individuals are able to operate with impunity by using fake accounts. This makes it difficult for authorities to track them and hold them accountable for their actions.

‘If you are talking about social journalist and media freedom, these social journalists are very free. At this moment, there is no authority that taking any charge on them though sometimes they are creating this racial tension, due to their anonymous identity behind the fake account that they are using, they get free.’ (Informant 3)

Informant 5 also expressed the view that there is a press freedom in Malaysia, and people are free to write and express themselves however they wish. This freedom extends to the point of being able to defame others with anonymity, as there are no restrictions in place to prevent it. However, this freedom does not align with their understanding of press freedom. Informant 5 asserts that true press freedom is more than just being able to do anything without any consequences, but rather involves the responsible use of media to promote accurate and balanced reporting.

‘The practice of the media freedom in Malaysia is, we have more than that here. We can write anything, we are free to defame anybody as we have anonymity, we can hide behind that, there’s no one stopping you.’ (Informant 5)

However, Informant 4 expressed the view that press freedom refers to what we are allowed to do. They argue that in Indonesia, the media enjoys absolute freedom and people are always eager to know the latest news. In comparison, Malaysia lags behind and cannot be compared to Indonesia. Informant 4 asserts that the Malaysian media is sometimes inaccurate and biased, citing TV3 as an example of a news outlet that promotes biased news. They also believe that Malaysia lacks independence in the media and that there is a division in thinking and understanding of media freedom within the country. According to Informant 4, Malaysia does not have true media freedom.

Informant 4 also added that people will always gravitate towards reliable media that portrays accurate news. AWANI channel has been used as an example of a media outlet that always features intellectual discussions and is known for its credibility. According to Informant 4, media outlets that prioritize accuracy and credibility will always have a loyal following among the public.

‘AWANI channel will be discussing more into intellectual fact on certain issues and they are not bias in presenting the information to the public. If you compared it with TV3 or RTM, they will never have this kind of debate or discussion.’ (Informant 4)

According to informant 6, press freedom in Malaysia is currently limited due to strict guidelines, however, the informant agreed that regulation could be necessary. The

informant expressed concern that Malaysia is struggling to control the growing number of social journalists in the country.

‘The freedom is limited as Malaysia has a guideline and the journalist are being cautious due to it. I do agree when we have a restriction as many does not aware about the laws. The number of these social journalist are many and how are we going to control them without any guidelines or restriction?’ (Informant 6)

In conclusion, there are a variety of opinions and perspectives on the current state of press freedom in Malaysia. While some individuals may feel that there are limitations on media freedom due to strict guidelines, others may believe that regulation could be necessary. Additionally, the emergence of social journalists has raised concerns about the ability of Malaysia to effectively control the media landscape. Overall, it is clear that the issue of press freedom in Malaysia is a complex and nuanced one, with many differing viewpoints and factors to consider.

#### **4.2.3 Expectation of Press Freedom**

Press freedom is a crucial component of a democratic society, providing citizens with access to accurate and diverse information on political, social, and economic issues. In Malaysia, there are high expectations for press freedom, given the country's commitment to democracy and freedom of expression. While the government has taken steps to promote media freedom, including the establishment of the Malaysian Press Institute and the repeal of the Printing Presses and Publications Act, there are still concerns about the level of media independence and the ability of journalists to report without fear of reprisal.

Press freedom has long been a contentious issue in Malaysia, with the government exercising tight control over the media. Despite recent reforms, the expectation of true press freedom remains elusive. According to a journal article by William Case (2018), "The Malaysian government has frequently demonstrated its intolerance for criticism, either by censorship, intimidation, or prosecution of those who express dissenting views." This has created an environment in which journalists must self-censor or risk facing legal action or harassment. Additionally, media ownership is concentrated in the hands of a few government-linked companies, further limiting the diversity of viewpoints in Malaysian media.

Another journal article by James Chin (2020) notes that while there have been some positive developments, such as the repeal of the Fake News Act in 2019, there is still a long way to go for press freedom in Malaysia. Chin writes, "The government continues to use the Printing Presses and Publications Act to control the media and restrict freedom of speech, while the Sedition Act remains in place to suppress dissenting voices." These laws have been used to silence journalists and opposition politicians, and there are concerns that they could be used again in the future.

Overall, while there have been some improvements in recent years, the expectation of true press freedom in Malaysia remains elusive. The government's continued use of restrictive laws and its control over the media continue to stifle dissenting voices and limit the diversity of viewpoints in Malaysian media. This section will explore the expectations for press freedom in Malaysia.

According to informant 5, the expectation towards press freedom in Malaysia should be much better than what it currently is. While progress has been made, the process

has been slow, and Malaysia still has a long way to go in terms of ensuring true press freedom. Informant 5 believes that if journalists and those connected to journalism, such as academics and lecturers, are truly committed to the cause, they must come together to push for greater freedom in journalism. Without this collective effort, progress will continue to be slow, and the freedom of the press in Malaysia will remain limited. Ultimately, change will come, but it is up to those who are passionate about journalism to ensure that it happens sooner rather than later.

‘My expectation towards press freedom in Malaysia, it should get better. However, it’s a natural process and we are taking too long for this phase. Respectfully, if everyone is committed and passionate in journalism, if we don’t come together and ensure greater freedom for journalism, it would not happen. This is a good time for us to come together and go for it.’ (Informant 5)

According to informant 6 who shared the same view as informant 8, as a writer, press freedom should be total and unrestricted. However, there are certain limitations that must be put in place, particularly when it comes to sensitive issues such as race and religion. Informant 6 stresses the importance of having clear guidelines in place to ensure that journalists and writers understand what is acceptable and what is not. This is particularly important for news portals that are registered in Malaysia, as they must comply with all media laws in the country.

‘I do agree that the press freedom should be given total to the journalist but they must know their limitation in their practice. Hence, there is a guideline that has been set up to assist these journalists in their writing.’ (Informant 6)

Informant 6 also notes that social media platforms like Facebook have their own guidelines that writers must adhere to, with strict community standards in place to

prevent the spread of hate speech and other harmful content. Ultimately, while total press freedom may not be feasible, having clear guidelines and standards can help ensure that the media operates in a responsible and ethical manner, while still allowing for the freedom of expression.

‘This is where a guideline plays a vital role and the guideline has been set by the company for the journalist to comply it in their writing. Since is a registered news portal, so it will follow all media laws in Malaysia. In fact, if we are using Facebook as a medium to share our writing, we must follow the standard community guideline that has been set by Facebook.’ (Informant 6)

Then, researcher also asked some of the informant that either these social journalists should be given an unlimited freedom to let the journalist write and present the ideas to the society. Informant 8 believes that press freedom should be granted to journalists, as long as their reporting does not violate any laws. In their view, as long as journalists have a clear understanding of what is right and wrong, they should be free to write and report on any issue they see fit.

‘As long as they don’t write something that against the law, they should have been granted this unlimited freedom to let them express their ideas through their writing.’ (Informant 8)

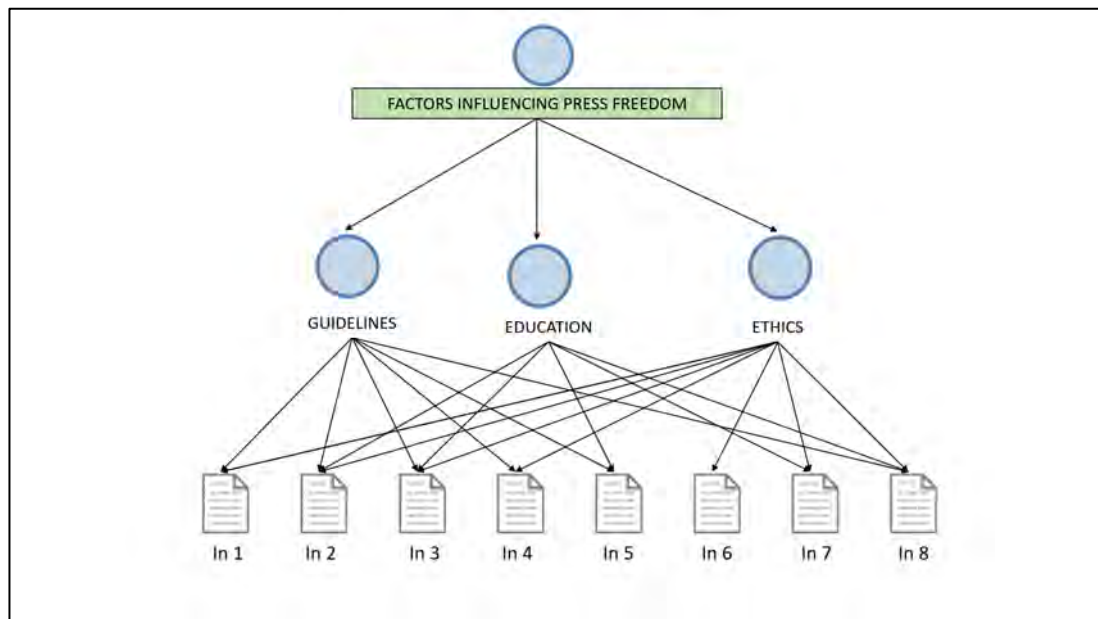
Informant 8 also mentioned that journalists have a responsibility to use their training and knowledge to ensure that their reporting is accurate, unbiased, and within the legal limits. Informant 8 emphasized that the freedom of the press exists in Malaysia, but it is important for journalists to understand the limitations and responsibilities that come with this freedom.

On top of that, informant 8 believes that media freedom in Malaysia should always prioritize the needs and interests of the citizens. They argue that the media should not be misused as a tool to spread hatred, particularly by the government or those in positions of power. Instead, the media should always be on the side of the people and work to assist citizens in making informed decisions that can lead to positive change.

Informant 8 also stresses that journalists should avoid writing content that spreads hatred or causes disharmony, particularly when it comes to sensitive issues such as race. It is important to control individuals who spread hateful and racist content on social media, as this can lead to serious consequences and social divisions. Ultimately, for media freedom to truly benefit society, it must be used responsibly and always work towards the betterment of the citizens.

In conclusion, the data gathered from the interviews with the informants from various media backgrounds showed that there is a common expectation among them for better and unlimited freedom in their practice as journalists. However, they acknowledge the importance of having limitations and guidelines to ensure responsible journalism. The need for training and sufficient knowledge to equip journalists to become responsible in their practice is also emphasized. The media should be used as a tool to give information to citizens for their benefit and avoid spreading hatred, especially in sensitive issues such as religion and racism. Therefore, having a guideline is crucial to assist social journalists and act as a boundary in their practice.

### 4.3 Factors Influencing Press Freedom



*Figure 4.2.* Factors Influencing Press Freedom

The study has two objectives, and the second one is to determine what factors affect how people understand press freedom. These factors include guidelines, education and job requirements. In an attempt to explore factors influencing the press freedom, eight informants from different media backgrounds have been interviewed. The data collected revealed that there are only a few factors that influence how press freedom is conceptualized.

#### 4.3.1 Guidelines

Guidelines play a critical role in shaping the practices and values of any organization, including media organizations. Guidelines serve as a set of rules and standards that guide journalists in their reporting, ensuring accuracy, fairness, and ethical conduct. In recent years, there has been growing attention to the role of guidelines in promoting responsible journalism and maintaining the credibility of media organizations.

A study published in 2020 explored the impact of guidelines on media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study found that guidelines played a crucial role in promoting accurate and responsible reporting during the pandemic. The guidelines provided journalists with clear standards and criteria for reporting on the pandemic, ensuring that the reporting was based on scientific evidence and expert opinion (Jeong & Ko, 2020).

According to informant 1, every platform already has its own guidelines that content creators must follow. As an example, YouTube, which already has a set of guidelines in place. If content creators violate these guidelines or any laws, YouTube has the right to take down the video.

However, informant 1 also points out that these guidelines are not as simple as they may seem. They can be quite restrictive, and in their opinion, they limit media freedom. The guidelines can dictate what type of content is allowed, how it should be presented, and even how it should be monetized.

‘You may take YouTube as an example where the platform has provided a guideline for all users to follow, but this guideline is not as simple as we think since the guideline provided is restricting the content creators from expressing their ideas.’ (Informant 1)

While these guidelines may be put in place to ensure that the platform remains safe and appropriate for all users, Informant 1 believes that they can sometimes be too strict. It is important to find a balance between protecting users and allowing content creators to express themselves freely.

Informant 1 added, having guidelines is not just about restricting content, but about promoting responsible behavior and self-regulation. By teaching content creators to be mindful of the impact of their work, guidelines can help create a more positive online environment for everyone.

Next, Informant 3 stated that, the guidelines set by his company have been very helpful in his practice as a journalist. He believes that the guidelines act as a boundary and a reference point for him, allowing him to navigate the challenges of reporting with accuracy, fairness, and ethical conduct. The guidelines serve as a framework that he can rely on to ensure that his content meets the highest standards of quality, and he is able to use them as a tool to improve his work as a journalist.

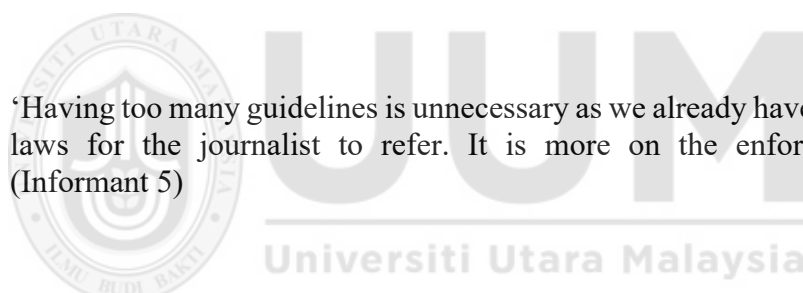
Informant 7 shares a similar opinion as Informant 3 regarding the importance of having guidelines in place for online content creation. According to Informant 7, guidelines can help prevent issues such as pornography or child grooming by establishing clear boundaries for what is acceptable content.

By providing guidelines and regulations, online platforms can create a safer environment for users, particularly vulnerable populations such as children. Informant 7 believes that guidelines can also help to protect the reputation of the platform and the content creators themselves, as it ensures that content remains within legal and ethical boundaries.

‘We need rules and guidelines about other social issues such as pornography and child grooming, go after that.’ (Informant 7)

Informant 7 not only supports the importance of having guidelines for online content creation but also emphasizes the need for self-regulation in addition to the guidelines. According to Informant 7, self-regulation can be achieved through the establishment of an independent organization that oversees the conduct of media professionals and promotes responsible behavior.

Nevertheless, informant 5 disagrees with the notion that creating additional guidelines could lead to confusion and unnecessary restrictions on media freedom. They argue that journalists already have a responsibility to adhere to ethical and legal standards when creating content, and the existing guidelines and laws provide enough guidance for them to do so.



‘Having too many guidelines is unnecessary as we already have enough laws for the journalist to refer. It is more on the enforcement.’  
(Informant 5)

Considering all opinions from the informants, guidelines are crucial for media organizations to ensure that their content is accurate, fair, and ethical. While guidelines may seem restrictive, they promote responsible behavior and self-regulation among journalists, which creates a more positive online environment for everyone. However, there is a concern that creating additional guidelines could lead to confusion and unnecessary restrictions on media freedom. Therefore, it is essential to strike a balance between promoting ethical conduct and preserving media freedom when creating guidelines for media organizations.

### 4.3.2 Education

Education plays a crucial role in shaping the skills and values of journalists. Aspiring journalists undergo years of rigorous training to acquire the knowledge and skills they need to excel in their profession. In addition to learning the technical aspects of journalism, such as writing and reporting, education also teaches journalists about their ethical and professional responsibilities.

During an interview, Informant 1 was asked about the importance of education in journalism. In response, Informant 1 emphasized that education should be given top priority in the field of journalism.

‘Education is at the first place. It will help people to see things. When they were exposed with sufficient knowledge, they will know on how to treat the issues and that is important.’ (Informant 1)

According to Informant 1, education plays a crucial role in shaping the knowledge and skills of journalists, and equips them with the tools they need to navigate complex ethical and legal issues in their reporting. By prioritizing education, journalists can ensure that they are well-equipped to tackle the challenges of the profession, and can help to promote responsible and ethical journalism that upholds the principles of press freedom and accountability.

Informant 2 shared his experience from mainstream media, where he was taught about the laws in journalism from the first day he started his career journey as a journalist. He mentioned that attending workshops from time to time was mandatory, and being in the mainstream media line, all regulations and laws were taught to avoid libel or being sued. Moreover, whenever any new rules or law were set by the government, he

was informed and trained accordingly. He was also sent overseas several times for studying journalism. However, he expressed his concern about the lack of awareness among journalists, especially regarding laws and enforcement.

‘I am concerned about the level of awareness among journalists, both professional and amateur, regarding the laws and limitations on freedom. It is crucial that they receive education on the Penal Code, which contains fundamental principles that can aid in comprehending the rationale behind the creation of other laws.’ (Informant 2)

Besides, in this study, Informant 4 was also asked by the researcher whether he had learned about ethics in journalism during his studies in journalism or work in the industry. Informant 4, who has been in the industry for a long time, responded that he was first exposed to media ethics, media law, and media and society during his studies. These subjects equipped him with a strong foundation of knowledge and understanding about the ethics of journalism, which he has continued to apply throughout his career.

‘I learned on media ethics, media law, media and society where these subjects have been very helpful in my career journey. There are many dos and don'ts. Through these subjects, I learned about ethics in journalism.’ (Informant 4)

He emphasized that, regardless of which organization he has worked for, the ethics of journalism have remained the same. This highlights the importance of a comprehensive education in journalism, which provides journalists with the necessary tools to navigate the complex ethical challenges that they may encounter in their careers. Furthermore, it emphasizes the need for ongoing education and training to ensure that journalists stay up-to-date with the latest ethical standards and best practices in the industry.

On the other hand, Informant 5 was asked about where he got the idea of press freedom and whether his views had changed since he started practicing as a journalist. He stated that his original idea of press freedom was largely influenced by what he read or watched in the media. He further explained that during his college years, most of his lecturers had no prior experience in journalism, which left him feeling uncertain and uninformed for the first four semesters of his studies.

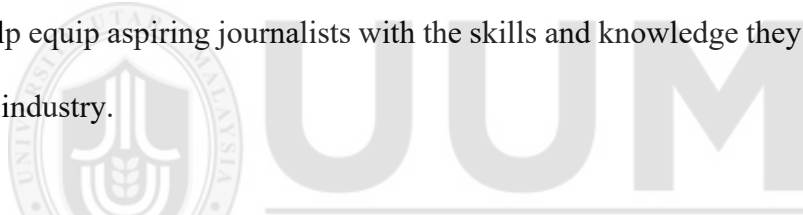
‘I believe that I was influenced by what I read and watched. During my college, one of the problems that I encountered and I could say that most of my lecturers, had zero experience in journalism. Thus, there was a disconnect by four semesters. When I went for my industrial training, I was taught about the dos and don’ts of journalism.’  
(Informant 5)

It was only during his industrial training that he was able to gain a deeper understanding of the industry and was exposed to the dos and don'ts of journalism. This highlights the importance of practical experience and training in journalism, which is crucial for preparing future journalists for the complexities and challenges of the profession.

Informant 5 also revealed that as he progressed in his career as a journalist, he realized that there were many barriers that prevented him from being as free in his writing as he would like to be. In particular, he mentioned that working for a media organization that is affiliated with a political party can be challenging, as it may limit his ability to criticize or challenge the political organization. As a result, he had to adapt his writing and reporting style to navigate these limitations, while still upholding his journalistic integrity and principles. This highlights the complexities of working in the media

industry, and the need for journalists to balance their personal beliefs and values with the expectations and constraints of their organization.

In addition, Informant 7 shared that his journey in journalism began when he received an offer to work at Berita Harian. It was during his tenure there that he received comprehensive training from Straits Times Group, which lasted for six months. Through this training, he was able to gain a deep understanding of the fundamentals of journalism, including media freedom, ethics, and guidelines to be followed by journalists. In particular, he emphasized the importance of adhering to ethical standards, which serve as a crucial foundation for the practice of journalism. This highlights the significance of formal training and education in journalism, and how it can help equip aspiring journalists with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in this industry.



‘I learned press freedom when I was at Berita Harian. They sent me for a journalism training where I was equipped with a knowledge in journalism and one of the basic thing that they taught was about ethics and guideline that has been set.’ (Informant 7)

When researcher asked about his understanding of press freedom at the beginning of his career, Informant 7 acknowledged the vital role that education played in shaping his understanding of the concept.

Researcher comes to a conclusion that education is an essential component in the field of journalism, as it equips aspiring journalists with the necessary knowledge and skills to navigate complex ethical issues and report responsibly. Therefore, it is crucial that education is given top priority in the field of journalism to produce responsible and

ethical journalists who are equipped to handle the challenges of a rapidly evolving media landscape.

### **4.3.3 Ethics**

Ethics can guide journalists to become responsible journalists by providing a framework for decision-making and professional conduct. For example, as highlighted in a recent article by Pavlik and McIntosh (2022), ethics can help journalists navigate the complexities of digital media and social media platforms, where information spreads quickly, and misinformation can have serious consequences. Adhering to ethical principles such as accuracy, transparency, and verification can help journalists to report responsibly and avoid spreading false information.

According to the researcher's interview with Informant 2, when asked about his opinion on whether people nowadays have ethics or not, he responded by stating that it's not about whether people have ethics or not, but rather that people do not realize the existence of ethics.

‘The issue is not whether people possess ethical values or not. Instead, the problem lies in the fact that many netizens are unaware of the MCMC laws, acts, and rules that regulate communication and multimedia use in Malaysia. The informant further explained that some netizens wrongly assume that they will only face legal consequences if they openly criticize the government.’ (Informant 2)

He went on to highlight the existence of MCMC (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission) rules and laws, which are designed to regulate the use of communication and multimedia technologies in Malaysia. The informant suggested that many netizens may not be aware of these rules and laws, and that they may believe

that they will only be arrested if they openly criticize the government indicating a lack of understanding of the scope and implications of these regulations.

Besides, Informant 2 appears to be someone who values ethics over popularity. When asked to choose between gaining popularity and following ethical standards, he replied that he would choose ethics. He emphasized that he is not seeking followers but only aims to share his writing while complying with ethical standards.

‘If I wanted to gain popularity and seek for more followers, I should just set up a Facebook page. However, my goal is to only share what I know and my writing is based on facts and ethics.’ (Informant 2)

On top of that, Informant 2 also noted that he is now free to write what he wants on Facebook, whereas when he was working at Utusan Malaysia, he was unable to do so. This indicates that he values the freedom to express himself and is grateful for the opportunity to do so on Facebook while still adhering to ethical standards.

The researcher continued to explore the issue of ethics and integrity in journalism by asking Informant 3 about how he learned these principles. Informant 3 replied that he was not trained as a professional journalist, as his background was in engineering, which is a completely different field. However, he did mention that journalists develop their own style of writing, which can be casual and flexible at times.

Informant 3 made it clear that he never uses harsh language in his writing, as it is not his style. He also avoids attacking individuals personally, instead choosing to focus on policies, such as government policies. This indicates that he values professionalism and avoids sensationalism or personal attacks in his work.

‘My writing style does not include the use of profanity or personal attacks on individuals. As someone who was trained in engineering rather than journalism, I do not have a fixed style of writing, but instead write about current issues, often focusing on politics as I am working with a political party.’ (Informant 3)

Besides, Informant 5 also added that social journalists are not bound by any specific ethical standards, and they are free to express themselves through their own platforms. His organization does not have any say in this matter, and there is no agreement between the organization and its journalists that obligates them to use their Facebook as an extension of his news portal.

During the interview, Informant 7, who is a social journalist and the founder of a news portal, was asked about their priority. In response, Informant 7 stated that it depends on who they are. As a social journalist and a media entrepreneur, their primary focus is on the economy and business. As a result, their stakeholders, including businesses and entrepreneurs, become their priority. Informant 7 believes in promoting their stakeholders' reputation, identity, and image through their news portal. This aligns with their mission as a social journalist and media entrepreneur, which is to provide accurate and reliable news while also promoting the growth and development of the economy and business sector.

‘As a social journalist and the founder of a news portal, my priorities depend on my role. Given our focus on the economy and business, we prioritize stakeholders in this sector by promoting their reputation, identity, and image. Bacalah Malaysia is a dynamic platform, and stakeholders in the sector have become increasingly important. As such, our news content is tailored to approach them in various ways. For example, if Company A sells Item A, we approach them for branding purposes and provide assistance to entrepreneurs.’ (Informant 7)

The researcher also inquired if Informant 7's news portal would promote certain items despite it being against journalism ethics. In response, Informant 7 emphasized that upholding ethical standards was of the utmost importance as a founder of a news portal. The nature of their work was dynamic, but they still relied on the ethics they had practiced in conventional media. One advantage of social journalists is that their integrity and ethical practices are typically higher if they come from a conventional media background. However, if someone is not from that background, then it becomes a major concern, as everything ultimately goes back to integrity. Therefore, understanding the basic principles of journalism is crucial, he added.

In addition, when asked about the importance of ethics in writing, Informant 8 emphasized that the foundation of ethical writing is truthfulness. The principle that guides journalists is to remain true to the facts. If a journalist writes something that is untrue, they are going against ethical principles. It is essential that the facts presented in writing are accurate and truthful.

Informant 8 expressed that throughout his career journey, he has always upheld this principle of truthfulness. He never written anything that was not true. This shows that Informant 8 takes the issue of ethics in writing very seriously and is committed to maintaining a high standard of integrity in their work.

According to Craig Carroll, "Ethics are a critical component of journalism that provide guidance to practitioners in making difficult decisions and balancing the needs of stakeholders" (Carroll, 2016, p. 67). In conclusion, ethics play a crucial role in social journalism by providing a framework for decision-making and professional conduct. It guides journalists to become responsible and accountable in their work. Based on

the interview, it is evident that most informants prioritize ethics and integrity in their profession. They value professionalism and strive to avoid sensationalism or personal attacks in their reporting. However, there are still some who prioritize business interests, but they do not compromise on ethical standards as journalists. As social journalism continues to evolve in the digital age, upholding ethical practices remains essential to maintain public trust and credibility.

#### 4.4 Factors Controlling in Press Freedom for Social Journalists

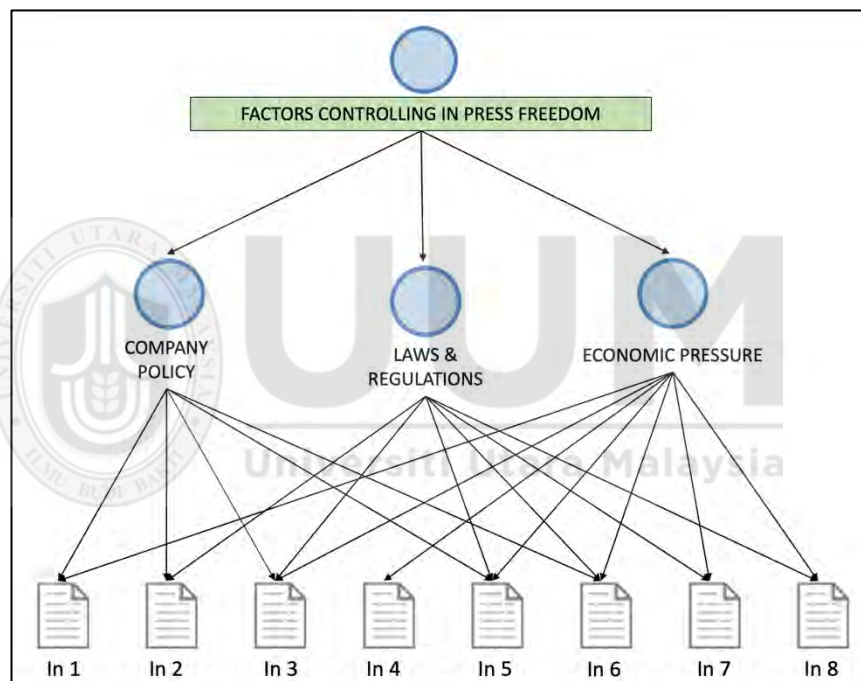


Figure 4.3. Controlling Factors in Press Freedom for Social Journalist

The third objective of this study is to examine the factors that control press freedom for social journalists. Through the research, the researcher identified three main factors that play a crucial role in controlling press freedom: company policy, laws and regulations, and economic pressure.

Company policy refers to the guidelines and rules established by media companies that dictate what can and cannot be published. Such policies can limit the freedom of journalists to report on certain topics or express certain viewpoints.

Laws and regulations are another significant factor that controls press freedom. Governments may impose laws and regulations that restrict what journalists can report on or even punish them for reporting on certain topics. Such restrictions can have a chilling effect on the press, leading to self-censorship and a lack of transparency.

Economic pressure is also a significant factor that controls press freedom. Media companies may face financial pressures that limit their ability to publish certain stories or take a critical stance on certain issues. This can lead to a lack of diversity in the media landscape and limit the range of voices and perspectives that are represented.

#### **4.4.1 Company Policy**

Company policy can significantly impact the practices of social journalists. According to a study by Maltby and Voakes (2014), media companies often have guidelines and rules in place that restrict the freedom of journalists to report on certain topics or express certain viewpoints. These policies can lead to self-censorship among journalists, limiting the range of perspectives and voices that are represented in the media.

Throughout the research, several informants have discussed how company policy has affected their practice as a journalist. These policies can have a significant impact on the topics and viewpoints that social journalists are able to report on, as well as the tone and style of their writing.

According to Informant, it is necessary to adhere to the company policy that has been established by the media organization. He indicated that his superior would provide guidance on whether or not an article should be published, based on this policy. He also added that working as a writer especially utilizing the social media as a platform, he has no superior and he can do anything he want.

‘Working with media companies where the boss holds political power means that they can instruct whether an article is suitable for publication or not. However, with social media as a medium, there is no boss involved. We have the freedom to work on the story and do as we please.’ (Informant 1)

Informant 5 shared that the company policy is closely linked to its vision, mission, and related aspects. He emphasized that he has never prevented his journalists from exercising their freedom on social media. He clarified that while he does not restrict them from engaging in any personal activities on Facebook, it is their individual right. They are free to write anything, including gossip. However, he emphasized that they must ensure that their actions do not bring disrepute to the organization. As long as they are mindful of this aspect, they can write freely as individuals.

‘We strive to use our blog and portal with ethics and responsibility, and we aim to promote ethical journalism on Facebook as there is a lot of trash and nonsensical content on the platform. However, within our organization, we have a culture of responsibility and accountability.’ (Informant 5)

Informant 6 mentioned that the biggest challenge in journalism arises when a news report is false or inaccurate. Such reports can have significant impacts on specific parties, particularly if they have an interest in the media organization in question.

Then, the researcher inquired with informant 7 regarding the current company policy practice in Malaysia. According to his response, the present practice in social media is extremely unregulated, with individuals expressing their opinions without considering ethics or integrity. These individuals prioritize their personal agendas over everything else. He further added that when working with a news portal, one must adhere to the house style.

In conclusion, a company policy can significantly impact the social journalist practice. Journalists are expected to adhere to the house style of their employers while keeping the interests of various stakeholders in mind. This can pose a challenge to social journalists who aim to provide unbiased and objective coverage of social issues. A company's policy can affect the social journalist practice in several ways. For instance, if the company has a strong bias towards a particular political or social ideology, it can constrain journalists from covering certain issues or reporting on them in a specific way. This can result in the suppression of alternative viewpoints and the perpetuation of a particular narrative.

#### **4.4.2 Laws and Regulations**

Laws and regulations play a significant role in shaping the landscape of social journalism, which refers to the use of social media platforms and other digital tools for reporting and disseminating news and information. Social journalism often involves the collection and dissemination of personal information, including images, videos, and personal stories shared on social media platforms. Laws and regulations governing data protection, consent, and privacy can affect how social journalists collect, use, and share such information. For example, journalists may need to obtain consent from

individuals before using their content, or comply with data protection regulations when storing and processing user-generated content.

Several informants, who are practicing social journalists in Malaysia, have shared their perspectives on how laws and regulations have impacted their work. They have expressed that laws and regulations play a significant role in shaping their practice and the boundaries within which they operate as social journalists.

According to Informant 3, when asked about laws and regulations, emphasized that it's not just about the existence of laws and regulations, but also about their enforcement. Informant 3 expressed that he had witnessed instances where individuals report violations of laws and regulations related to social journalism, but no action is taken, highlighting the importance of effective enforcement.

‘It’s not about laws and regulations, it’s actually enforcement. The thing is you can have the best law but if we have the lousiest enforcement, there is no point to have the laws at first place.’  
(Informant 3)

Informant 3 highlights the importance of enforcing laws and regulations in order for them to be effective. Simply having laws and regulations in place is not enough to ensure that people follow them. The success of a law ultimately depends on how well it is enforced.

However, it is different with Informant 5 that had a different view when asked whether social journalists require specific laws and regulations to guide them. He suggested that the current laws and regulations should be reduced, as there are already too many of them. Instead, he emphasized the importance of self-regulation, and one way to

achieve this is through the establishment of a media council that has been discussed for 40 years. He also mentioned that the phenomenon of social journalism could be addressed similarly to other issues that affect journalists and journalism, such as ethical concerns, national interests, and individual rights.

‘We’ve been fighting over 40 years to build a Media Council, and the last one was under Pakatan Harapan that went a bit further, but the outcome remains the same. When politicians have a power to govern, they realised that they have power to stop people from doing things. In this case, they have power to stop the media from writing stuff that are not beneficial to them. I believe by having a self-regulation through Media Council, the issues related to social journalist and social journalism can be addressed similarly to other issues.’ (Informant 5)

Moreover, researcher asked Informant 5 whether MCMC (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission) has been enforcing laws related to the media. In response, Informant 5 stated that MCMC does go after social journalists frequently, but he does not believe that MCMC should be involved in policing what journalists do. Informant 5 suggested that MCMC should focus on issues related to the telecommunication industry and the business sector, such as pornography and child grooming.

Informant 5 once again proposed the concept of self-regulation, which involves setting up an organization that includes journalists, community members, and individuals from the business community to oversee the conduct of the media. This organization would be established by the act of parliament and would function similarly to the Bar Council. However, there is a fine line between the Bar Council and the Media Council, as there are no legal procedures in place for the latter.

‘Establishing a Media Council for journalists, similar to the Bar Council for lawyers, is a feasible option. This is a common practice in all developed countries, and even some less developed countries have such councils to monitor their journalists. The concept of self-regulation can be implemented by creating an organization and formulating community policies.’ (Informant 5)

Next, the researcher dived further into the topic by asking Informant 6 about how to regulate social journalists who do not adhere to guidelines and laws. In response, Informant 6 suggested that one way to control social journalists is by issuing permits to them. However, he also expressed concerns that releasing permits to journalists could restrict freedom of information.

‘If you wanted to control them, I think by giving them a permit. When there is a permit, it means that there would be no freedom. That is crucial, when there is a permit, it is written down and the journalist must follow them. However, there is no freedom.’ (Informant 6)

Finally, Informant 7 expressed the view that news portals nowadays are quite lax, mainly due to the absence of specific laws that could guide them in their operations. While acknowledging this lack of legislation, he pointed out that all the acts under the purview of the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission to address issues and concerns that arise in our capacity as media practitioners can still be utilize. Despite this, he noted that news portals are still relatively unregulated, as there are no clear guidelines or regulations in place that they can adhere to.

Based on the interview, it can be concluded that there are existing laws and regulations that govern the behaviour of social journalists. However, there is a need for better enforcement mechanisms to ensure that these guidelines are adhered to. Moreover, the establishment of a media council could also be a viable solution to monitor the

movement of social journalists and ensure responsible reporting. However, there are concerns about how such a council could be used to restrict freedom of information.

The suggestion of issuing permits to social journalists is another approach that could be considered to regulate their behaviour. However, it should be ensured that the process is fair and transparent, and that it does not unduly restrict freedom of the press. In conclusion, there is a need to strike a balance between regulating the behaviour of social journalists and ensuring that freedom of information and freedom of the press are not compromised. Authorities should explore ways to better enforce existing laws and regulations while considering the establishment of a media council and the issuance of permits as potential solutions.

#### **4.4.3 Economic Pressure**

The study shows that economic pressure is not only a threat to journalistic ethics, but it can also become a controlling factor in press freedom. As commercial media outlets face declining readership and advertising revenues due to the rise of social media and search platforms, they are forced to find new ways to attract readers and generate revenue. This economic pressure can lead to media consolidation, where larger companies dominate the market and control the flow of information (Molyneux & Holznagel, 2018).

In this study, the researchers discovered that economic pressure is a significant factor that influences the social journalist's perception of press freedom. The study found that financial constraints and economic challenges faced by media organizations can affect the social journalist's ability to report objectively and without interference. Therefore,

economic pressure must be taken into account when assessing the state of press freedom and the ability of social journalists to do their jobs effectively.

Informant 1 emphasized that working as a journalist using social media as a platform has its own set of challenges. As there is no employer, journalists have more freedom in terms of the stories they cover and how they present them. However, this freedom can also be a double-edged sword. If click-bait is what generates views and clicks, then many journalists will resort to sensationalizing stories or using misleading headlines to garner attention. The content itself becomes secondary to the number of views or clicks received, which directly correlates to the amount of money earned.

Informant 1 provided a personal example, having previously worked as a news reader but quitting due to the realization that click-bait generates three times more money than reading news. The lack of limitations and freedom to create any story, especially those related to politics, was a significant factor in their decision to switch to social journalism. This demonstrates the dilemma that many social journalists face - how to balance ethics and professionalism with the desire to generate income and gain followers.

According to informant 1, individuals who seek to profit from the content they create on YouTube must adhere to the community guidelines. The YouTube platform can be utilized based on one's own agenda, and those seeking to generate income must follow guidelines to ensure that they do not violate copyright laws or use content owned by others without permission. For instance, Sinar, who aims not to make a profit, posts content randomly.

However, those aiming to generate income must follow guidelines to avoid posting material that does not bring profit. It is important to understand one's niche and adhere to community guidelines to effectively utilize YouTube as a means of income generation. The public who are unaware of the community guidelines may post content randomly, while those who are aware of the guidelines are more cautious about what they post to ensure they comply with the rules.

‘People who want to make money from their YouTube content are required to comply with the community guidelines, which are in place to prevent copyright infringement and the use of others' content without permission. While YouTube can be used for personal purposes, those seeking to generate revenue must abide by the guidelines to avoid posting non-profitable material. For example, Sinar posts content sporadically without the intention of making a profit. However, individuals aiming to generate income must adhere to the guidelines to ensure they don't violate copyright laws or use unauthorized content.’  
(Informant 1)

Moreover, according to Informant 1, being a social journalist can be a lucrative main source of income. As an example, he cited Dato Aliff Syukri who has 1.52 million followers and is able to make money from the content he creates. However, Informant 1 also noted that Dato Aliff Syukri's approach to creating content does not necessarily adhere to ethical guidelines.

Next, Informant 3 shares the same perspective as Informant 1, believing that social journalism can be a viable career path for generating income. In fact, a friend of Informant 3 suggested that he should change his personal profile into a Page in order to earn a substantial amount of money and make a living from it. However, despite having the capability to do so, Informant 3 ultimately decided not to pursue this option. The reasons for this decision were not specified.

‘I can turn my Facebook profile to a Facebook page where I can make money from it. But I did not do it. Social journalist is also considered as a profession.’ (Informant 3)

In conclusion, the research conducted with Informant 1 and Informant 3 has shed light on the perspective that social journalism can indeed be a viable career path for generating income. Both informants expressed a belief in the potential of social journalism to provide a sustainable livelihood. However, the study has also highlighted a significant dilemma faced by many social journalists, which revolves around the delicate balance between ethics, professionalism, and the desire to generate income and gain followers

In conclusion, the given statements and research findings emphasize the impact of economic pressure on media organizations and its influence on the practice of social journalism. The study reveals that declining readership and advertising revenues force media outlets to find new ways to attract readers and generate revenue, leading to media consolidation and the control of information flow by larger companies. This economic pressure has significant implications for press freedom and the ability of social journalists to report objectively and without interference.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

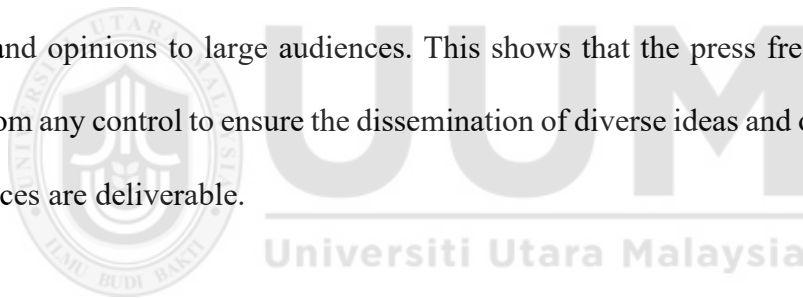
This research was based on assumption that social journalist and mainstream journalist experienced different environment of press freedom in Malaysia mainly because of different medium. Based on a study by Noor (2017), social journalism is a new phenomenon where journalist are leveraging the growing internet popularity to share news through blogs and social networking sites. However, it is different with mainstream media where they are using a printed media such newspaper to circulate the news or stories to the public. According to Sani (2005), the internet is a powerful tool that enable media to reach broader audiences and establish forums for political discussions, free from concerns about regulations. Then, a research by Salman, Ibrahim, Abdullah, Mustaffa, et.al (2011) the acceptance of new media in Malaysia stem from the desire for freer information flow, as the mainstream media is widely perceived to be under government control. Mainstream media encounter challenges in terms of political interest and the control from the government. In this research, the focal point would be on social journalism, which researcher intended to delve and understand on the conceptualization of press freedom from the perspective of social journalist, the factors influencing press freedom in social journalism and factors controlling press freedom in social journalism. This chapter will discuss, contrast, evaluate and explain the findings. Suggestions for future research will also be included at the end of the chapter.

## **5.1 Conceptualization of Press Freedom from the Perspective of Social Journalist**

As the data revealed, the conceptualization of press freedom from the perspectives of social journalist aligns with the international scholar, yet they have been influenced by guidelines, education, ethics. These includes the issues with company policy, economic pressure, laws and regulations. Looking at the Malaysia's press freedom, social journalist urge for a total freedom. This aligns with McQuail (1987) who highlighted the basic characteristics of the press and its freedom under libertarianism where a publication should be free from any control.

He also emphasized that a publication or the distribution of the news should be public to a person or group without any authority process such the involvement of permit or license. From the mentioned characteristic that have been highlighted by McQuail, press freedom was grounded on the idea that individuals should have the right to publish whatever they desire in the news or mass media without government or external interference. This freedom was considered an extension of other fundamental liberties, especially free speech, serving as a safeguard for all civil, political, and religious rights. In Malaysia, since there are a number of laws and regulations that controls the media movement, the social journalist believes that a press freedom without any control would be a freedom that has been fought for all this while as the government enable the transparency between the public. In discussing the conceptualization of press freedom, there is a contradiction in terms of the expectation towards Malaysia press freedom that some of the social journalist insisted that there must be a limitation or guideline that should be established to assist these social journalist in their practice.

Through this research, it was found generally that social journalist understands the press freedom and seeking for an unlimited press freedom where they will be able to express any views without any limitation. Lowenstein (1970) highlighted that a fully unrestricted press is characterized by independent newspapers, periodicals, news agencies, books, radio, and television, possessing absolute autonomy and critical capacity, with minimal limitations pertaining to libel and obscenity laws. There is no central ownership, minimal economic control, or organized self-regulation within the press. This also has been supported by Weaver (1977) where there are three identified components in a press freedom – the degree to which government restrictions on media are limited; the degree to which non-governmental constraints are minimized; and third, the presence of conditions that facilitate the widespread dissemination of diverse ideas and opinions to large audiences. This shows that the press freedom should be free from any control to ensure the dissemination of diverse ideas and opinions to large audiences are deliverable.



Through interviews done with the social journalists, the current-status of Malaysia's press freedom indicates that in this digital media landscape, the journalist still able to express their view without getting charged from the authority and enjoys a high degree of freedom. In social journalism, some of the journalist is hiding behind their anonymity, allowing them to demonstrate their views without thinking of the consequences on their action. According to Reader (2012), journalism scholars perceive that anonymous writing is considered as an unethical, irrespective despite any legal safeguards.

On the contrary, certain journalists hold the view that press freedom in Malaysia remains restricted, and they believe that a truly free press has not been achieved.

Despite having the ability to express themselves, they assert that media outlets constantly face the threat of legal repercussions if their content is deemed unlawful. According to their perspective, media freedom has never been fully supportive of the press, as they frequently find themselves at a disadvantage in defamation-related court cases.

The last aspect of conceptualization talks on the expectation of press freedom and study revealed that the social journalists shared the same desire for improved and unrestricted journalistic freedom. Nonetheless, they recognize the significance of having boundaries and guidelines to promote responsible journalism. Emphasizing the necessity of adequate training and knowledge, they aim to equip journalists with the tools to practice responsibly. They emphasize that the media should be used as an instrument to provide beneficial information to citizens and avoid propagating hatred, particularly in sensitive matters like religion and racism. Therefore, by having guidelines in place is crucial to support journalists and set boundaries for their professional conduct.

## **5.2 Factors Influencing Press Freedom in Social Journalism**

In this study, social journalist revealed that there are three factors that influence the press freedom in social journalism. The factors are consists of guidelines, education and also ethics that have play vital role in social journalism. Further explanation on these three essential factors have been explain thoroughly (see 4.3.1, 4.3.2, 4.3.3). Guidelines has been a main contributor that shapes the practices and values of any organization including the media organization. It acts as a framework of regulations

and benchmarks giving a direction to journalist in their practice to uphold accuracy, impartiality, and ethical behaviour.

The guidelines can be found in the platform or medium used by the journalist. For instances, the social journalist revealed that they have to obey to the guideline that has been set by the platform to ensure their content were accepted and will not be taken down. Some of the guidelines that has been set by the platform is strict as if it is restricting the creator to express their ideas. Different social media platforms may have their own guidelines and community standards. Understanding and adhering to these platform-specific guidelines is crucial for social journalists to avoid content removal, suspension, or other forms of censorship.

On top of that, study revealed that there are too many guidelines that has been set and it is not necessary as there are already laws that related to Media for the journalist to follow. The enforcement is the thing that has been highlighted in this study. Nevertheless, some of the journalist in this study mentioned that the existence of guidelines making it easier for the journalist to refer as it act as a boundaries in their practice allowing them to navigate the challenges of reporting with accuracy, fairness, and ethical conduct. Guidelines act as a navigation for social journalists to understand and navigate the legal boundaries of freedom of expression in providing clarity on what is acceptable and what may lead to legal consequences, guidelines offer protection to journalists and media organizations while still promoting the exercise of free speech.

The second aspect that were discussed for factors influencing press freedom in social journalism is education. In Malaysia, there are about 18 universities that offers the

journalism courses and in these courses, journalists will be taught the principle as a journalist and other related subjects. The student who enrols in a journalism course will be exposed to subjects such as Media Law or Media Ethics that will give a better exposure and prepare them before they step into the industry. The study revealed that all informants agreed that education really plays an important role in shaping the journalist to become a journalist that upholds the ethics and credibility principle.

Through interviews, the informants revealed that the education aspect can be found especially through the training and workshop that they attended. These foundational teachings equipped the journalist with a solid understanding of legal boundaries and ethical considerations in reporting. Attending regular workshops underscored the commitment of the mainstream media industry to ensuring that its journalists are well-informed about the laws and regulations that govern their work. These workshops likely covered topics such as defamation, privacy, copyright, and other legal aspects relevant to journalism.

Joseph (2019) mentioned that education also plays a pivotal role in influencing press freedom. Training and education in journalism not only equip journalists with necessary skills but also instil a sense of ethical responsibility. Educational institutions play a key role in fostering a culture of ethical journalism, which is essential for maintaining high standards of reporting and ensuring that journalists can operate freely and responsibly. In many Asian countries, journalism education includes comprehensive courses on media ethics, which help journalists understand the importance of balancing freedom with social responsibility.

To address the knowledge gap, media organizations could consider implementing more comprehensive and regular training programs. They might explore methods like online courses, seminars, or collaborations with legal experts to provide journalists with up-to-date information on relevant laws and regulations. By actively addressing this issue, media outlets can promote higher standards of reporting, reduce legal risks, and enhance public trust in their content.

The third factor that influence the press freedom in social journalism is ethics. Ethics has a significant role in influencing press freedom in the context of social journalism. In this context, press freedom is a fundamental democratic principle that ensures the media's ability to operate independently, report on various issues, and hold governments and institutions accountable. Social journalism, which involves using digital platforms to engage with audiences and produce news content, can be both empowered and constrained by ethical considerations.

Through interviews, the study revealed that all informant acknowledged the importance of practicing ethics in their practice. Despite the acknowledgement and the implementation of the ethics principle in their practice, some of the informant revealed that they are not bound to any rules or laws as the platform that they used enable them to express whatever opinions that they have. However, they still comply to the ethical standard in their writing and they value the freedom given by the platform.

A research by Chattopadhyay, (2024) affirmed that ethics in journalism is a critical factor in journalism. Ethical journalism involves reporting truthfully, fairly, and with

integrity. In the context of Asian media, where political and economic pressures can be intense, adherence to ethical standards is vital for safeguarding press freedom. Ethical guidelines help journalists resist external pressures and maintain their independence, which is crucial for the credibility and reliability of the press

In addition, some of the informant argued that MCMC should plays a vital role in terms of enforcement to ensure the public truly aware the importance of ethics. In Malaysia, MCMC function as a regulatory bodies that monitor the communication and multimedia activities. The primary responsibility of the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission was the regulation of the communications and multimedia sector in accordance with the authority granted by the Communications and Multimedia Act (1998) and the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission Act (1998).

According to The Star (2019), there were almost 22,000 reports lodged to MCMC pertaining to the '3R' (race, religion and royalty) social media posts. Throughout these reports, 19,968 were still being verified and MCMC had taken against 256 complaints. This indicated that MCMC should do more enforcement to ensure the public to truly have the exposure related to the ethics in journalism. Enforcement should be taken by MCMC seriously to minimise the misuse of social media and to nurture a responsible writing in order to avoid misunderstanding that can cause disharmony.

Essentially, understanding the factors that influence press freedom is important for researchers and practitioners in the field of social journalism. By studying these factors, researchers can better understand the challenges and opportunities within the media landscape and develop strategies to promote a free and responsible press. This understanding is particularly relevant in the context of social journalism, where the goal is to report the truth while serving the public interest and holding those in power accountable.

### **5.3 Factors Controlling Press Freedom in Social Journalism**

Company policy, economic pressure, laws and regulations as mentioned by informants are among the factors controlling press freedom in social journalism in Malaysia.

There are various ways in which company policy and internal styles can influence journalists as well as their writing. The tone, style and content of journalists' work are shaped by those policies which have an impact on how stories are reported to the audience.

In discussing the company policy in depth, the study revealed that the social journalist is necessary to adhere to the company policy that has been established by the media organization. Most informant mentioned that their superior would provide guidance on whether or not an article should be published, based on the policy that has been set by the company. Media outlets often establish rigorous ethical standards that reporters are required to follow. These standards may encompass a range of topics, including precision, impartiality, steering clear of any potential conflicts of interest, and respecting the privacy and dignity of those featured in their coverage. However,

adhering to these guidelines is key in fostering a bond of trust with the audience and upholding the publication's reputation for credibility.

According to Hetler (2023), the company policy can act as a reference or a guideline on how the journalist should present themselves online. It is true that any media organization should not refrain their journalist from using the social media, however, Hetler emphasized that setting up a policy can be used as a helpful reminder for the journalist to be more responsible inside and outside of their work. Some of the media organization does not really have a strict rules to their journalist and still let their journalist to freely express as long as they know their boundaries.

Company policy has been set to ensure the journalist comply to the ethical standard as it is also connected to the legal compliance issue. In nurturing the journalist to become a responsible and ethical writers, the journalist should follow the legal and regulatory that has been outlined by the company to minimise and avoid the risk such as libel or defamation. The company policy is been set to safeguard the media organization from any legal accusation.

Interviews revealed that company policy or in-house style must be adhere by the journalist. Though this might giving impact to the journalist in practicing the press freedom, the company policy plays an important role in shaping journalistic writing. In ensuring the effectiveness of communicating with the audience and at the same time still implying the values and standards of the media organization, journalists must depend on policy that will assist them to produce content in compliance with legal and regulatory requirements.

The influence of company policy is closely related to social journalism, as it affects the ability of journalists to engage with and report on community issues. Social journalism, which focuses on community-based reporting and addressing local concerns, requires a level of editorial freedom that is often compromised by stringent corporate policies. As media companies navigate economic pressures and the demands of digital transformation, they must balance profitability with the ethical responsibility to provide accurate, comprehensive news coverage (Snoussi & Al-Houtti, 2024).

Additionally, a research by Gillmor (2020) revealed that company policy significantly influences journalism practices, shaping how journalists gather, produce, and disseminate information. These policies often dictate editorial standards, ethical guidelines, and the overall approach to news coverage. For instance, strict company policies may limit journalists' ability to cover certain topics or express specific viewpoints, thereby affecting the breadth and depth of their reporting.

By understanding how company policies shape journalism, researchers can gain insights into the broader dynamics of media freedom and its implications for social journalism. This knowledge is crucial for advocating for media reforms that enhance journalistic independence and promote a more informed and engaged public.

The second factors that controlling the press freedom in social journalism is laws and regulations. In Malaysia, there are few laws and regulations that has been set by the government such Printing Presses and Publication Act 1984, Communications and Multimedia Act 1998; Sedition Act 1948; and Official Secrets Act 1972. These laws have been act as a guideline and boundaries for the journalist practices.

Through interviews, informant revealed that the laws and regulations about the existence of laws and regulations, but also about their enforcement. Informant expressed that they had witnessed instances where individuals report violations of laws and regulations related to social journalism, but no action is taken, and highlighted the importance of effective enforcement. Simply having laws and regulations in place is not enough to ensure that people follow them. The success of a law ultimately depends on how well it is enforced.

Another interesting finding in discussing on the laws and regulations, some of the informant revealed that that the current laws and regulations should be reduced, as there are already too many of them. Instead, the informant emphasized the importance of self-regulation, and one way to achieve this is through the establishment of a media council that has been discussed for 40 years. He also mentioned that the phenomenon of social journalism could be addressed similarly to other issues that affect journalists and journalism, such as ethical concerns, national interests, and individual rights. This involves setting up an organization that includes journalists, community members, and individuals from the business community to oversee the conduct of the media. This organization would be established by the act of parliament and would function similarly to the Bar Council. However, there is a fine line between the Bar Council and the Media Council, as there are no legal procedures in place for the latter.

Apart from setting up a Media Council, some of the informant also suggested that that one way to control social journalists is by issuing permits to them. Nevertheless, he also expressed concerns that releasing permits to journalists could restrict freedom of information.

Nevertheless, the application of the laws and regulations has been shown to maintain the racial unity, the political and economic stability of this nation. Malaysian media professionals are also linked to their media ethics and business policy, in addition to laws and regulations set by the government. There are certain rules and plans that they must obey. A study by Adibah, Mohd Khairie and Che Su (2017) found that, according to their priorities, convictions and values, Malaysian media practitioners interpreted press freedom differently.

Therefore, within the press freedom parameters set by the government, they found it comfortable to work. However, that is only true in Malaysia for professional media practitioners. The situation with social journalist might be different.

Given the current situation, digital media is now changing the journalism norm. Compared to professional reporters working for the mainstream media, social journalists are now more popular and have more followers. This group of 'journalists' has unfortunately changed the nature of journalism, which was once bound by laws, ethics, ideology, and content control.

To conclude the laws and regulation factor that control the press freedom in social journalism, there is a need to strike a balance between regulating the behaviour of social journalists and ensuring that freedom of information and freedom of the press are not compromised. Authorities should explore ways to better enforce existing laws and regulations while considering the establishment of a media council and the issuance of permits as potential solutions.

The last factors that contributes to control the press freedom in social journalism is the economic pressure. In this study, the researchers discovered that economic pressure is a significant factor that influences the social journalist's perception of press freedom. The study found that financial constraints and economic challenges faced by media organizations can affect the social journalist's ability to report objectively and without interference. Therefore, economic pressure must be taken into account when assessing the state of press freedom and the ability of social journalists to do their jobs effectively.

Through interviews, the informant revealed that being a journalist on social media comes with its own challenges. Without having an employer, journalists have more freedom in choosing what stories to cover and how to present them. Nonetheless, this freedom can have both positive and negative effects.

If getting more views and clicks is the main goal, some journalists might choose to make stories more dramatic or use misleading headlines to attract attention. This could lead to the content itself becoming less important than the number of views or clicks, which in turn affects how much money they earn. In this case, the platform or the medium used by the journalist can generate the income which might affect the journalist to sacrifice their ethics principle just for the sake of money.

A research by Strangio (2021) highlighted that the Malaysian media environment has been heavily influenced by economic pressures, leading to increased control by political actors and significant financial struggles for media conglomerates like Media Prima. The injection of funds from prominent tycoons and political figures has led to

concerns about the independence of the media, as financial dependency can result in editorial compromises and bias.

In addition, a study by Nain (2021) supported that the economic pressures faced by media organizations often result in job insecurity for journalists, lower wages, and reduced budgets for investigative reporting. This economic vulnerability can limit the ability of journalists to report freely and accurately, impacting the overall quality of journalism. For example, the heavy fine imposed on Malaysiakini in 2021 for contempt of court, which was swiftly paid through public donations, underscores the financial vulnerabilities and the public's role in supporting independent journalism in the face of economic and governmental pressures.

Another findings revealed that they believed social journalism can be a viable career path for generating income. For example, the personal profile can be changed into a Page to earn a substantial amount of money and make a living from it. However, the informant decided to not do it as writing is his passion and he is not going to turn it as a way to generate the revenue.

Last but not least, for the economic pressure factor, that declining readership and advertising revenues force media outlets to find new ways to attract readers and generate revenue, leading to media consolidation and the control of information flow by larger companies. This economic pressure has significant implications for press freedom and the ability of social journalists to report objectively and without interference.

The interplay of company policies, economic pressures, and legal frameworks collectively form the intricate fabric that defines the boundaries of press freedom in the realm of social journalism. Journalists operating in this landscape must grapple with these internal factors while endeavouring to uphold the principles of responsible and ethical journalism. By understanding and engaging with these factors, both journalists and society can work towards preserving a vibrant and informed media ecosystem.

#### 5.4 Press Freedom Framework of Social Journalist

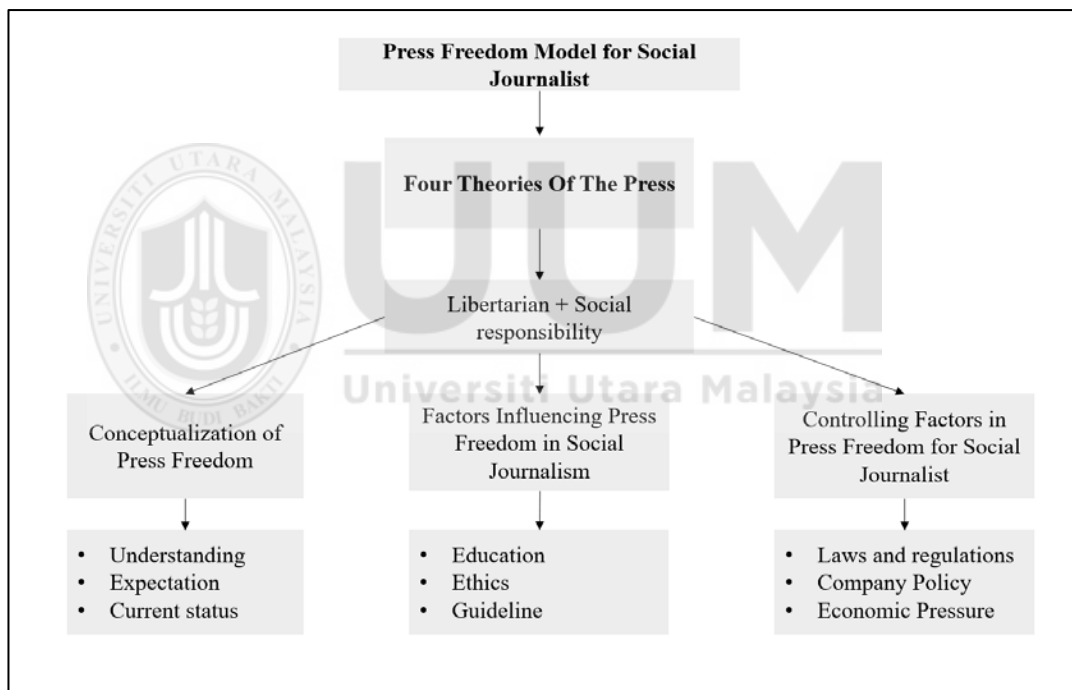


Figure 5.1. Press Freedom Framework for Social Journalist

This framework started by understanding the broad landscape of press freedom for social journalist through the exploration Four Theories of the Press. It was found that social journalism transpires from the combination of characteristic found in libertarian and social responsibility press system. Review of literature shows three components that differentiate the press systems in the Four Theories of the Press which are

conceptualization, factors influencing and factors controlling press freedom. Further investigation found that Malaysian social journalist conceptualized press freedom through three themes which are understanding, expectation and the current status.

To further understand the conceptualization, the first component is the understanding of press freedom and through interviews, the study revealed that in general, the informant understand on the terms of press freedom. However, they defined that press freedom should be a total freedom in order to let the journalist truly exercise freedom in their practice. In giving an obsolete freedom to the journalism, this topic has been widely debated among the journalist in Malaysia and other country. According to International Press Institute (IPI), (2022), it is possible for the government to develop an environment where the journalist can exercise total press freedom and creating a more sustainable media landscape.

There are two strategies that can be implemented by the government. The first strategy that can be done is government should build trust and their confidence to the journalist by refrain the political elites and elected official from doing verbal attacks on the press and put the media on any risk of harassment. Lisa and Todd (2020) found that this approach helps to establish a more respectful and secure environment for journalists, encouraging them to report accurately and confidently. For example, studies have shown that when political elites avoid negative rhetoric against the media, it fosters a more open and trusting relationship between journalists and the government

Next, the strategy that can be implemented is where government should play their role in endorsing independent journalism as a societal benefit. A study by Nieman Foundation (2020) emphasized that the government should endorse independent journalism as a societal benefit by supporting initiatives that promote journalistic integrity and independence. This involves providing resources and training to journalists, especially those in high-risk environments, to ensure their safety and ability to report freely. Supporting independent journalism helps to create a more informed public and strengthens the role of the media in holding power to account.

The second component that lies under the conceptualization of press freedom is the current status of press freedom in Malaysia. Generally, the study revealed that the journalist enjoys freedom and able to express their opinion freely without any constraints. This is due to the anonymous identity that allows some of the journalist to remain enjoying the freedom to publish any stories without getting any action taken against them. In addition, the study also revealed that in comparison with another country such Indonesia, it allows the public to speak freely and encourages public intellectual discussion to ensure the transparency.

The third component in the conceptualization of press freedom is the expectation of press freedom in Malaysia. Through interviews, the research indicates that all media practitioners hoping for a better freedom where they should be trusted to exercise more freedom in their practice. However, there are limitation that should be taken into a serious consideration in giving more space or freedom to the journalist especially to a race or religion issues as these two are sensitive to be discussed. To ensure the freedom is not misused, a guideline is crucial to be imposed and this has been agreed by most media practitioners.

The research delved further and through in-depth analysis, researcher found factors influencing press freedom in social journalism; guidelines, education and ethics. The first factor is guideline where it serves as a critical role in shaping the practices and values of any organization, including media organizations. This research revealed that guidelines can be found in every platform that the journalist used to present their report or stories, and they must obligate to follow it. The social journalist agreed that having too many guidelines seems unnecessary as it will restrict their freedom in their practice.

Some of the social journalist promotes the idea of self-regulation and believes that it is more crucial than the guidelines itself. Considering all opinions from the informants, guidelines are crucial for media organizations to ensure that their content is accurate, fair, and ethical. While guidelines may seem restrictive, they promote responsible behaviour and self-regulation among journalists, which creates a more positive online environment for everyone. It is crucial to strike a balance between promoting ethical conduct and preserving media freedom when creating guidelines for media organizations.

The second factors that influence social journalism is education which is a basis of knowledge that will assist the social journalist in their practice. The social journalist agreed that having a sufficient knowledge is vital to view things from different perspectives. By equipped with sufficient knowledge, it can serves as a navigation for the journalist to handle with complex ethical and legal issues in their reporting. The education can be gained through studies especially when the journalist was exposed with the subject related to media law and through their career journey where they will be send to training or class that prepare them well in their practice. Thus, it is crucial

that education is given top priority in the field of journalism to produce responsible and ethical journalists who are equipped to handle the challenges of a rapidly evolving media landscape.

The third factors that influence social journalism is ethics. In a recent article by Pavlik and McIntosh (2022), ethics can help journalists navigate the complexities of digital media and social media platforms, where information spreads quickly, and misinformation can have serious consequences. The study revealed that the social journalists are not bound by any specific ethical standards, and they are free to express themselves through their own platforms. However, surprisingly that most social journalists interviewed in this research still upholding the principle of ethics in their practice despite the freedom given in each of the platform that they used. This indicates that social journalist can exercise the freedom well as they still taking ethics into a consideration when they write. As social journalism continues to evolve in the digital age, upholding ethical practices remains essential to maintain public trust and credibility.

The last attribute of this framework ended at the factors controlling in social journalism which consists of three; company policy, economic pressure, and laws and regulations. These three factors revealed that it controls and restrict the social journalist movement as it limit the perspectives of the journalist when they presented their reporting in media. The first one is company policy. The policies implemented by companies can have a major influence on the way social journalists operate. As stated in a research conducted by Maltby and Voakes (2014), media organizations often have specific guidelines and regulations that restrict the freedom of journalists to cover certain subjects or express particular opinions. These policies may result in journalists

practicing self-censorship, which ultimately limits the diversity of perspectives and voices conveyed through the media.

Through the exploration of the company policy, research revealed that social journalist were given guidance on what to publish or not to publish based on their superior decision. This can be affected due to the in-house style of the media organisation. The social journalist mentioned that when collaborating with media organizations where the manager wields political influence, they have the authority to determine if an article is fit for publishing or not. However, when it comes to social media, there is no hierarchical figure involved. The journalist who specializes in social media stated that they enjoy the autonomy to pursue their stories and act as they see fit. On the other hand, as some of the journalist interviewed was among the media portal founder, they mentioned that they never refrain their journalist from expressing their views according to their own style. Nonetheless, they highly promote their journalist to write ethically and responsible in their reporting.

In order to conclude for this first factor, a business policy can have a big impact on how social journalists work. Journalists are supposed to follow their employers' house style while keeping the interests of all relevant parties in mind. This can be difficult for social journalists who want to report social topics impartially and objectively. The social journalism practice can be impacted by a company's policy in a variety of ways. Journalists may be prevented from covering certain topics or reporting on them in a particular fashion, for example, if the company has a strong bias toward a particular political or social philosophy. As a result, some narratives may be perpetuated and opposing ideas may be suppressed.

The second factor controlling in social journalism is economic pressure – this is due to the declining in readership and media organisation must find a way to attract the new readers. For this issue, according to Molyneux and Holznagel (2018) usually media consolidation happens and this is how the big companies being dominant in the market and control the flow of information.

Through interviews, research revealed that being a social journalist is a viable career path for generating income. The media practitioners disclose that the content creator can generate a huge amount of income and they might create that do not adhere to ethical guidelines. Each medium used giving an opportunity for the content creator to generate income, but there are certain limitation for the content creator that they must follow as the guidelines has been set by the platform itself. This economic pressure has significant implications for press freedom and the ability of social journalists to report objectively and without interference.

## **5.5 Significant Contribution**

This research makes significant contributions to both theoretical and practical aspects as outlined in more detail below.

### **5.5.1 Theoretical Contributions**

This research contributes to the body literature of social journalism within Malaysian context, specifically focusing on conceptualization of press freedom by dividing it into three components which are consists of the understanding of Malaysian's press freedom, the current status of Malaysia's press freedom and also the expectation towards to the Malaysia press freedom. Although the scholars are still debating on the concept of social journalism, this research sheds some light on the perspectives of

Malaysian media practitioners on the subject. The result from this research may assist the academicians to build a stronger and practical, Malaysia oriented curriculum to produce better social journalist that can fully practice their role as watchdog for the benefit of the public.

Last but not least, this research will also be a foundation and reference for future research on social journalism in Malaysia or any other countries. A framework has been developed here on the essential features of Malaysian social journalism that summarizes the comprehensive examination of its conceptualization and factors that may influence or controlling the Malaysia press freedom. This framework may provide a foundation for a non-Western social journalism concept.

### **5.5.2 Practical Contributions**

This research was conducted at the stage where advanced information and communication technology is given, and leads to a new interesting paradigm worthy of analysis. his research contributes to an alternative and new understanding of practicing social journalism while ensuring the freedom is being practice responsibly. This could assist the government in overseeing individuals engaged in social journalism due to their heightened liberty. Such a scenario could potentially serve as a starting point for crafting guidelines aimed at safeguarding freedom in digital sphere. Practically, this research also can be used by the stakeholders in creating policy or changes that can benefit the media organisation. The framework developed in this research will be useful for practitioners to practice social journalism in Malaysia. In addition, international social journalists stationed or covering issue in Malaysia will also find this framework useful in their reporting here.

## **5.6 Future Research**

Exploring the establishment of Malaysian press freedom framework for social journalist offers a valuable opportunity to improve the journalism and also the society in future. For the future research, researcher suggest a detailed guidelines should be outlined to fit the social journalism landscape in Malaysia. Since the digital platform are giving a lot of freedom to the social journalist, having these guidelines is vital to ensure the social journalist use the freedom that they earn responsibly and ethically. The guidelines would not just be on practicing the journalism in an ethical ways, but, the future research also should suggest ways to assist the social journalist to stay safe in digital world. The suggested future research should not only help the journalists themselves but could also contribute to making the online space safer and more organized. This aligns with the country's ultimate goals of keeping information correct and people secure. Thus, avoiding fake news or tendency to create disharmony. By finding new and creative ways to create these guidelines, this research could play a big role in how social journalism grows in Malaysia, making sure it's responsible and safe while using the digital world.

## **5.7 Conclusion**

Above all, this research has examined social journalism started from a broad concept of press freedom and social journalism, simplified by Four Theories of the Press originated by Siebert et al. (1963). The findings revealed different perspectives of social journalism when compared to other nations. This research emphasized on the conceptualization of press freedom that has been divided into three main components; understanding of press freedom, current-status of press freedom and the expectation of press freedom. These three components are crucial to analyse the conceptualization

of press freedom in Malaysia among the media practitioners in Malaysia. Through a thorough exploration, this research concluded that social journalism in Malaysia has been influenced by three factors which consists of guidelines, education and ethics which can be considered as an external factor for social journalist in their practice. On the other hand, this research also revealed that the controlling factors of press freedom are consists of company policy, economic pressure, and laws and regulations. Lastly, at the end of this research, a framework was developed to described this perspective was proposed.



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