CENTRE FOR INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM
Media Independence Survey 2008

Background and context

The year 2008 was an exciting one, particularly in looking at how the impact and reach of the traditional and new media were fought out at the run up and in the post 12th General Elections, held on 8 March 2008. Feedback from polls, academic research, and analysis points toward the growing influence of the Internet medium in influencing voter behaviour. While the phenomenon was mostly obvious in the urban areas along the west coast of the peninsula, it reflected the levels of crisis in confidence towards the traditional and big media houses starting from the release of the video on judge fixing, the march by members of the Malaysian Bar, the BERSIH organised rally on 10 November 2007 and leading towards the general elections.

In a study[1] of elections coverage by six publications between the nomination day and elections day, the Centre for Independent Journalism found high levels of bias towards the Barisan Nasional leaders and component parties in Utusan Malaysia, Makkal Osai and Malaysian Nanban (82%, 66% and 70% respectively) while among the English dailies, The Star had the highest percentage of pro-BN coverage (63%) compared to the New Straits Times (60%) and theSun (42%). With such obvious slant towards the BN, including the space allocated for party advertisements, it was then a surprise to see the results of the elections, where the BN lost its two thirds majority in Parliament and four state legislative assemblies to the coalition of opposition parties, now known as the Pakatan Rakyat. In the wake of the general elections, political commentators point out that one of the glaring weakness of the BN campaign was its failure to persuade the public despite its control over the mainstream media.

In an environment where there relationship between the big media and those in power are very strong, the lines dividing them are blurred. The growing concentration of ownership in the hands of a few in the media industry is often portrayed as rational business decisions minus the implications to plurality and diversity in views and the extent to which political control is strengthened.

Any discussions of changes to the media landscape of access to information and freedom of expression will not be complete without the background of the checks and controls placed on these rights. Specifically, media and information are governed by an array of laws that have left the state of press freedom and credibility wanting. Among the laws that continue to be used against the media, writers, bloggers and individuals are the Printing Presses and Publications Act, Official Secrets Act, Sedition Act, Defamation Act, the Criminal Procedure Code and the Penal Code. This is done in an environment of general fear of voicing dissent and criticism.

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[1] The Center for Independent Journalism conducted a media content analysis research for the three weeks from the dissolution of parliament to the elections day of six major Malaysian dailies.

Introduction

The survey was carried out by Merdeka Center for Opinion Research through telephone interviews on 1,203 randomly selected Malaysians aged 21 years old and above from 8th to 14th May 2008. The survey covers all of Malaysia including Sabah and Sarawak. Respondents of the survey were selected via a stratified random sample using residential telephone subscriber database as a sampling frame. Respondents were screened in accordance to state of residence, ethnicity and gender.

The survey was conducted in support of the work of the Centre of Independent Journalism (CIJ) and funded by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation. The poll seeks to find out perception of the public towards media independence and data collected will later be made used by CIJ in planning its activities to raise public awareness on the subject of media freedom.

MAIN FINDINGS

News and information access and consumption generally along vernacular lines

The survey found that Malaysians of different ethnic and cultural background generally obtained information along vernacular lines and usually preferred media in their mother tongues.

Malays and Muslim Bumiputras' favourite sources for local news tended to centre on several sources such as Utusan Malaysia, Berita Harian and Harian Metro, the no. 1 Malay language tabloid. The 2007 circulation figure complied by the Audit of Bureau Circulations[2] also confirmed the popularity of the three dailies amongst Malay press. As for news on television, three-quarters of Malay and Muslim Bumiputra respondents placed TV3 as their favourite. More than one-third respondents from this community claimed to have access to internet and those with internet access exhibited higher trust towards online news sources but trust with mainstream media remained strong at 59% and such trust was consistent with other races as well.

Chinese across the nation have more diverse choices in terms of printed news media, with the dominant four major Chinese press, a myriad of regional based newspapers in states like Penang, Sabah and Sarawak, and several English language dailies. Many Chinese respondents also noted that they had a habit of reading more than one newspaper either of different publications or different languages in order to get different viewpoints on issues. However, when asked to name their favourite newspaper, 44% quoted Sin Chew Daily, followed by China Press with 15%. Similar to choices of press, the Chinese also enjoyed a rather wide range of television channels. Although there were already several channels providing Mandarin news such as RTM2, NTV7 and 8TV, many respondents also subscribed to the ASTRO cable service, hence would have access to more news channels other than the free-to-air channels. Different from their preferences on newspapers, there seemed to be no single

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[2] Sources: Perception Media Sdn Bhd (2007) Press and PR Guide 2007, Kuala Lumpur, Audit Bureau of Circulations 2007

favourite news channel for the Chinese polled. RTM2 being the oldest TV station providing Mandarin news led with a 20% following while other news channels trailed behind with several points lesser.

In 2007, the circulation of Harian Metro topped all Malay press at 289,315, followed by Utusan Malaysia at 197,033 and Berita Harian with 192,917. The figure for favourite Chinese press matched the circulation of respective press in the year 2007[3] where Sin Chew Daily enjoyed the highest rate of readership at 357,163 and China Press with the second highest circulation rate of 227,270.

The findings on favourite newspapers generally matched the circulation figure provided by the Audit Bureau of Circulations with exception to the Malay press where the survey showed that the most favoured newspaper was Berita Harian, followed by Utusan Malaysia. Harian Metro, despite having the highest number of circulation, was the third most favoured Malay newspaper according to the survey.

Indian respondents' favourite press centred on Malaysia Nanban (27%), Makkal Osai (19%) and Tamil Nesan (10%) for Tamil dailies and another 26% for English daily The Star. Similar to the Chinese where many Indians also subscribed to ASTRO, local news provided ASTRO became the second most favoured news channel by 25% after non-Tamil news from TV3 which was favoured by 42% Indians. RTM2 was also a favourite news channel for 23% Indians polled.

Non-Muslim Bumiputras of East Malaysia enjoyed a wide range of local dailies and these local dailies became their favourite press for local news. Besides that, Malay dailies such as Berita Harian was also a favourite among native East Malaysians. Compared to West Malaysia, East Malaysians had limited choices in terms of television channels in which only government-owned RTM and TV3 were the only choices presented to the majority of respondents polled. Having a lack of choice, three-quarters quoted TV3 as their favourite news channel.

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[3] Sources: Perception Media Sdn Bhd (2007) Press and PR Guide 2007, Kuala Lumpur, Audit Bureau of Circulations 2007

The survey indicates that users of the Chinese media rated it as having the highest level of freedom compared to other vernacular media. This is exemplified by the perceived slant on the coverage of the March 08 election which were seen to be more balanced compared to other which retained the slant in favour of the ruling parties (refer Chart 1). Chinese respondents had the highest internet penetration rate but their trust remained with the mainstream media.
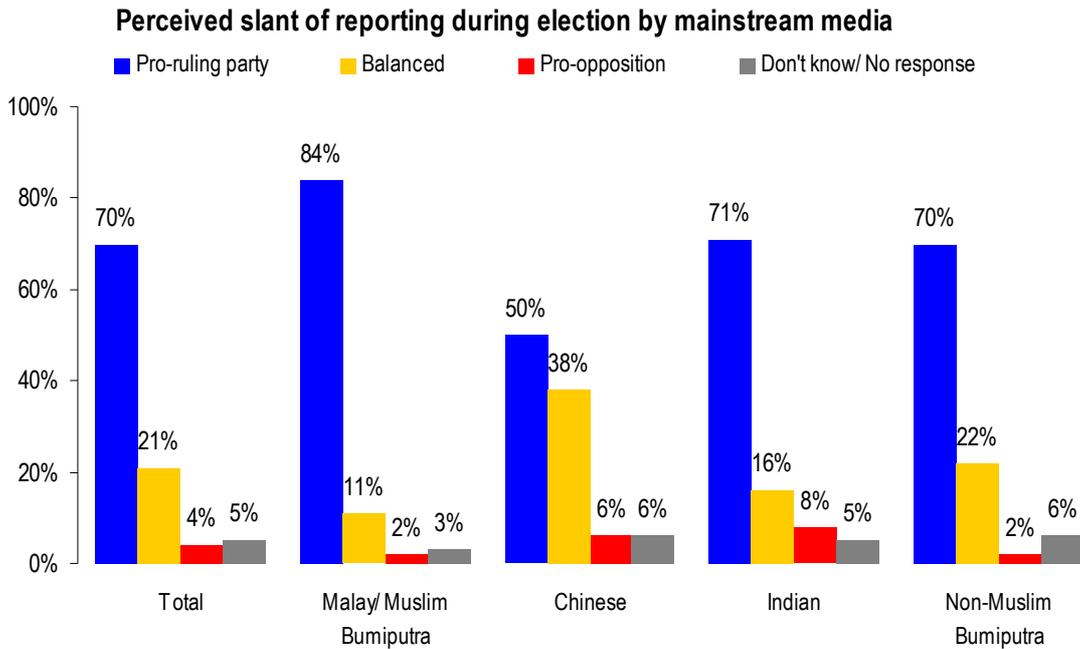
Perceived slant of reporting during election by mainstream media

Chart 1

The public in general had a vague understanding of media independence

A majority of respondents polled did not understand the concept of "media independence". This was evident as 54% claimed they did not understand the concept of "media as a watchdog" and 77% were unable to name laws that govern the Malaysian media. Furthermore, 53% also thought that the media was owned by the government (refer Chart 2). While the BN government wields a lot of power and influence over the main media, many of the media are in fact business entities owned by companies and individuals closely linked to the ruling party. In technical terms, most of the media media are not owned by the government as perceived by the public.

Who owns most of the media in the country?

Category	Percentage
Government	53%
People/ companies connected to the government	15%
Independent businessmen	7%
The community	15%
Political parties	1%
Don't know	8%
No response	1%
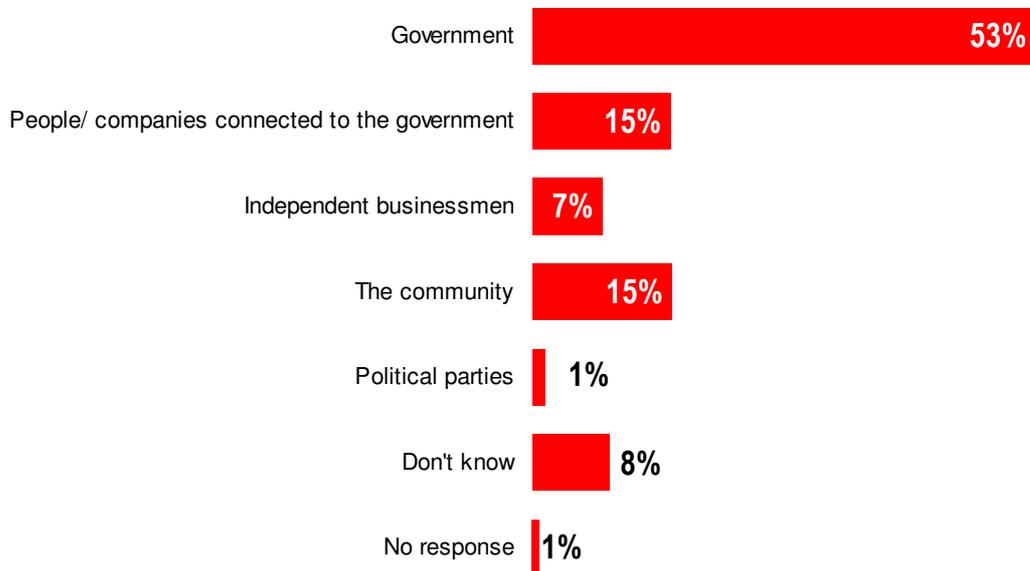
Chart 2

The reaction was seen as a result of lack of discourse on issues related to media independence such as media freedom, press freedom and freedom of speech. In this survey, only 48% claimed the media discussed about the issues mentioned rather frequently and 79% respondents interviewed were unaware of NGOs or individuals working to improve media independence. Thus, the public in general lacked sources which allow them to understand clearly ideas and concepts on independence of media.

Needs and demands for greater media independence

The general public did not appear to understand media independence as defined by lawmakers, media practitioners alike but acting as media consumers who relied heavily on local news media to stay informed, they were able to identify the shortcoming of local media and were critical in assessing the "products" from information providers.

While most respondents got most of their information from the mainstream media, it did not translate into high approval rating for the performance of the medium of information. The mainstream media obtained rather modest scores from its consumers in terms of being truthful, fair, objective, ethical and in variety of issues and opinions covered. The mainstream media did not manage to score higher than 34% favourability in aspects that constitute a healthy media environment in the eyes of the public (refer Chart 3).

How would you rate the mainstream media in terms of... ?
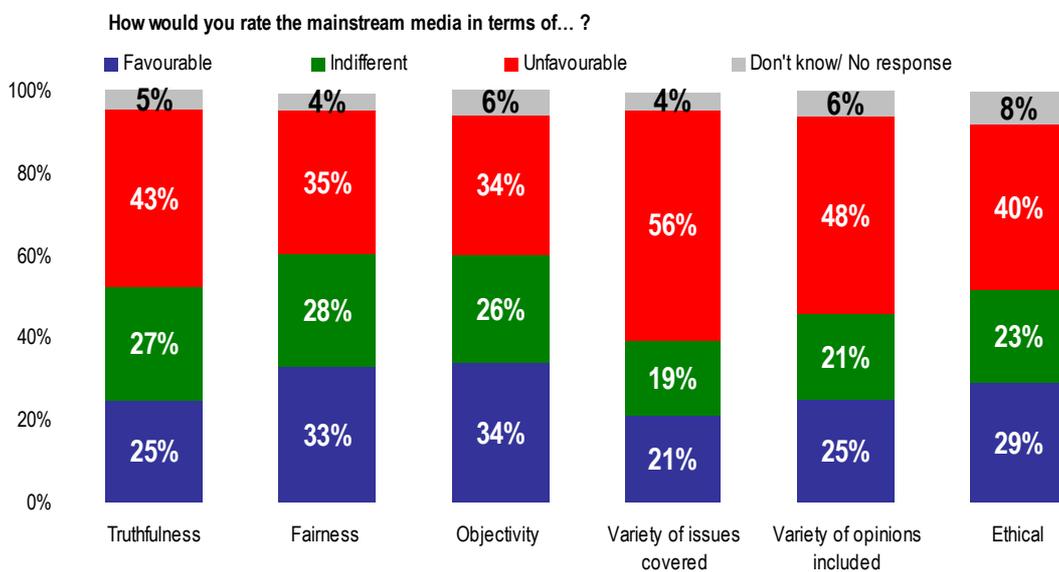
Note: "Very favourable/ unfavourable" and "Somewhat favourable/ unfavourable" aggregated.

Chart 3

Behind such critical assessment, the respondents were also aware of the impact of media ownership on media content. They also acknowledged that the labeling of media as "pro-government" or "pro-opposition" had effect on media credibility. This was evidently shown in their awareness of differences in terms of slant in the mainstream media in the recently concluded general election in March 2008.

With critical assessment comes critical demands. The public also knew what they wanted from the media in order to get quality output from information providers. The majority of respondents polled did not think censorship was necessary for many items except reporting on vulgarities, indecent pictures lurid and obscene details (refer Chart 4).

Should reporting/ coverage on… be censored?

■ Yes   ■ Indifferent   ■ No   ■ Don't know

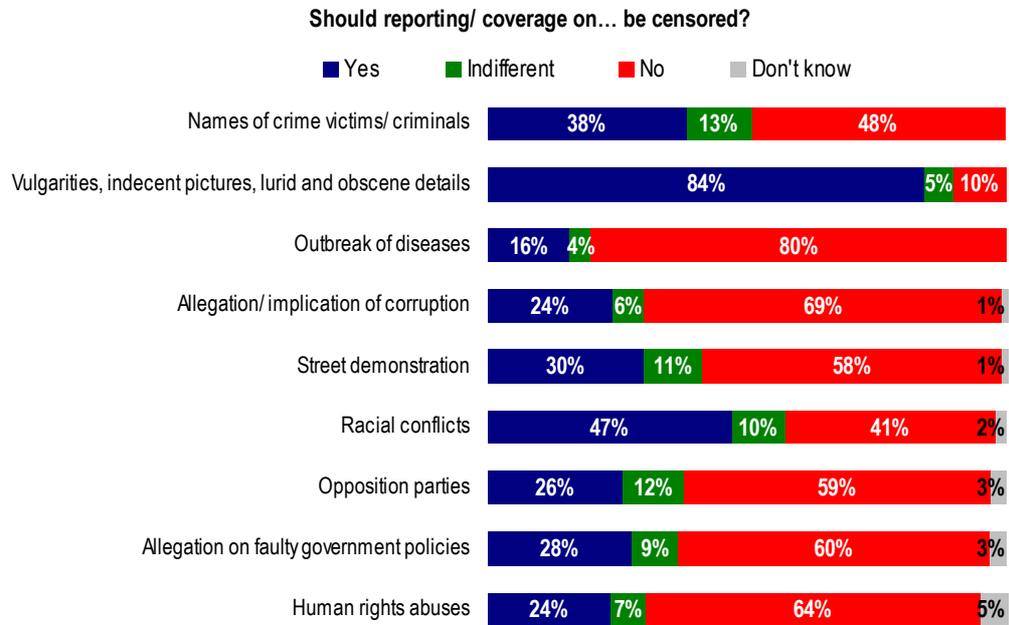|	Yes	Indifferent	No	Don't know
Names of crime victims/ criminals	38%	13%	48%	
Vulgarities, indecent pictures, lurid and obscene details	84%	5%	10%	
Outbreak of diseases	16%	4%	80%	
Allegation/ implication of corruption	24%	6%	69%	1%
Street demonstration	30%	11%	58%	1%
Racial conflicts	47%	10%	41%	2%
Opposition parties	26%	12%	59%	3%
Allegation on faulty government policies	28%	9%	60%	3%
Human rights abuses	24%	7%	64%	5%

Chart 4

A majority of 76% respondents felt that the media should be left independent in deciding what they want to report. And such sentiment was confirmed by the finding that 60% polled agreed that public opinion and peer pressure within the industry were better tools for regulating the media (refer Chart 5).
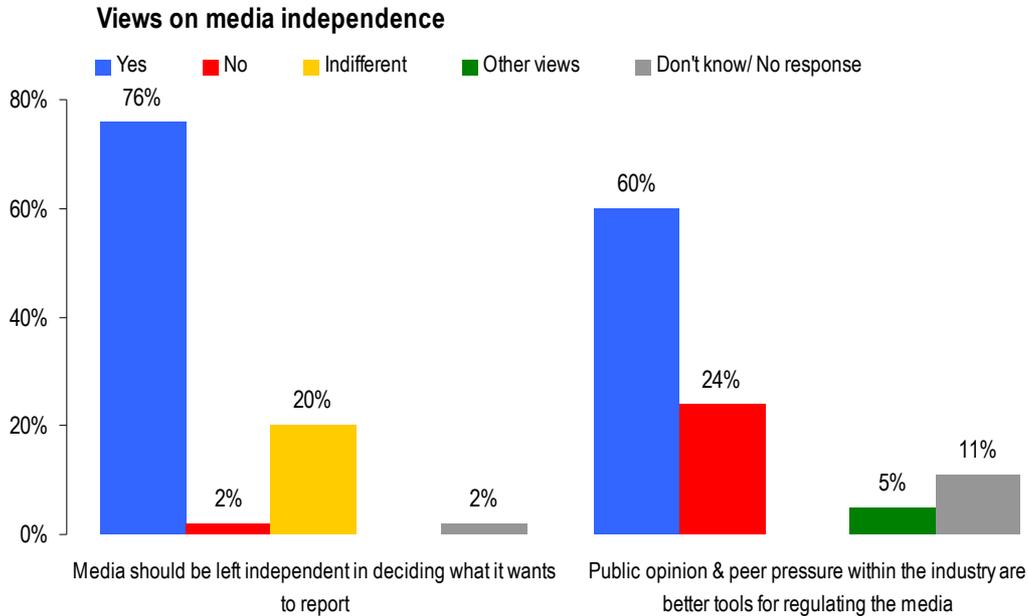
Views on media independence

Legend: ■ Yes ■ No ■ Indifferent ■ Other views ■ Don't know/ No response

- Media should be left independent in deciding what it wants to report: Yes 76%, No 2%, Indifferent 20%, Don't know/No response 2%
- Public opinion & peer pressure within the industry are better tools for regulating the media: Yes 60%, No 24%, Other views 5%, Don't know/No response 11%

Chart 5

The public in general also had some ideas to improve the state of media independence in Malaysia. 87% respondents polled wish to see changes leading to greater media independence and among the more popular demands were having more critical media, setting up a complaint mechanism on the media and making situations easier for public to start media etc. (refer to Chart 6)

What should be done towards greater media independence?
(Among those who wanted greater media independence)

- Repeal outdated media laws: 8%
- Introduce more laws to control media: 11%
- Have more critical media: 26%
- Make it easier for public to start a media e.g. tv, press etc.: 19%
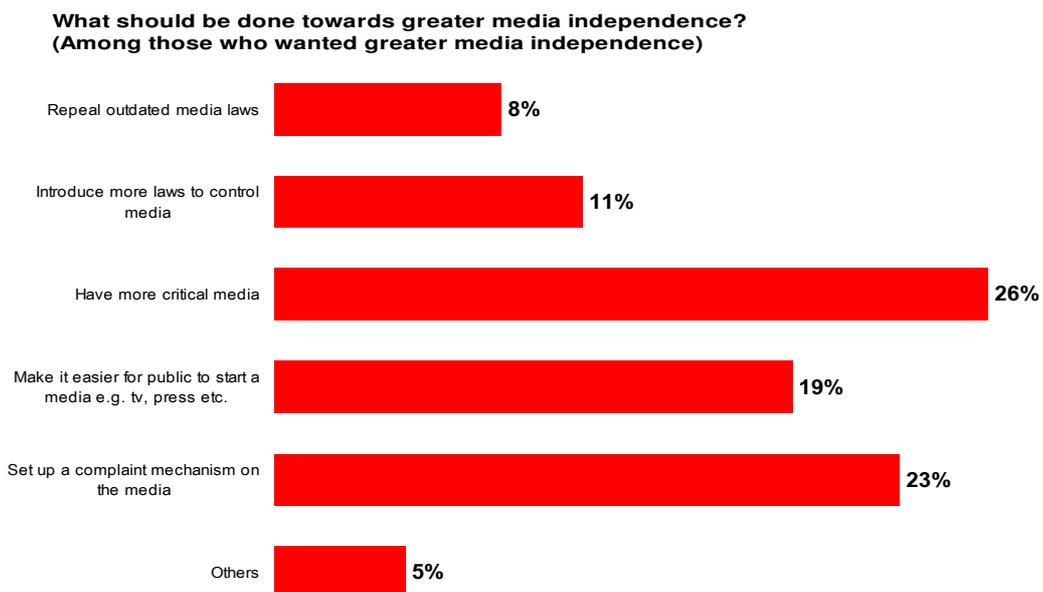- Set up a complaint mechanism on the media: 23%
- Others: 5%

Chart 6

Power to change lies in hands of others

However the public had mixed views on who can bring change in media independence. Two-third had the impression that improving greater media independence was out of their hands while 35% felt that the government plays the most important role. Such sentiment matched even those from the Malaysian Bar, when during the "Walk for Press Freedom" event in June 2008, its Human Rights Committee responded to the Minister of the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Zaid Ibrahim by saying the state bears the primary burden of removing laws that have impinged freedom which were also introduced by itself as a retort to Zaid's earlier statement that it was part of the press' responsibility to conduct reforms within industry. Nevertheless, 30% respondents felt that the public itself plays the most important role in demanding greater media independence. (refer Chart 7)
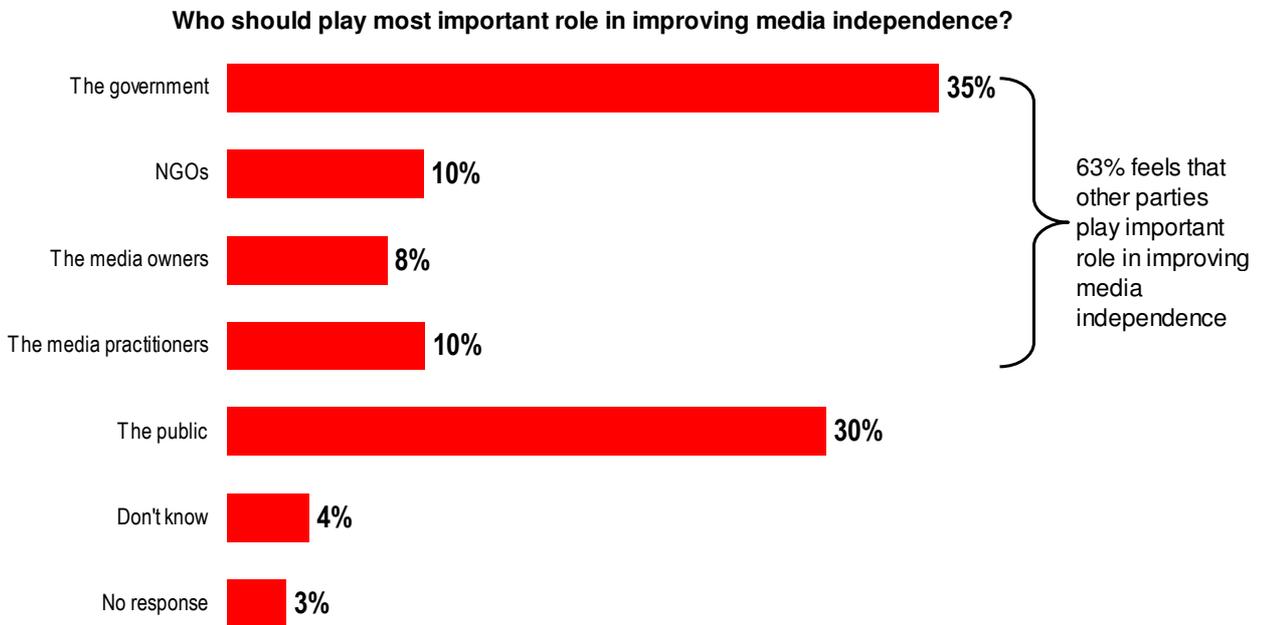
Who should play most important role in improving media independence?

The government	35%
NGOs	10%
The media owners	8%
The media practitioners	10%
The public	30%
Don't know	4%
No response	3%

63% feels that other parties play important role in improving media independence

Chart 7

Lower recognition of civil society efforts to promote media independence

Majority of the public did not know of NGOs nor their efforts towards promoting media independence and greater media freedom. This was particularly evident when the 2008 Memorandum on Media Freedom launched online on 3rd May 2008 by three NGOs including CIJ only managed to garner 1946 endorsees (http://benar.org/memo.htm) as of 2nd September 2008.

The survey was able to identify some trends in particular groups of respondents who claimed have been aware of NGOs or individuals who work on improving media independence (refer to Table 1):

- o Men were twice likely than women to know the said NGOs or individuals;
- o Malays/ Muslim Bumiputras were most aware compared to other races;
- o Across age groups, more people from the middle age (41 – 50 years old) knew about organizations or people working to improve media independence comparing to those younger or older than them;
- o The higher level of education, the higher level of awareness on said groups;
- o Level of awareness also seemed to increase with the increase in household income; and
- o More respondents with internet access had knowledge in groups working towards improving media independence.

Are you aware of any NGOs or individuals who work on improving media independence?		Yes	No/ Don't know	No response
Total		18%	79%	4%
Gender	Male	**24%**	72%	5%
	Female	11%	86%	3%
Ethnicity	Malay/ Muslim Bumiputra	**22%**	75%	3%
	Chinese	13%	83%	5%
	Indian	16%	84%	
	Non-Muslim Bumiputra	15%	81%	4%
Age	21-25	18%	81%	1%
	26-30	17%	78%	5%
	31-35	17%	76%	7%
	36-40	12%	86%	2%
	41-45	**20%**	77%	3%
	46-50	**27%**	67%	6%
	51-55	16%	81%	3%
	56-60	12%	84%	4%
	Above 60	19%	79%	3%
Level of education	No formal education	8%	77%	15%
	Primary school	12%	83%	5%
	Secondary school	17%	79%	4%
	Diploma/Polytechnics/Teacher's college/Vocational Institutes	**22%**	76%	2%
	Degree	**22%**	76%	1%
Total monthly household income	< RM1500	16%	80%	4%
	RM1501- RM3000	**20%**	77%	3%
	RM3001 - RM5000	18%	78%	5%
	> RM5000	**24%**	74%	3%
Internet access	With internet access	**23%**	74%	3%
	Without internet access	14%	82%	4%

Table 1

Despite there was lack of exposure to groups working on the area of media independence, the public did not think of supporting greater media independence as something dangerous. Hence, there is enough reason for groups such as CIJ to be further supported. Groups promoting media independence should also improve and refine its public education strategies to relate the importance of media independence to the public.

Conclusion

1. Unclear with concept of media independence but understands what makes the media responsible

Respondents generally did not have clear understanding of concepts such as "media independence" and "media as a watchdog". However, having regarded local news media as important for them to stay informed, the public in general did acknowledge certain values that constitute a good media. They also understood the impact of ownership on media content.

2. Concerned but unable to provide solution

Overall the survey detected a gap dichotomy in ideas of between knowing what was wrong with the media, and providing solutions to address the problems. The respondents, as examined above, showed that the public knew what they wanted from the media and about the impact of ownership and laws on media but at the same time did not feel they could do much in improving the situation.

3. Clear recognition of the stakeholders for change

Majority of the public generally agree that although ordinary citizen could demand for change in the manner in which media is being regulated, many recognize that only the government is able to bring change to greater media independence.

4. Improvement is possible

Despite low level of recognition towards organizations working to improve media freedom, the public was open to the idea of media independence. This further showed that the stigma of equating supporting media independence to danger did not exist. Hence, it is in the interest of the public and the nation for civil society organizations such as CIJ to continue its work to further educate the public about media independence.