

Employability of Journalism Graduates in an Ever-Changing Media Landscape

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At a media-related event known as the Media E-Colloquium organised by a public tertiary institution at the end of 2021, I felt it would be appropriate to broach on the employability of young journalism graduates as I was asked to speak on the new media landscape (Muhammad, 2021). This was in light of drastic changes impacting the local media scene. Drastic changes indeed on many fronts -- technology, viability, sustainability and of course, employability.

In the last 10 years or so, we have heard about technological advancements having a tremendous effect on media organisations. Technology, to be exact, had actually brought costs down. Especially in the transmission of information. Downright speedier, too (Marvin, 2019).

And not forgetting that much information can be packed in a handheld or mobile device for the convenience of the user. In other words, retrieval of information at one's fingertips. A startling scenario that one may never have imagined in the early 1990s.

As an illustration, I would also like to share an amusing development of how the ever-evolving technology had "taken out the fun" among some journalists. This pertained to the transmission of digital data, including moving pictures, across thousands of kilometres within minutes or even seconds!

I remembered that before 2010 or so, tv news crews covering key moments of our country's VIPs, especially the Prime Minister and his entourage on official overseas visits, had to bring a lot of cash in a briefcase. The money was to be paid to the local tv station in the visiting country with satellite links so that the data could be beamed to the crew's television studios in Malaysia for eventual telecast to audiences. Under this arrangement, you would also need someone on standby at the local station to receive the news feed.

The daily cost for these transmissions ran in the tens of thousands of US dollars, depending on how advanced or remote the country was. The money was usually paid on a daily basis. Hence, the need to bring large wads of cash.

Usually, the crew concerned did not want to be caught off guard in case there were last minute changes to the VIP's itinerary, like a sudden four-eyed meeting or a special request to film the VIP's spouse visiting a school, zoo or welfare home for the under-privileged. Yes, the official "handlers" would often make it sound that these footages are top priority for viewers back home! Therefore, to be on the safe side, the crew members usually carried a bit of spare cash in case of contingencies.

But what happens if the money is not fully utilised? The crew members, who were usually well-travelled, certainly knew what to do. Since they would already have a rented van with a driver on standby until the end of the trip, they would go to great lengths, so to speak, to finish off the money by going to far-flung places in the same foreign country! Some more hardworking ones would attempt to produce a travel piece with added footages from places they would not have gone as they were not listed on the official itinerary. At the end of it all, these crew members got to see more of the country!

But these jaunts somewhat came to an end in 2011 or so. This was when a technician at one local news organisation, who had always kept abreast of developments in information

technology (IT), found that various technological advancements in digital transmission and reception were able to eliminate the need for the cumbersome and costly satellite link-ups!

A hotel with a good Internet connection is all you need! You can send the information in the comfort of your room after you have edited the footage. During the initial stages, it was agonising when the transmission took several minutes if the footage was rather long or the connection was bad. But as technology improved, such data could be sent within seconds. So less “holiday” travel and no more carrying loads of cash as seen in crime movies!

As mentioned earlier, since much information can be packed in hand-held devices such as mobile phones, it has also taken a toll on the sales of newspapers. An increasing number of younger readers have also found that it more convenient to access news via such devices, especially via free sharing platforms. Lower newspaper sales in turn also affected advertising revenue when hard-nosed advertisers based their advertising expenditure on circulation or readership numbers (Chandran, 2021).

When newspapers have very little to show for in terms of circulation or readership numbers, this often impact on their bottom line or profits. These developments are a far cry from the days when newspapers reigned supreme in Malaysia (Mohd Safar, 2003).

The massive drop in advertising revenue has been gone on in earnest for the last 10 years. Of late, foreign media giants with strong online following have also cut into the local advertising cake by offering to display local ads through their pervasive information platforms (New Straits Times, 2020).

Stung by these challenges, newspaper organisations have no alternative but to trim their costs, thus affecting staff hires as well. In the last few years, we have read of many retrenchment and voluntary separation exercises, changes in delivery formats and even newspaper closures (NST Business, 2020).

These are cases in point in Malaysia:

- a) The Malay Mail, which used to be a popular afternoon paper, switched to becoming a morning paper before it decided to be solely an online newspaper.
- b) The Sun, which prided in being a free newspaper, used to have thousands of newspapers delivered to offices, train stations, bus terminals and convenience stores. Its print run has dwindled to a trickle while it maintains a strong online presence.
- c) The Edge Financial Daily, which used to be printed and sold from Mondays to Fridays, is now an online newspaper.
- d) Utusan Malaysia, the bastion of Malay journalism, was closed for a while in 2019 before it re-published in 2020 following the onslaught of the change in reading preferences.
- e) The Star, which used to have a circulation of at least 400,000 a day at one time, has seen circulation dwindled drastically and has resorted to offering various online options to stay in the game.
- f) Similarly, the New Straits Group which runs The New Straits Times, Berita Harian and Harian Metro, has resorted to online offerings to keep abreast on reading preferences.
- g) Oriental Daily, a newspaper that many of the older Chinese readers regarded as an upstart when it started in 2003, has since switched to becoming an online publication, as a result of advertng and cost pressures.
- h) The New Sabah Times, once the mainstay of news in Sabah, has since closed down in 2019, as a result of costs and advertising pressures.
- i) Tamil Nesan, the oldest Tamil newspaper in Malaysia, ceased to publish on Feb 1, 2019 after 94 years as a result of cost challenges.

With these closures and downsizing, they do affect the employment opportunities of journalists, be they reporters or editors (Rahimi, 2020). Many of the older and less competent ones found that their future was rather bleak after spending almost all their working life in a news organisation if they were left without a job suddenly. Despite getting compensated in accordance with the provisions of the country's labour laws, it is still a loss of self-esteem if one is retrenched.

Experience has shown that maintaining one's previous lifestyle is out of question if one doesn't get re-employed within half a year or so (Human Resource Online, 2019).

As can be seen, there has been a steady switch to online offerings. What does all this mean? It means that these publications would have to be quick to disseminate the news or else its reputation and credibility may take a beating.

Being speedy used to be the domain of foreign news agency reporters, especially Reuters, Bloomberg, Associated Press, Agence-France Presse, and to a certain extent, the business news section of BERNAMA, the Malaysian national news agency. In today's changing journalism world, speed is of the essence.

In the light of these turbulences, what are the prospects for young graduates coming out from universities? Are there institutions still offering journalism or mass communication courses?

I made a brief dip-stick survey prior to the e-colloquium. The quick answer was that private colleges have gone "soft" on these courses in view of the perceived diminished prospects for journalists. It is akin to a situation of why run such courses when the prospects are poor? The good news, however, is that government-run institutions are still offering journalism and mass communication courses.

I also probed for answers from the editors of the mainstream and non-mainstream media on present day job prospects. There were interesting revelations on the question of employability.

The verdict is that doors are still wide open for new journalism talents for a number of reasons. One is to replace the older retiring journalists who may have found running after deadlines or fact-checking information from sloppy reporters to be rather hectic in their twilight years (Ahiruddin, Yushaimi, Haresh, & Lee, 2021)¹.

Secondly, the editors are in unison in saying that they need reporters who are quick in sending information with their mobile devices (Ahiruddin, Yushaimi, Haresh, & Lee, 2021). This affords the newsrooms to be kept abreast of what is happening on the ground quickly. And that is not just limited to words or narratives but in pictures and videos as well.

This is the new environment. This is the new demand. Such are the requirements as readers become more discerning as they also want to view pictures and videos of certain events and personalities after having read the narratives.

And young talents who have been properly trained in universities that offer specialised training in the new media or multi-platform technology-based workstreams definitely stand a better chance of being snapped up.

The editors admit that it would take a longer time to retrain older journalists to work on the latest technological intricacies of certain apps on the devices and laptops because of their ingrained ways. It was better to acquire new talents who can operate the apps seamlessly like young ducklings taking to water easily, so to speak.

¹ Brief personal question-and-answer sessions or interviews pertaining to the subject of employability of new journalism graduates under the present day environment. These sessions took place at the National Press Club of Malaysia, Jalan Tangsi, Kuala Lumpur on Dec 20, 2021 in an attempt to obtain answers to the pressing issue from people in positions of power who have responsibilities in terms of hiring or had been involved in such responsibilities prior to the journalism colloquium at the end of 2021.

While some did say that while the younger writers need not be expected to be good in their writing prowess in the first few months, they are expected to improve in this department over time. Why is this so?

Reading preferences are not just tied to “streaming across the screens” quickly. You still need writers who are able to dissect, analyse and interpret complicated issues so that readers can better understand or absorb. It’s no more a walk in the park. One has to work harder in today’s journalism world. Employers are more discerning and expect the very best.

The ability to write well goes a long way as many veteran writers will attest to their sustainability and visibility. As long as one can still write coherently to attract a good following, he or she will still be much in demand, irrespective of the age. Age does not matter as long as the matter does not age!

All is not lost if one has been well-trained despite passageways to newspapers becoming tighter. Some graduates have found their niche in social media platforms as well and have excelled in apps such as Tik Tok. Some have gone into advertising, making films and documentaries, etc.

The world is all yours if you can put together narratives and visuals better or more attractively than the competition. That’s the passport to employability in today’s media world.

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Yong Soo Heong, 67, is currently a Trustee of the Malaysian Press Institute (MPI) & National Press Club of Malaysia. He is also a member of BERNAMA's Supervisory Council, an appointment by His Majesty, the Yang diPertuan Agong.

Yong's journalistic career spanning more than 40 years was mostly spent in BERNAMA, where he specialised in business and economic reporting for some 20 years, covering business developments, including the stock, commodities and financial markets. His speciality was aviation, oil and gas, and palm oil.

Having retired from the Malaysian national news agency (BERNAMA) at 60 after being its Chief Executive for two years and Editor-in-Chief for six years, Yong now provides advice and training on strategic media strategies and communications.

Besides being a Trustee at the Malaysian Press Institute (MPI), Yong has been MPI's Chief Judge for the annual Hadiah Kewartawanan Media (HKM) competition for the past seven years.,

Between 2009 and 2014, Yong was a member of the Public Complaints Bureau in the Prime Minister's Department, which evaluates and provides feedback on the standard of service delivery by various government departments and agencies.

For his services to the nation in the media field, he was conferred the Panglima Mangku Wilayah (PMW) award, which carries the title "Datuk", by His Majesty the King on Feb 1, 2009.