

EVALUATING THE STATE OF INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM IN MALAYSIA FROM PRACTITIONERS' PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

Investigative journalism is not a new area in journalism but its practice around the world vary from one country to another as media practitioners are arguing whether it should be practiced or not. Therefore, this research is trying to find out the state of investigative journalism in Malaysia from media practitioners' perspective. Using qualitative interview, this research will try to evaluate their understanding on the roles of investigative journalism and barriers in practising it in Malaysia. Eight respondents consist of editors and reporters from four print media organizations were interviewed in this research. This research found that Malaysian media practitioners do understand investigative journalism but they have to adapt their practice into the country's media environment. Most of them prefer to abide by the rules and regulations set by the government, their organization and even themselves. Consequently, the study showed that they prefer to investigate issues concerning consumer affairs and rarely touch on political issues.

Background

The term investigative journalism among layman conjures a picture of crime reporting. It actually entails a more complex meaning. Investigative journalism as one of the journalism genres was defined by John Ullman and Steve Honeyman (in Northmore 2001, pg 183) as the reporting through one's own product and initiative; matters of importance which some persons or organizations wish to keep secret. Their definition outlined no limit on the topic of coverage as long as it exposes something important to the public. It could be about political corruption, government's power abuse, practices in the private agency or corporation and also social situations such as sex crime and drug abuse.

It is understood that the idea and material for investigative report do not come easily to the reporter. They have to find the topic to investigate whether through tip off, whistle blowers, government records or other resources and he or she only decides to investigate the topic if it is matter of important to the readers or viewers. Usually investigation will take a long time because others are attempting to hide the matter from the public. Therefore, the reporter sometimes has to go undercover, use various gadgets to record or do surveillance and use multiple skills to analyze and write their exposé. The role of investigative reporters is similar to a detective but their weapon is not a gun but their writing skill.

The practice of investigative journalism in every country in the world especially democratic countries is crucial to ensure the public were not being suppressed by the people in power. However, there are barriers that hinder journalists from practicing this kind of noble journalism such as pressures on regional and suburban media, media ownership and concentration, commercial pressures, increasing emphasis on infotainment, public relations and press releases, staffing pressures, risks of investigative journalism including legal constraints, costs of investigative journalism (Haxton, 2002), laws and regulations and also government control (Das, 1990).

Problem Statement

The early history of investigative journalism started since 1800s. However, the development and degree of its practice varies from one country to another. In Malaysia, although it has been practiced for quite sometime, investigative journalism is not popular among Malaysian media practitioners. Scholars like Rodan (2004) and Dunnet (1998) said that the press in Malaysia existed only under tolerance of the government as he pointed out that Malaysia uses security laws and official secret acts to intimidate journalists and editors, as well as annual licensing laws that meant the spectre of official retribution was a perennial problem for publishers and distributors alike.

For example, Printing Presses and Publications Act (1984) is implement to regulate the use of printing presses, the printing, production, reproduction and distribution of publications, and the importation of publications from abroad, and Official Secret Act (1972) that prevents journalists from accessing information in any official document labelled as secret and Internal Security Act (1960) which allows detention without trial. Therefore, there is a need for a systematic evaluation on the state of investigative journalism in Malaysia. This research will try to answer these questions:

1. What is their understanding on the roles of investigative journalism?
2. What are the barriers facing investigative journalism in Malaysia?

Research Objectives

Generally this research is trying to find out the state of investigative journalism in Malaysia from media practitioners perspectives. Specifically, this research is trying to achieve these objectives:

1. To identify the roles of investigative journalism in Malaysia
2. To find out the barriers facing investigative journalism in Malaysia.

Significant of the Study

This research will contribute to the body of literature on investigative journalism especially in Malaysia as it is a new academic area in this country. Moreover, as this is an exploratory study, it would give a brief view of the state of investigative journalism in Malaysia as there is no systematic research that had been done to evaluate this. This research will also contribute to the journalism profession in Malaysia as it would give a general guideline for editors and journalists to practice investigative journalism. It could also shows to the world how investigative journalism is practice in Malaysia because other than demonstrating the current practice, this research will also identify the barriers facing this journalism in Malaysia.

Literature Review

1. Roles of Investigative Journalism

“Watchdog” is the famous word use to describe the role of investigative journalism in any country because by exposing corruption in government and other institutions, the news media may alter the direction of public policy and can cause people to be removed from office (Altschull, 1994). In this way, investigative journalism is playing its roles as the Fourth Estate checking on government and rectifying abuses of power (Tumber & Waisbord, 2004). Another two scholars agreed as they said: “It has also become a crucial check on abuse of power by large institutions, molding opinion to shape public policy and affirm important societal values.” (Ettema and Glasser, 1998).

Proress (1991) voiced out the same role as he said investigative journalism is playing its roles to improve the American system by pointing out its shortcomings rather than advocating its overthrow. By spotlighting specific abuses of particular policies or programs, the investigative reporter provides policy makers with the opportunity to take corrective actions without changing the distribution of power.

Investigative journalists’ main focus should be seeking for the truth and political accountability. Both ideals resonate with classic ideals of the liberal press as well as with political demands in contemporary South American politics. These functions are more demanding in democratic countries as the lack of accountability constitutes a major weakness of today's democracies and one of the most pressing issues to resolve (Waisbord, 2000).

Meanwhile, Ettema and Glasser (1998) said investigative reports that yield stories which are carefully verified and skilfully narrated accounts with a meaning that always transcends the facts of the particular case could call attention to the breakdown of social systems and the disorder within public institutions that cause injury and injustice. In turn, their stories implicitly demand the response of public officials and the public itself to that breakdown and disorder. Waisbord (2000) agreed as he said that the role of the press is not as an institution that monopolizes the truth, but as one that, at best, can stimulate and enrich public debates.

David (2007) added:

In much of the developing and democratizing world, investigative journalism contributions include fostering accountability and transparency, battling corruption, exposing organized crime, strengthening civil society, fuelling reform, and calling for justice.

(page 8)

Remollino (2007) supported this statement when he said that Philippine really need investigative journalism to demonstrate and document the political and social realities that still define Philippine existence today, towards the historic end of arming the people with the consciousness that will mobilize them. He added that investigative journalism is also one form of writing that can repudiate the martial law legacy of secrecy that still haunts Philippine society.

However, Protes et al (1991) did notice the change in the roles of investigative journalism in today's media. They said that today's investigative journalism reflect a different tradition – the social responsibility theory of the press. This tradition stems from late nineteenth century changes in American society and newspaper ownership. Through this tradition, the press is committed to pursuing public enlightenment and to upholding standards of civic morality. The press duty is not just to its readers but also to the community and even the society as a whole.

In summary, the purpose of investigative journalism is to correct what is wrong by exposing it to public knowledge and indirectly pressure the authority to act on it. It could also bring up issue of significant public concern that reveals information not previously known and perhaps even hidden (Aucoin, 2005), to alert and educate the public.

Barriers in Practising Investigative Journalism

Investigative journalism has often been more celebrated than practiced, in part because wrongdoing may be difficult to uncover and documenting it can generate costly, lawsuits, alienate advertisers, and be expensive to produce (Greenwald and Bernt 2000). Willis (2003) even went to the extent of saying that investigative journalism is the most expensive journalism to be practiced.

They outlined four barriers which include the cost news organization has to bear when they have to take investigative reporters out of daily news production and allowed them to spend long periods of time pursuing one story that might not surface for weeks or months. They also have to bear the cost after those stories were published because there was always the danger of libel as these reporters majored in uncovering corruption and illegalities. Further they have to face the risk of uninterested readers because these stories were so in depth that they often ran much longer than the normal news story, and readers are often turned off by long stories. Additionally, many of the issue these stories dealt with involved complex business and government stories on topics that weren't too exciting for lot of readers. And there was always the risk these newspapers encountered in putting their credibility on the line.

Haxton (2002) on the other hand outlines eight reasons that threaten this field. Some of her points have been mentioned above but I chose to repeat it here with more complete elaboration. The barriers are pressures on regional and suburban media, media ownership and concentration, commercial pressure, increasing emphasis on infotainment, public relations and press releases, staffing pressure, risks and costs of investigative journalism.

The first barrier, pressures on regional and suburban media means journalists do not have enough time to do research for investigative article. They are pressured to write about local affairs, telling people what happen through out the day. They are push to attend daily assignments like press conference, seminar, workshop and even to follow minister's visit. They do not have free time to do investigation although the issues are there. They knew it could be something big but they do not have time to dig deeper.

Journalists are only allowed to do investigative pieces as long as it did not interfere with weekly demands and much worse when no resources were offered to support these journalists. It is like the other way of telling reporters not to do investigative reporting.

The second pressure is media ownership and concentration including closing of small newspapers, corporate buyouts and media mergers. These development increase the concern that too few controlled too much (Daniel, 2000). This situation will threaten investigative journalism as businessman who owns the media do not care much about "journalism for justice" but more focus on "journalism for money".

Tanner (2002) posits:

Increasingly media outlets are falling into the hands of people with no tradition of journalism, who see journalism as an extension of marketing and do not have any respect for independent journalism.

(page 22)

Moreover, concentrated ownership leads to lower chances for journalists to get their investigative article publish. This is because usually the company's share are mostly own by people with power and authority like government. Therefore, media organizations will avoid publishing something that will tarnish their owner's reputation.

Through his study, Waisbord (2000) admitted that at least this situation is happening in South America.

In countries where the state remained in control of vital resources for press economies, rarely were news organizations willing to criticize governments out of fear that such reporting would have damaging political and economic consequences. Additionally, the persistence of a heavily partisan culture ran against the consolidation of an "independent" press. News organizations explicitly took sides in the partisan and often violent confrontations that characterized contemporary South American politics. Also, constant political instability and the long absence

of extended democratic periods undermined the prospects for a critical press that would target official malfeasance.

(page xxi)

Feldstein (2006) sum up the two barriers when he said: “Most journalism in the nation’s capital was from the beginning a curious blend of partisanship and stenography, a trend that arguably continues to the present day.”

Media owners also give advertisers and sponsors unwarranted influence over news agendas and even the composition of individual news items (Hargreaves, 2003). Burgh (2000) supported this idea with his statement saying that the concentration of media ownership has had a profound impact on the content of the print and broadcast media and on every nature of investigative journalism. The space in their newspapers will be filled with advertisement, lifestyle and entertainment sections, columns and other “soft” material.

Another syndrome brought by ownership that could lead to the death of investigative journalism is limited opportunity to publish the story when the organization investigative reporters are working for is a subsidiary of a large media corporation. This is because when the top management decided not to publish the story, investigative journalists they have no other place to turn to. Other organization under the same management certainly could not help. If the corporation owns almost all main media in the country, certainly the investigative report do not have chance to reach the public. On another perspective, Fleming (2000) argues that even freelancers are affected by this ownership concentration because in order to sell their stories, they must conform to the style of that organization.

The third drawback is commercial pressures. For corporation which is profit oriented, commercials are their priority compared to the news. Even in newspaper layout, they will first indicate places for advertising. Only the empty space between the big commercials is allocate for the news. There is not enough space for investigative stories to fit in. Moreover there are other priority like Prime Minister’s and a lot more other minister’s statement.

The fourth point is increasing emphasis on infotainment. It is obvious now that media focus is more on entertainment, with a bit of information. Burgh (2000) quoted John Pilger attribute the decline in investigative journalism to the domination of media conglomerates by their entertainment interest. Even our premier television channel, TV1 is also using the slogan “Your infotainment channel”. They are presenting something “light” for the viewers which Tanner assumed as unseptical and uncritical. It is the shallowest form of journalism, it is just endless commentary on events as they are unfolding, which is interesting but it doesn’t reveal the unknown - it’s a running commentary on the known (Tanner, 2002).

Another serious “disease” haunting the investigative journalism is public relation and press releases influence. Journalists now rely increasingly on press release as

a source of information rather than just an appendix. Waterford (2002) argues that the editors are not utilizing their workforce effectively. They should not press journalists to spend much time processing press release, but give them opportunity to carry out investigative reporting, which will turn out to be more valuable news. The recent trend shows that journalists and even editors has become over dependent on press release, often reproducing gratefully whatever ready made material comes their way (Hargreaves, 2003). It has become the attitude of today's reporters and editors. They become lazy to think out of the box, and because the feel of security that there are enough press release to fill in the newspaper column, for them hard work is not necessary. Waterford points out that this has become an acceptable culture in news organizations.

Staffing pressure is another reason leading to the death of investigative journalism. Nowadays, it is hard to find an organization which have special department for investigative journalism. It is about commitment of the organization to investigative journalism. They divided their editorial into various desk such as general, sports, crime, international and feature desk. All these reporters are allowed to do investigative reports but only if they have free time. The organization does not set any target of reports that should be produce. This is not a supportive environment for investigative journalism. There is a need for news organizations to value investigative journalism and see it as something that should be a basic part of their charter. There are always journalists committed to shining the light into dark corners but they need time and they need their stories to be backed by their papers and they need to feel valued (Tanner, 2002).

Risk of investigative journalism is another factor that discourages journalists to pursue their intention of doing investigation. They actually have to face risks before they start investigation, during and after they have finished it because people are trying from every angle to stop investigative reporters from bringing the truth to the public.

This is what Houston (2004) is trying to say:

Investigative reporters fall under outside scrutiny the moment they begin a story and that the scrutiny following the story's publication will include not only criticism of the story, but also their methods of newsgathering.

(page 4)

David (2007) proved what Houston said when he gave a few examples.

Reporters at Rustavi-2 were harassed, beaten, jailed, and ultimately murdered. Journalists with the Philippine center have been repeatedly threatened, and they have watched with dismay as their colleagues in smaller cities are slain with impunity. Others regularly face criminal libel cases, government spying, and the threat of violence.

(page 9)

It is much worse if the organization refuses to back up their in-trouble journalists. Moreover, investigative journalists are also vulnerable of court proceedings, including jail sentences. Sometimes they are put behind bars just because they

refused to reveal their sources. These actions make journalists to think again and again before pursuing writing another investigative story. It hampers journalists because it makes their job more difficult as they have to write in a way of not mentioning the “anonymous” source. It might need extra work to find something else that could give the same information as they got from the anonymous.

This argument support Anderson and Benjaminson’s (1976) statement that investigative journalism is the most risky pursuit in the media. These risks deter not only journalists from pursuing investigative stories but also editors who realize that court proceedings could be a hindrance to their career, making them less likely to run the story even if it is written.

Last but not least, cost of investigation is also directing to the death of investigative journalism. Time consuming research and investigation surely will require a lot of budget. Among others the budget for telephone calls, it will be more expensive if the stories involve sources from different region, traveling cost, and even worse the organization will have to pay monthly income to the reporter for months without getting the complete piece. What’s more disappointing if the story comes up without much impact. This is the reason why a lot of media organizations are not interested in funding investigative journalism. In a survey conducted by IRE, reporters and editors agree that the desire to do investigative journalism is there, but that money for staff and training often isn’t (Houston, 2006).

Other than those eight barriers offered by Haxton (2002), there are other barriers like laws and regulations, time and tabloidization. It is undeniable that a good investigative story might be time consuming and this has become a barrier that could hinder more investigative stories to be written or published. Tofani (2001) said that: “Investigative stories took much more time than ordinary stories – months sometimes years. And there were cases in which a reporter would spend time investigative a story only to find that the thesis couldn’t be proven or editors found the finished product not worth printing.”

In a country where journalists must work under restrictions from laws and regulations like Malaysian journalists who are bound with Internal Security Act, a Sedition Act, and an Official Secrets Act, the practice of investigative journalism is more likely to be difficult. For example, in Malaysia the Internal Security Act defines any reporting of military activities without permission as a breach theoretically punishable by imprisonment; and the "principle of national responsibility" says that anything the government considers undesirable cannot be covered (Stapenhurst, 2000).

Lent (1984) added that laws and regulations forced reporters to exercise self-censorship, to protect themselves from being dubbed 'anti-government,' sub-editors rewrite to tone down controversial issues, news editors try to turn a deaf ear to the people's grievances. All this is done for the sake of “national interest” and “racial harmony.”

The last barrier that could be mentioned here is the spread of “broadloid journalism”. Franklin (1997) who coined the word said there has been a general retreat from investigative journalism and the reporting of hard news stories, together with a wholesale change in editorial priorities when broadsheet front pages now mimic those of the tabloids with similar banner headlines, alternative and funny headlines, large print, less text, shorter words, bigger pictures, colour pictures and also its contents.

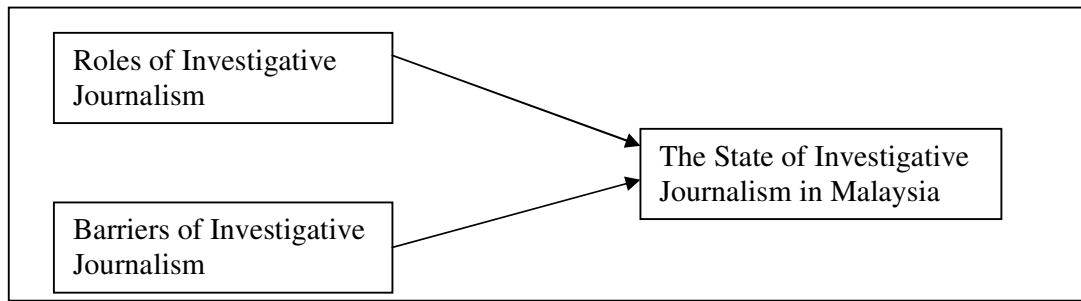


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Methodology

In this research, the researcher will use semi-structured interviews as it provides guideline and allow some flexibility. It generally consists of a list of questions that the interviewer wants answered by the informant where a few questions will be prepared earlier based on readings, literature and research questions while other additional questions will be asked during interview when the researcher thinks it is appropriate depends on the interviewees’ information. This will give the researcher the opportunity to dig deeper and get additional information from them.

The interview questions was divided into two sections where section A asks the interviewees about their demographic information such as their job designation, education background, years of experience and years of experience in investigative journalism. These demographic data will give an insight into knowing the interviewees as it could also reflect their answers. Section B on the other hand uses open ended questions that focused in gathering information required by the research questions.

This research selected its interviewees through the use of purposive sampling where the interviewees were carefully selected in order to increase the reliability. According to Sekaran (2003), specific target group could provide the researcher with the desired information, because they are the only ones who have it conform to some criteria set by the researcher. For this research, the researcher will particularly interview one editor and one reporter from each of these newspapers where the total number of interviewees will be eight. They were selected based on a few criteria such as they have experience practising investigative journalism and they are working with the newspapers selected for this research.

According to a report by AC Neilson, overall readership of any Malaysian dailies has continued to increase steadily from 51 percent in 2003 to 55 percent in 2007 due to growth of Bahasa Melayu dailies readership (AC Neilson, 2007). Therefore, four main Malay newspapers were chosen for this research. The newspapers are *Utusan Malaysia*, *Berita Harian*, *Kosmo* and *Harian Metro*. Moreover *Utusan Malaysia* and *Kosmo* are published by the same company which is Utusan Melayu Berhad while *Berita Harian* and *Harian Metro* are published by New Straits Times Press. However, these four newspapers fall into two different categories where *Utusan Malaysia* and *Berita Harian* are the mainstream newspapers while *Kosmo* and *Harian Metro* are tabloids.

According to statistics by AC Nielson (2007), Utusan Malaysia has a readership of 1.1 million readers while Berita Harian had a readership of 1.27 million readers. For tabloids, Harian Metro with the highest readership has 1.98 million individuals and Kosmo with only 406,000 readers.

Interviewees Demographic Details

All interviews were conducted between 26 February to 21 March 2008. There are eight respondents interviewed for this research. Four of them are editors and another four are reporters. The names, job designation and publication of the respondents are listed below.

No	Respondent's name	Job Designation	Publication
i	Ramli Abdul Karim	Crime Desk Editor	Utusan Malaysia
ii	Wan Syamsul Amly Wan Seadey	Reporter	Utusan Malaysia
iii	Wan Hasnan Wan Hasan	Assistant News Editor	Kosmo
iv	Mohd Zaini Samsu Hadi	Special Desk Reporter	Kosmo
v	Othman Mamat	News Editor	Harian Metro
vi	Mohd Jamilul Anbia Md Denin	Reporter	Harian Metro
vii	Ahmad Zaini Kamaruzzaman	News Editor	Berita Harian
viii	Norfatimah Ahmad	Specialist Writer	Berita Harian

Table 1: Respondents' names, job designation and publication

In terms of gender, there are seven male and only one female respondent. However gender does not play any role in this research as respondents were not selected randomly but purposively according to their involvement in investigative journalism. Their age ranges between 23 to 44 years old and most of them have education in journalism or related area. Only one respondent has a diploma in other field. In terms of job designation, there are two main categories which are

editor and reporter that represent each of the publication. However the name of the positions varies from one organization to another but they are people who are doing investigative journalism in their organization either as an editor or reporter. Nevertheless, none of them use the term 'investigative' either investigative reporter or investigative editor. It shows that the term is not popular in Malaysia if compared to overseas that use the term in their job designation and even for the desk that produce investigative reports.

All respondents have at least three to nine years of experience in journalism. There are also respondents that have experience between 17 and 23 years. To be specific, there are three respondents, all editors have experience between 17 and 23 years, three respondents with 10 to 16 years of experience (two reporters and one editor) and two of them have experience between three to nine years (both are reporters). Their experience in investigative journalism does not varies much as five of the respondents have between three to nine years of experience while two of them have experience for more than 10 years and only one respondent has experience for at least two years.

Findings and Discussions

1. Roles of Investigative Journalism

From the data provided by the interviews, respondents agreed that investigative journalism plays a big role in a country. Nonetheless, respondents keep mentioning one important role which is watchdog where it exposes wrongdoings for the benefit of the public. This is consistent with scholars opinion including Altschull (1994); Tumber and Waisbord (2004); Ettema and Glasser (1998); Protess (1991) and David (2007).

For example, Ramli said:

It is playing a very big role. It gives good input to the government, become useful data to them and it also helps to improve government's delivery system. It is check and balance to the government. Investigative report also tells something that people do not know or almost don't know with a hope that some actions will be taken.

While Mohd Jamilul Anbia said:

When an issue being brought up as a national issue, indirectly it alerts the public and pressure the government to take actions. So it shows the media is playing a big role in the society.

Other respondents like Zaini Samsu Hadi, Othman, Ahmad Zaini and Norfatimah also pointed out the same role. For example Zaini Samsu Hadi said:

It brings changes from negative to positive. It also makes people to think about today's world. Moreover it helps to give information to the government for them to take actions. Government has to be criticized if not it will not be strong. Investigative journalism also helps settle public's problems.

Ahmad Zaini pointed out the same point. He said:

Investigative journalism exposes wrongdoings, power abuse, corruption and also social problems. Although it is quite different but it is still investigative.

Norfatimah on the other hand mentioned the role as a wake up call to the society. *It is a wake up call. It tells the public that something is happening although everything seems to be normal. This is because there are people who make it look that way.*

She also mentioned another important role which is investigative journalism could show the existence of press freedom in the country as media are free to report anything although there are laws and regulations that control them.

There is one role plays by investigative journalism that is not included in the scholar's lists which is to increase newspaper sales. Two respondents – Norfatimah and Wan Hasnan mentioned this during the interviews. They said people will buy their newspaper if they have something different from others, let alone if it is a big exposé. Definitely it will increase the newspaper sales and in the long run it will build the newspaper's credibility. For example Wan Hasnan said:

We need investigative journalism because we want Kosmo to be a paper that exposes something for public benefit. We do not want the public to be cheated. We want them to be alert of the issue and tell them the right procedure so that they know what is happening and what to do when they are facing the same situation.

When the roles were narrowed down to their own society, respondents give three different answers. One respondent said that investigative journalism is playing its roles in the society, majority said that it is playing its roles but still limited while there are respondents who said that the roles is successfully played on certain issues.

Respondent that said investigative journalism is playing its roles in Malaysia is Wan Hasnan from *Kosmo*. He said:

In the context of Kosmo, Alhamdulillah we are succesful in carrying out the role. We have succesfully delivered useful messages to the public, consumerism messages and other messages that benifited the public. That is why we have won Consumers' Newspaper Award organized by Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs for two consecutive years (2005 and 2006). We even have a special desk named "Meja Khas" with four reporters and an editor to produce investigative stories.

There are also respondents who said that the roles is played but limited. They blamed the situation to laws and regulations and also ownership as they said that investigative journalism fail to plays its roles on political issues especially if it involves government which is also the media owner. Scholars like Waisbord (2000) Feldstein (2006) and Hargreaves (2003) also admitted the same situation is happening in their countries. But respondents did admit that it is successful in playing its roles on consumerism and social illness issues.

For example, Ramli who previously was an editor at *Kosmo* agreed on the roles played by the newspaper but still admitted that investigative journalism is not practices in full force in Malaysia as *Kosmo* is the only newspaper that focus on investigative journalism.

Investigative journalism is not really playing its roles in Malaysia. There is not even one organization in Malaysia that practice the real investigative journalism except in 2004 where Kosmo set up a special unit for investigative journalism. There is no other media. In Utusan they just set up a soecial unit last February but they focus more on special report, not investigative reports.

A *Kosmo* reporter, Zaini Samsu Hadi who previously work under Ramli's supervision and now under Wan Hasnan said that:

We have started (investigative journalism) in Malaysia but has not yet succesful in carrying out investigative journalism's roles in Malaysia. But still it depends on issues. As for Kosmo that carries consumerism issues, t has succesfully play its roles.

Meanwhile, three of the respondents – Wan Syamsul and Othman admitted that the roles of investigative journalism in Malaysia is still limited due to the controlled media system. Their statement supported Rodan's (2004) allegation that Malaysian media system is still under government control. Wan Syamsul said:

Malaysian media in particular is still not independent. Therefore we can carry out the roles of investigative journalism but it is limited. Even if we want to explore the issue, because of the Malaysian media policy say no, so we have to stop. Malaysian media is still not indepenbt in terms of laws, policies and its system.

Othman agreed as he said:

Yes, until now we still play the roles but it is not as immense as overseas because our media is still not independent, although we have freedom but still under control. We can't just expose everything we like, there is something behind it that stops us.

Ahmad Zaini admitted the same thing when he said:

For me, although we can do something that we should actually do, but because of the barriers especially when the government own the media, or part of the share own by people in the government or it is government-link company, so we can't do it. Therefore investigative journalism is not really playing its roles in Malaysia.

However, he added:

"Still it is not fair to say investigative journalism is not playing its roles in Malaysia because it actually depends on issues. We only do not touch on politics like sex scandal but other than that if it does not involve important politicians, we still play the issue."

In evaluating respondents' perceived importance of investigative journalism, the researcher found that they really think this kind of journalism is playing a big role and should be practiced in Malaysia although there are restrictions. All of the respondents want the practice to continue. Nevertheless, there is one respondent – Ahmad Zaini who not only wants the practice to continue but he wanted some improvement in the practice. He urged the media owner to give some freedom for the press to practice investigative journalism as it is for the benefit of the public.

In summary, respondents did mentioned 10 important roles of investigative journalism in Malaysia which are: It gives good input to the government, improve government's delivery system, tells something that people do not know or almost don't know, alerts the public and pressure the government to take actions, brings changes from negative to positive, helps settle public's problems, correct what is wrong, a wake up call to the society, practicing press freedom, and give guidelines to the public on what to do when they are facing the same situation.

When asked whether they should continue practising this kind of journalism, all respondents voiced out the same attitude, they want Malaysian media to continue and improve the practice of investigative journalism. For example Wan Hasnan said:

Yes, we should continue because we do it as our social responsibility meaning that we are not just a newspaper that serves news but we give constructive information to develop the society. We become a forum to correct wrongdoing, we will become watchdog to the government.

Norfatihah, still with the same opinion with other respondents said:

Yes, it is appropriate, it should be practiced because without investigative journalism, newspaper will become something dull to read and freedom of the press is not practice without investigative journalism.

Ahmad Zaini who also agreed with others said that Malaysian media practitioners should improve their practice. He said:

Now that the country has developed, supposedly we do better than what we do now. Media should be more open for the benefit of the public. Because our media owned by the government, we can't carry out our duty efficiently. May be media owners should be more open, be brave to give some freedom to the media to expose wrongdoings, they should not restrict media from carrying out its duty.

Stapenhurst (2000) also offer solution to government ownership:

When the government itself is the largest media owner, which can undermine the independence of the media, efforts should be undertaken to strengthen the independence of the media, possibly through privatization of existing state-controlled media. Undoubtedly, privatization can sometimes have beneficial consequence in this regard.

All in all, respondents know the roles and importance of investigative journalism. But, although they know the roles, they have to admit the fact that they can't fully

plays those roles in Malaysia. Still, there is a good sign as they still want to practice investigative journalism despite the situation they are facing.

2. Barriers of Practicing Investigative Journalism in Malaysia

All in all, scholars mentioned 12 barriers facing investigative journalism but respondents only mentioned eight barriers. When I cross checked between their lists, I found that respondents only mentioned four barriers that were pointed out by scholars. This finding is not surprising because situation overseas especially United States where most of the scholars operate might be different with the situation here in Malaysia.

The four barriers that were mentioned by both parties are ownership, commercial pressure, time and laws and regulation. Another four barriers mentioned by respondents but not by scholars are sensorship, journalists ethics, uncapable reporter and culture while another eight that were left out by respondents were: increasing emphasis on infotainment, public relations and press releases, staffing pressure, risks and costs of investigative journalism, difficulty in uncovering wrongdoing, and broadloid journalism.

Talking about the barriers of space limitation, as also mentioned by Haxton (2002), Ramli said:

For tabloid newspaper, investigative reports needs at least three pages with one story on the front page and another two full pages inside. If broadsheet at least one full page. The problem is company spared more spaces for advertisement because they get paid for that. So, the space for investigative reports will be limited.

The second barrier mentioned by the respondents was ownership where government owned most media either directly through shares or indirectly through political-connected people who owns the company or pointed as board of directors who have decisional powers. Scholars that also mentioned this barrier are Haxton (2002), Daniel (2000), Waisbord (2000), Hargreaves (2003) and Remollino (2007). For example Ahmad Zaini said:

Media owned by politicians, or people who have interest in national politics, it involve government, if it is a private company, still sometimes they are government-link company or the owner has some political connections or part of the shares own by people in the government. Therefore media was forced to take care of their interest. This is why most of Malaysian media does not focus on political issues like bribery. Although company encourage reporters to produce investigative reports, they still have to be careful with stories like this. So, although we can do what we suppose to do, we can't do it because of this barrier.

Norfatimah added:

Sometimes when the story were published, there are people who will call our boss asked them not to continue running stories about them. Usually this people has political powers or they have connections with our boss. This is the barrier. We

published the story not because we have bad intentions but for me if it is wrong why shouldn't we write the report. What's wrong is wrong.

The second barrier will lead to the third barrier which is censorship. Das (1990) said that Malaysia is one of the worse countries that suffer from censorship – not only censorship from editors but also self-censorship among reporters before and during writing their stories. This is inline with what respondents pointed out. For example Zaini Samsu Hadi said:

Our media is still constrained in terms of news delivery, there are a lot of things that we can't do. As reporter, we have to think before we write because when the story involve government, editor will cut the story. Our long story will suddently become a summary. So it is not an exposé anymore. That's what happened in our country.

Suprisingly, Zaini Samsu Hadi did throw some sentences that shows his support for this kind of media system:

Malaysian media are still under constrain for benefit of various parties although the truth is to take care of somebody's interests. Actually it is good when the media is not too free because it could bring damage to the country because our writing could influence a lot of people.

Journalists ethics is the fourth barrier mentioned by the respondents. For example Othman Mamat said:

We are bound to our journalists ethics. For example we can't reveal the name of the company involved until the case has been mentioned in court. Then only we can mentioned it although we want to use their name in our first story.

Wan Syamsul elaborate futher on the use of anonymous sources:

Sometimes we need to use anonymous source in our story but usually editor will not accept stories like this. So, we are trapped in the middle as we have the info but we can't publish the story.

The fifth barrier is incapable journalist. Two editors did mentioned this as a barrier to investigative journalism. One of them is Ramli who said that:

There are not enough capable reporter to do investigation, they are afraid and a lot of other reasons given. Most of them are reporters who are unwilling to work overtime.

He put the blame on the university as he said universities failed to train their product to become a discipline reporter, dedicated to their work and willing to work hard.

Ahmad Zaini is the second editor who mentioned this barrier. He said:

Our reporters does not have capabilities to do it (investigative reports). They do not have enough experience. They don't even know how to do it. Even worse, most of them do not know the existance of investigative journalism. Of course they don't have the interest if they do not know about it.

However, none of the scholars mentioned this barrier. Obviously this barrier does not exist overseas or if it does, it is not too obvious as they have a lot of organization that offer training in this field for their reporters and they are also advance in terms of academic in this area. It is different here as Malaysian doesn't even have its own association for investigative reporters. Much worse, there is no institution that specialized in this area. It is fair enough to say that it is a new academic area in Malaysia and still not matured. Even worse when Ahmad Zaini said that reporters in Malaysia does not have a role model among them to follow even if they are interested in this field.

For those who interested to do it, there are a lot of barriers and restrictions, yet they don't have example to follow.

Another interesting barrier mentioned by respondents is culture. Obviously respondents' culture is different from the scholars'. Western culture is more open and this is good for investigative journalism but Eastern culture focus more on cumulative values where they concern more about others than themselves. This culture does not encourage people to point fingers to others or humiliate others, let alone through newspapers that have a lot of readers. It is indirectly discourage investigative journalism. For example Ahmad Zaini said:

Our culture is different from overseas, we do not humiliate people. If overseas even Thailand, Philippine or United States, they will expose, investigate to the end although their report will humiliate others.

Norfatimah agreed as she gave this example:

For example if a politician lost in the election, it is not appropriate in our culture to torture that person again with our investigative report. We need to be compassionate, we will not add salt to an injury.

Another barrier is time. Haxton (2002) did mention this as one of the barrier that hinders reporters from practicing investigative journalism. For example, one of the respondent - Wan Hasnan said:

Sometimes, we need to sit down and discuss before we investigate, we need a lot of time for research and investigation. By the time we are ready with the story, it is not valid anymore.

Other than that, respondents also mentioned about restriction by laws and regulations. However they have some dispute on this because some of the respondents said that laws and regulation is a barrier – which is inline with what scholars like Das (1990), Stapenhurst (2000) and Lent (1984) said.

For example, Othman Mamat who feels that laws and regulation hinder him in doing investigative journalism said:

While searching for information, we will come to the stage where authorities like police will say that they can't reveal further information. They will use Official Secret Act to support them. They say it will jeopardize national security and give us many other reasons. It's different from overseas, they can investigate anything they want because they don't have Official Secret Act.

Surprisingly almost half of the respondents said they are comfortable to work within constrain of laws and regulations implement in Malaysia. It does not hinder them from doing investigation because laws and regulations are guidelines for them in carrying out their duty. They said that there are reasons why government implements such laws for example to maintain national security and harmony in the country.

For example Zaini Samsu Hadi said:

If our story will create problems to the country, put the country at risk, it is appropriate not to run the story. For example if it can create chaos, murder and racism, we are responsible not to run the story. We have to really think about it because people will read our story, sometimes people can manipulate the story.

One of the respondent, Wan Syamsul even said that he already get use to it as all the laws and regulations that involve reporting work have been implemented since he get involve in journalism field. This could be linked to what Das (1990) said as “tamed media”. He described it as a result of control where media are used to the control and willing to follow their owner’s instructions, laws and regulations. Media become a government “friend” where they will give their full support and publish only good things about their owner or in Malaysia obviously the government.

“Broadloid journalism” as mentioned by Franklin (1997) is also not a barrier in Malaysia. It is actually something that should be welcomed in Malaysia because from general observation, tabloid newspapers are practicing more investigative journalism if compared to broadsheet. Therefore, if “broadloid journalism” is happening in Malaysia, it is actually something good for investigative journalism.

All in all, the researcher was able to list out eight barriers facing investigative journalism in Malaysia. Although there are some differences as there are some barriers that exists overseas do not exist here in Malaysia and vice versa, but it is self-explained as both media are operating in a different media environment.

However the researcher did notice that some of the barriers that were not mentioned by respondents but pointed out by Haxton (2002) did exist in Malaysia like increasing emphasis on infotainment, public relations and press releases, risks and costs of investigative journalism and difficulty in uncovering wrongdoing.

Conclusion and Recommendations

1. Conclusion

From the data provided by the interviews, respondents agreed that investigative journalism plays a big role in a country. Nonetheless, respondents keep mentioning one important role which is it exposes wrongdoings for public benefit. To be detailed, the specific roles mentioned by the respondents are that investigative journalism gives good input to the government, it helps to improve government’s delivery system, it tells something that people do not know or

almost don't know, alerts the public and pressure the government to take actions, brings changes from negative to positive, helps settle public's problems, correct what is wrong, it is a wake up call to the society, sign of press freedom and it gives guideline to the public on what to do when they are facing the same situation.

Question about barriers facing investigative journalism in Malaysia sees eight barriers outlined by the respondents which are ownership, commercial pressure, time, laws and regulation, censorship, journalists ethics, incapable reporter and culture.

In summary, this research found that there is a big gap between the practice of investigative journalism in Malaysia and its practice overseas especially in terms of topic covered and their impact. Malaysian media practitioners actually understand what investigative journalism is but they have their own way in practicing it due to the restrictions that exists in this country. They adapted the Western spirit but modified the practice to suit the real situation. However, their practice is still limited especially because they are controlled through ownership and laws and regulations. This is the main reason why investigative journalism that has long been practiced in this country still in its infancy and has never develops to a better stage especially in terms of topic covered and issues that is more significant to public.

2. Recommendations

Malaysian media practitioners should improve the roles of investigative journalism in this country because as of now it focuses more on consumerism issues and avoid any issues involving government and their owner. As for media owners and the government, they should be more open by giving more space for media practitioners to practice investigative journalism because the aim of practicing it is not to look for people's mistake but more of correcting what is wrong. They must be able to accept criticism with the intention to improve their service to the public because sometimes they might not realize that something wrong is going on if they do not have the "watchdog" that will monitor this for them.

Research findings on the barriers facing investigative journalism in Malaysia yielded something interesting. The researcher found that laws and regulation is not a big barrier for Malaysian media practitioners while scholars think this will be the biggest barrier. For Malaysian media practitioners, they are happy to work within the constrain of the laws and assume laws and regulations as their guideline in doing their daily duty. The researcher think that they actually do not master the laws and regulations. Therefore, they do not know their rights and prefer to distance themselves from using it even in their investigation for public benefit. The researcher would like to suggest more training being provided to practitioners especially in terms of press freedom where they could use it to access certain information that has been classified as "secret" by government officials but not by laws and regulations.

All in all, Malaysian media practitioners should pay more attention to investigative journalism not only because it is a noble journalism as it helps the public but it will also increase their credibility and standards of journalism in Malaysia.

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