

JOURNALISM EDUCATION IN PRIVATE HIGHER LEARNING INSTITUTIONS IN MALAYSIA: FACTORS AFFECTING DEGREE AND DIPLOMA STUDENTS' CHOICE

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Abstract:

In the current digitally-networked era, journalism schools worldwide, especially those in developing countries are gearing towards offering courses to cater to evolving market demands and needs. In this context, there is a growing concern, especially among private higher learning institutions in Malaysia on whether to continue offering journalism or provide other courses within mass communication studies. This paper looks at private universities in Malaysia to explore on factors affecting students' choice (degree and diploma students) when opting for journalism studies. The study employed quantitative research method on 300 students from five private universities that offered journalism studies. The research findings showed that 51% preferred non-journalism courses while 49% pursued journalism at degree and diploma levels. Among the strong reasons cited for students' reluctance to pursue journalism education in Malaysia were their dejection on the country's inhibitory laws on freedom of expression, fear that journalists were exposed to physical arm, and lack of language competency to meet journalistic writing skills. The study, which also looked at preferences based on gender, found that female students were less keen to take up journalism. While there are widespread research interests in journalism worldwide, this study hopes to track down important elements that discourage undergraduates, especially from those coming from a developing country like Malaysia, from taking up journalism studies. Drawing on data gathered from this study, this paper aims to add its contribution to our global knowledge about students' reasons for not opting to study journalism. It is also hoped that, as a secondary or indirect benefit, it will help provide recommendations to formulate proper curriculum for journalism educators. This will help inculcate greater interests among students to opt for journalism studies.

Key words: Journalism, journalism education, journalism studies, mass communication, specialization, journalism curriculum.

Introduction

Mensing (2010) argues that the justification for journalism schools to continue graduating thousands of hopeful recruits is increasingly debated in a context where established economic model for journalism is collapsing. While the media sector has seen dramatic changes, many journalism programs fail to meet new challenges of the industry (Hume, 2007).

In many countries, journalism education remains a stepchild at the universities despite growing enrolments (Hume, 2007). This, Hume believes, is because most programs lack the money and institutional support to reform and adapt to the digital age.

With a growing concern among academics worldwide on the dwindling interests on journalism among students, this research, drawing on data from the Malaysian study, hopes to contribute to the global knowledge about students' desire to study journalism

In this context, this research seeks to investigate the issue from the perspective of the students enrolled into mass communication studies in five private universities in Malaysia. It aims to analyze factors that affects undergraduates' choice when opting for journalism.

The study aims to:

- 1) Identity whether journalism is a preferred major among degree and diploma students in private universities in Malaysia; and
- 2) Determine factors that discourage Malaysian degree and diploma students in private universities in Malaysia from taking up journalism studies.

In line with the objectives of this study, the research posits to answer the following research questions:

- 1) Is Journalism a preferred major among degree and diploma students in private universities in Malaysia?
- 2) What are the factors that discourage Malaysian degree and diploma students in private universities from taking up journalism studies?

Literature Review

There is a growing concern, especially among private higher learning institutions in Malaysia on whether to continue offering journalism or provide other courses within mass communication program. According to Mensing (2010), debates about whether journalism meets the definition of a profession surface regularly. In the light of the current developments in the field of journalism, “the call to reinvent journalism education has often been repeated” (Mensing, 2010, p. 512). In view of the changing needs, many have identified new ways to conceptualize journalism education, including Dennis (1984), Medsger (1996), Reese (1999), Reese and Cohen (2000), Carey (2000), Adam (2001), MacDonald (2006), and Deuze (2006).

Mensing argues that “developing new models more appropriate to the needs of this age, as opposed to that of the media industries of the past, is a compelling obligation for journalism educators and scholars” (2010, p.516). Despite this, Hume says that “most entry-level professional journalists come out of university-based journalism programs, which makes universities an important factor in media capacity building” (2007, p.4). This could be more useful, especially for private higher learning institutions offering journalism program in Malaysia.

According to Karan (2001), despite criticisms about journalism course being theoretically based and lacking a professional approach, there is extensive demand for a degree, diploma or a certificate in communication and journalism. Teachers and media practitioners believe that both education and qualification are essential in the present media environment (Karan, 2001).

Karan (2001) suggests that programs at the university level need a massive overhaul to cater to changing needs and reforms. Acknowledging the changing trends in journalism, Megwa (2001) sums up that the internet will continue to have impact on news work and online journalism will constitute a significant part of journalism education. Sharing similar views, Hume (2007) states that students should learn the basics of working with a variety of different media platforms, rather than focusing exclusively on print, broadcast, or digital formats.

To analyse students’ response on journalism program, Hanna and Karen (2007) conducted a research on British journalism undergraduates on what

motivated them to become journalists. Their research showed a lack of change in students' preferences for subject areas and career goals. They found that this could be an effect of experiences, and confidences gained, during journalism education. With changes and new evolving trends in journalism, it seems important that views of the undergraduates need to be assessed to identify their specific interests that would enable the relevant universities tailor appropriate journalism programs, especially in a developing country like Malaysia.

What drives undergraduates to opt for journalism? This has been a continuing topic of concern for many academic research, especially those centred on journalism education. What are the areas and concerns that calls for new outlook when preparing undergraduates opting for journalism program? Mensing (2010) calls for a move away from industry-driven education to a more community-orientated approach that takes advantage of new technology and citizen participation. As journalism programs are taught extensively worldwide, innovative ways are blended to prepare undergraduates to fit into journalism industry which has since changed its traditional platform of reporting.

A 2005 study reported that 60 percent of US journalism schools were preparing students to work across multimedia platforms (Castaneda, et al. 2005). While this may be the case, there are also concerns that these new fads about technology may underestimate the need to meet industry needs in journalism. Stewart (2007) raises concerns on journalism education citing a lack of resources and insufficient expertise among journalism educators and competing demands for teaching resources (Auman and Lillie 2008) that hampers an effective journalism education.

Despite all these arguments and concerns, educators and media practitioners are seen to be supportive of efforts towards a more converged curriculum. Huang et al (2006) in a landmark study found consensus among educators and news professionals on the need to address media convergence in university courses while continuing to emphasise traditional journalism skills and critical thinking. Changes in global finances have also seem to reshape media industry and hence journalism education. They argued that journalism education should reflect a shift away from mainstream journalism, to freelancing and entrepreneurial journalism (Quinn 2010). Balsamo (2011) notes that the introduction of new

technology platforms by corporations like Google and apple have resulted in significant paradigm shift in journalism education.

In this context, the present on-going research would focus on an important research question: What are the factors affecting Malaysian undergraduates when choosing journalism course? The research is nearing completion. The findings reported in this paper is preliminary. Only relevant data would be used for the preliminary report here. As such, the discussion in this report would not be exhaustive.

Research Methodology

The research method used in this study is quantitative survey. A set of survey questionnaires was designed using purposive sampling and distributed to 300 undergraduate students pursuing Bachelor in Communication or Media studies in Klang Valley, Malaysia. The respondents are from five noted private higher learning institutions in Malaysia. The questionnaires were rendered personally using research assistants whereby the respondents were chosen based on the criteria that there are mass communication students.

Participants who signed the consent forms were asked to fill out the survey questionnaire. The questionnaire contains two sections – demographics, and their reasons for pursuing or not pursuing a career in journalism, adapted from Hanna and Sanders (2007). Sample statements of non-pursuance include “Journalism is, in itself, unattractive as a career”, “Journalism is unattractive because of low wages” and “Journalism is unattractive because of job demands.” However, if the students were keen on pursuing a career in journalism, the sample statements will include “Journalism is attractive because of the non-routine work”, “Journalism is a creative occupation” and “Journalism is a self-education profession” (Refer to Appendix for questionnaire). The participants were asked to state their agreements for each item on a five-point Likert Scale where 1 represents strongly disagree while on the other continuum, 5 represents strongly agree. To measure the reliability of the scale, a Cronbach Alpha test was performed after the completion of the pilot study.

Sections in the questionnaire were analyzed and tabulated by using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The demographic data

was summarized using charts and descriptive statistics while the push and pull factors were established through percentages and cross tabulations.

Findings and Discussion

Reliability analysis

Table 1. Reliability

Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
0.908	35

The reliability analysis using Cronbach's Alpha of 35 items in the questionnaire showed high validity with $r = 0.908$. The questions were hence found to be highly reliable.

Demographic Analysis

Table 2. Age distribution:

Age	Frequency	Valid Percent
18 – 20 years old	96	32
21 – 23 years old	164	54.7
24 and above	40	13.3
Total	300	100

Of the 300 respondents surveyed, almost 55% were aged between 21 and 23 while 32% were between 18 and 20 and 13% who were above 24. The demographic distribution is skewed towards the early 20s probably because of the educational system in Malaysia which allows students to undertake Diploma level education before pursuing their degree courses. Students in Malaysia generally opt for diploma after completing their Form Five education when they are 17 years. After a two-and-half year stint doing Diploma they opt for a Degree course. So the majority of the respondents would have pursued their diploma before entering their degree courses and basic journalism course is also offered at diploma level studies.

Table 3. Gender distribution:

Gender	Frequency	Valid Percent
Male	95	31.7
Female	205	68.3
Total	300	100

According to collected data, almost 70% of students interviewed were females. This may be due to the population structure of Malaysia where women outnumber men.

Table 4. Ethnicity distribution:

Ethnicity	Frequency	Valid Percent
Malay	210	70
Chinese	35	11.7
Indian	46	15.3
Others	9	3
Total	300	100

The ethnicity breakdown shows that 210 or 70% of the respondents were Malays and out of the overall numbers who preferred to do journalism 67% were Malays. This is an interesting finding which shows a different consciousness on journalism among Malay students. However, it is worth noting here that 60% of the Malaysian population comprise Malays.

Table 5: Distribution of respondents by universities:

University	Frequency	Valid Percent
1	60	20
2	60	20
3	60	20
4	60	20
5	60	20
Total	300	100

Five private universities were chosen for this survey. They were all accredited with between 4 and 5–tier ranking set by the Malaysian

government. A university accorded with 6-tier ranking is deemed excellent, while 5 is considered good. The universities included in this survey are all based in the Klang Valley, the financial hub of Selangor, which is the richest state in Malaysia. The names of the universities are withheld for confidentiality.

Table 6: Distribution of respondents by courses:

Course	Frequency	Valid Percent
Degree	206	68.7
Diploma	94	31.3
Total	300	100

Almost 70% of the respondents for this survey were pursuing a degree in Mass Communication studies.

Is Journalism a preferred major?

The respondents were asked whether journalism was a preferred major. The response received was something which was beyond the overall expectation of the researchers. The results were found to portray an encouraging trend in journalism studies in all the five universities surveyed.

Table 7. Journalism Preference:

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Preferred	147	49
Not Preferred	153	51
Total	300	100

A total of 49% chose journalism as their preferred major while 51% did not opt for journalism. These conforms to the general scenario in Malaysia whereby private universities are seen to be relegating journalism studies to a non-important category. Many private universities do not offer journalism as a major subject.

Out of those who did not opt for journalism, almost 65% were females while 35% were males.

However, the finding somewhat shows that interest in journalism is still strong among undergraduates. This could be because of job opportunities available for journalism students in Malaysia. Out of the 147 who preferred doing journalism, 72% were females. Researchers could not ascertain why there was an overwhelming interest among female students for journalism.

Why students do not choose Journalism?

The respondents who opted not to do journalism were asked on why they did not chose to do journalism on 5-point Likeart scale. The findings showed a different trend among Malaysian students.

Factors are based on the mean for each question below (Close to 5 mean denotes a strong factor)

Table 8. Reasons for not choosing journalism:

Statements	Mean
Malaysian laws curb journalists' freedom of expression	3.43
Journalists are exposed to physical risk	3.26
I may not have enough writing skills to take up journalism as a career	3.14
I would like to try other careers but maybe journalism later	3.09
Journalism restricts opportunities to write how I wish to	3.09
Journalism is unattractive because of irregular working hours	3.03
Journalism is unattractive because it is stressful	2.98
Unsure if journalism is the right career for me	2.92

Journalism jobs are too hard to get	2.91
Journalism is unattractive because of long working hours	2.88
Journalism is unattractive because of its routine work nature	2.83
Journalism lacks integrity	2.71
Journalism does not suit me because of my personality	2.66
Journalism is unattractive because of low wages	2.59
Journalism is unattractive as a career	2.51
Journalism is not glamorous	2.17

Based on the mean above, students opting out of journalism studies somewhat show a strong dislike for Malaysian laws that they feel inhibit their freedom of expression. This is reflected in the highest mean of 3.43. The calls for greater media freedom in the country has been a recurrent subject of contention in the public sphere. Laws curbing students' participation in public forum, especially those concerning politics could also be another reason why students feel discouraged to take up journalism.

It quite surprising to note how students somewhat perceive that journalists are exposed to physical risk. This is the second most important reason stated by students for not opting for journalism course. This perception may be the result of news reports that sometimes show how journalists face legal actions for libelous news reports. The students could also be demotivated because of threats journalists are exposed to when covering news stories, especially those involving crime.

Students' lack of confidence in writing skills is found to be among the important reasons cited for not opting for journalism studies. With a mean of 3.14, this is found to be third most important reasons for their reluctance to take up journalism. This is understandable as among the main hurdle for students in higher learning institutions now seems to be lack of language competency. It is common knowledge that journalists are required to have a good language command and students feel they lack such required skills. This indicates that students were not ready to take the risk of opting for journalism as they maybe unsure if they could meet up with the language demand.

There is also some hope for a renewed interest in becoming a journalist as some felt that they may try out journalism job later but preferred to look for other jobs first. Charting an average mean of 3.09, these students have not totally discounted journalism as a career but seem to put it on hold.

Although this may not be a proper reason for not opting for Journalism course, one could infer that students may not be confident in getting a job with a journalism degree. As such, they may go for other courses that promises them better job security.

It is also interesting to note that a mean score of 3.09 was also recorded for students finding journalism restricting their freedom to write. This could be the result of their perception that journalism prescribes rigid writing rules, especially on news writing. This could have resulted in their misguided view that their freedom to write could be curtailed if they take up journalism.

Irregular working hours of journalists also seem to discourage students from taking up journalism. With a mean score of 3.03, these students seem to be discouraged with working hours of journalists that could stretch beyond normal office hours. This seem to indicate that students are led to believe that working on normal office hours would be more fulfilling as compared to stretching working hours after office hours. They may have overlooked the passion and dedication journalism requires one to have.

Stressful nature of the journalist job also seem to be one of the reasons cited by respondents for not opting journalism as their preferred major. Although this shows a low mean score of 2.98, this seems to be one of the reasons that cannot be overlooked. Students may have the assumption that journalists have the responsibility to respond to job demands any time of the day when they are required to undertake assignments and this would add on to job stress. They may not realize that any job requires a high degree of responsibility and work stress cannot be avoided. Academics involved in teaching journalism courses could set this right by emphasizing that stress is part of working life and it can be handled effectively with right time management.

Long working hours and routine work nature have also been cited as reasons distracting students from choosing journalism course. These reasons seem to be quite acceptable given the reality that students may prefer a more fixed working hours rather than working for longer hours as the general notion among students is that only specified hours should be spent in office for job purposes. What is perplexing is that students also assume that journalists are involved in doing a routine job. Although journalists are involved in gathering information for their news writing daily,

the experiences they acquire on a daily basis may be different. This makes the job more meaningful as it provides a diversified world view.

Another notable finding is that students were not very much concerned about wages in discouraging them from choosing journalism. With a mean score of 2.59, this shows that students tend to give more importance to other concerns more than wages. This is contrary to popular notion that students pay more attention to wages when choosing a particular job.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Research on journalism has taken news turns, especially with the onset of digitalization of the media. New perspectives on improving journalism is fast gaining traction. Drawing on data from the Malaysian university study, this paper aims to add its contribution to our global knowledge about why students do not opt for journalism. In this respect, the present study has intended to look into students' views on journalism, drawing from which, news strategies could be conceptualized to revive the dwindling interests among graduates in journalism.

More than half of the respondents did not opt for journalism and of these 65% were females compared to only 35% male who did not choose journalism. This may be result of the influence from their peers or from family members who could have dissuaded them from taking up the course.

Students' concern on Malaysian laws curtailing freedom of expression seem to be the strongest reason for discouraging students from taking up journalism. This seems to be an acceptable reason bearing in mind that the general news reporting culture in Malaysia is tightly monitored by the Government. The students may have the impression that they would not have much freedom to write if they opt for a journalism degree. This can only be overcome when the overall restrictive laws are done away with and more freedom is given to journalists to write freely.

Students' concern on their lack of writing skills also show the need for more efforts to emphasize the importance of language mastery at earlier stages in their education process.

The findings strongly hint that respondents tend to have distorted perception on journalism. They may have gathered this wrong notions from their peers or from the overall reporting culture in the country. This could be set right by giving them enough exposure on the realities of journalistic career. Students should be made to realize the need for them to be agents of change in society and journalism would be an important avenue to achieve this.

There are concerns from journalism academics in Malaysia for a need to conceptualize new ways of imparting journalism education in higher learning institutions. Although this study did not intend to look at the journalism curriculum, it is hoped that the findings would imply a need for a relook into journalism curriculum as a possible criteria to inculcate greater interests among university students to opt for journalism. Perhaps future research could factor this in. It is also felt that a mixed research method could be used in future to delve into the actual reasons for opting or not opting for journalism studies.

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Appendix (Questionnaire)

Journalism Education in Private Higher Learning Institutions in Malaysia: Factors Affecting Undergraduates' Choice

Section A: Demographic data

(1) Age: _____

(2) Gender: (Please tick)

Male

Female

(3) Ethnicity: (Please tick)

Malay

Chinese

Indian

Others (Please specify) _____

(4) Which university are you from? _____

(5) What course are you currently pursuing?

Degree (Please specify your program): _____

Diploma (Please specify your program): _____

Section B: Preferred Major among Mass Communication Undergraduates

(6) As a communication graduate, which of the following majors/specializations are offered in your university? (Please tick: More than one answer is allowed)

Journalism

Broadcasting

Public Relations

Advertising

Event Management

Others (please specify): _____

(7) What is your preferred major? (Please tick)

Journalism (Please proceed to Section C and D)

Broadcasting (Please proceed to Section C)

Public Relations (Please proceed to Section C)

Advertising (Please proceed to Section C)

Event Management (Please proceed to Section C)

Others (Please specify): _____ (Please proceed to Section C)

Section C: Journalism as a chosen career or non-preferred career

(8) Please circle the number that best represents your response for the statements below:

No	Statement	Strongly Agree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	Journalism is an exciting field	1	2	3	4	5
2	Journalism is unattractive as a career	1	2	3	4	5
3	Journalism offers opportunities to meet different types of people	1	2	3	4	5
4	Journalism is not glamorous	1	2	3	4	5
5	Journalism is a non-routine job	1	2	3	4	5
6	Journalism is unattractive because of low wages	1	2	3	4	5
7	Journalism is a creative occupation	1	2	3	4	5
8	Journalism is unattractive because of long working hours	1	2	3	4	5
9	Journalism provides opportunities to learn from various fields	1	2	3	4	5
10	Journalism is unattractive because of irregular working hours	1	2	3	4	5
11	Journalism offers good job prospects	1	2	3	4	5
12	Journalism is unattractive because it is stressful	1	2	3	4	5
13	Journalism offers good income	1	2	3	4	5
14	Journalism is unattractive because of its routine work nature	1	2	3	4	5
15	Journalism offers opportunities to change the society	1	2	3	4	5
16	Journalism restricts	1	2	3	4	5

	opportunities to write how I wish to					
17	Journalism allows me to investigate wrongdoings	1	2	3	4	5
18	Journalism lacks integrity	1	2	3	4	5
19	Journalism allows me to educate the public	1	2	3	4	5
20	Malaysian laws curb journalists' freedom of expression	1	2	3	4	5
21	Journalism allows me to monitor public affairs	1	2	3	4	5
22	I would like to try other careers but maybe journalism later	1	2	3	4	5
23	Journalists are recognized for their work	1	2	3	4	5
24	I may not have enough writing skills to take up journalism as a career	1	2	3	4	5
25	Journalism attracts me because I am interested in current affairs	1	2	3	4	5
26	Unsure if journalism is the right career for me	1	2	3	4	5
27	Journalism attracts me because I love writing	1	2	3	4	5
28	Journalism does not suit me because of my personality	1	2	3	4	5
29	Journalism suits my personality	1	2	3	4	5
30	Journalism jobs are too hard to get	1	2	3	4	5
31	Current Malaysian media ownership landscape distracts me from taking up journalism	1	2	3	4	5
32	Journalists are exposed to physical risk	1	2	3	4	5

Section D: Perception of Journalism Education

(9) Please circle the number that best represents your response for the statements below:

No	Statement	Strongly Agree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	I am satisfied with the quality of journalism education in my institution	1	2	3	4	5
2	I believe my institution provides the right exposure in journalism to meet industry needs	1	2	3	4	5
3	My institution prepares me with skills needed for journalism career	1	2	3	4	5