Jurnal Kewartawanan Malaysian Press Institute
Vol.2,No.1 (April) 2026
eISSN: 3083-8991

PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE

SIX PR PROS FOR EVERY JOURNALIST: WHO REALLY OWNS THE NEWS AGENDA NOW?

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Sometimes I scroll through the local news portals, then look at my inbox, and I catch myself smiling a bit.

Media invites. Statements. "Important announcements". Event highlights. Profile pitches. Some of them are decent. Some look like an internal memo that got pasted straight into an email. Many clearly went to everyone in the media list, whether it is relevant or not.

Then I talk to some friends from the media and hear how Malaysia is facing a shortage of journalists. Whether it's about existing journalists jumping into PR or other communication-related roles or lack of keen young graduates to take up the noble role of being a reporter, the shortage is real.

Research and commentary on the media industry have long pointed to this imbalance. Writing in PR and media trade publications, Bobby Brumberg and Rob Brody have both discussed how public relations practitioners now significantly outnumber journalists in several media markets, with estimates often cited at roughly six PR professionals for every working reporter. While the exact ratio varies from country to country, the broader trend reflects the structural changes taking place in modern media ecosystems. Those pressures are visible locally as well.

In recent years Malaysia has seen newsroom restructuring, consolidation and the closure or downsizing of several legacy media operations, including the temporary shutdown of Utusan Malaysia in 2019 and the digital restructuring of major media groups such as Media Prima. Many news organisations today operate with smaller reporting teams while producing content at a faster pace.

So the slightly uncomfortable question is this.

If we have so many more people on the PR side, who really owns the news agenda now?

This question becomes heavier when you work in an organisation involved in IT and digital infrastructure. When your systems support core government services, and you deal with citizen data and national platforms, every line in a statement matters. Every choice to speak or stay quiet carries weight.

Let me share how I see it from where I sit.

How PR quietly outgrew the newsroom

Not too long ago, communications was seen as a support function. You did a press conference when something "big" happened. You sent a press release when the company opened a new branch. You arranged an interview when the CEO had time.
That world feels very far away now.

Today, most serious organisations have some combination of corporate communications, strategic communications, branding, marketing, social media, investor relations, sustainability, even their own "content studio". On top of that, they engage agencies, consultants and trainers.

In the IT space, and especially in companies like HeiTech Padu Berhad that deal with core government systems, this is not a luxury. When your work touches identity systems, licensing platforms, defence infrastructure or citizen portals, your reputation is only part of what is at stake. Public confidence in the system itself is involved. It is public confidence in whether the system will be there when people need it.

So management started to see communications as strategic. They invest in headcount, tools, training. They want dashboards, sentiment reports, "key messages". They want us in the room when decisions are being made, not just when they want to cut a ribbon.

At the same time, Malaysian media has been going through a very different journey. Advertising has moved online. Some old names have gone fully digital with leaner teams. Radio is being redefined. Newer portals run with small, overworked crews. Everyone is chasing clicks, traffic and "engagement".

Put these two trends side by side and you get the imbalance we are talking about. A growing army of communicators facing a smaller and more stretched group of journalists.

More people, more emails, more noise

It is tempting to hear "six PR people for every journalist" and imagine power. As if more people and bigger teams automatically mean more control over what gets reported.
The reality is not that simple.

On a normal week, my team and I might be dealing with internal announcements that suddenly have external implications, questions about contracts, calls on outages or disruptions, requests for comment on broader topics like cyber security, data governance and digital government.

Without discipline, the easiest response is often the loudest one.

Another statement. Another quote. Another "for immediate release" email.

Inside the organisation, even colleagues will reach a point where they are tired of constant noise. Now multiply that for a journalist who receives dozens, sometimes hundreds, of emails and WhatsApp messages a day.

A lot of those messages are generic. Some are clearly mass mailed. A few get their name wrong. Quite a number are simply not relevant to their beat.

So yes, there may be more of us than there are journalists. But if we use that advantage only to push out more and more content, what we create is not influence. It is fatigue.

Volume without judgement does not give us control. It just clutters the environment that we also depend on.

Malaysian newsrooms are not our punching bag

Every PR person has heard or said some version of these lines:

"Why did they only use one line from our statement?"
"Why call our competitor but not us?"
"Why highlight the negative angle?"

I understand the frustration. We put in the effort. We negotiate internally, balance legal and business concerns, and finally get a statement cleared. When it comes out differently from what we hoped, it stings.

But we also need to be fair.

A Malaysian journalist today is usually handling more beats than before, has less time for background research, and lives with instant public feedback through comments and social media. Editors are under pressure. Owners are under pressure. Everything is urgent.

If, on top of that, PR people respond to every unfavourable story with aggressive emails, threats to cut access, or subtle reminders like "we will remember this", the relationship slowly deteriorates.

I often remind my team that journalists are not channels. They are not your email list or your broadcast group. They are professionals with their own judgement, values, limitations and blind spots, just like us.

Many of them are also people we bump into in our daily lives. Former classmates. Parents at school events. Someone you have seen at more than one press conference over the years.

Seeing them that way naturally softens our tone. The conversation becomes more human. Less transactional.

When IT, PR and public trust intersect

Where it gets more sensitive is when PR and journalism meet on highly technical or political issues.

Imagine a company that builds or maintains a critical system for government. It could involve identity, licensing, immigration, defence, healthcare, toll, financial services. The technical work sits deep inside data centres, lines of code and integration documents. The public does not see any of that.

What they see is whether the system works, how long the queue is, what they read on news sites, and what they see on social media.

If there is a major outage or a controversial contract, things move fast. Your phone starts ringing. A reporter wants to know what happened. A business desk wants to understand the contract. Someone from a portal messages you late in the evening asking "Is it true your system is down nationwide?"

Those are the moments when PR, IT and public trust collide.

Journalists will want to know who won the tender, whether the process was fair, whether the company is truly capable, what the track record is.

The public will ask if their data is safe, whether this new system will make life easier or harder, and why something that "used to work" had to be changed.

When PR teams outnumber journalists, and when only one side has ready made statements, timelines and fancy infographics, it is very easy for the narrative to tilt toward whoever is more prepared.

That is exactly why our responsibility as communicators in the IT sector is heavier. We cannot hide behind "technical issues" for everything. We cannot oversell capabilities. We cannot simply wait and hope the story dies when it is clearly not going to.

Our job is not to make a complex issue sound simple by removing the important bits. Our job is to make it understandable without losing what matters.

The small temptations that slowly erode trust

I once listened to a farewell speech by a senior figure who said, very plainly, that in whatever you do, do it properly and do it the right way, even when it is tempting to choose the easier path.

That line is stuck with me because communications work is full of small temptations.

Under pressure, it is very easy to leave out details that may make the picture less flattering. Or to use language that is technically correct, but obviously intended to create a wrong impression. Or to brief friendly voices with only one side of the story and let them "fight your battles" in public.

Sometimes you win that round. The immediate pressure drops. The issue cools. The boss is relieved. The client is happy.

But every time we play that game, we pay a price.

Bit by bit, we weaken the trust that people have in organisations, in media and in information in general. We teach people to doubt everything they read. We normalise spin as a standard response.

Most organisations claim to care about integrity and responsibility. For me, the real test is not what is written on the wall. It is what happens when there is a crisis and someone says, "Can we just phrase it this other way so it does not sound so bad?"

Information is a form of trust. When people rely on your words to understand what is happening behind closed doors or inside a server room, you have a responsibility to respect that.

The culture we build inside leaks outside

A while back, one of my staff asked how I could stay patient with another colleague after a very tense incident at an event. She thought I was completely calm. Truthfully, I was upset. I just chose not to react on the spot.

I waited. Gave it a few days. Then called her in and spoke calmly about what happened. We talked it through. We moved on. Our working relationship is still good today.

I share this story because the same principle applies to how we shape the culture in our own communications teams.

If, inside the team, our default is blame, fear and panic, we will carry that same energy into our dealings with media. Every tough question becomes "hostile". Every correction request becomes "an attack". Every neutral story that is not fully positive feels like a betrayal.

If our internal culture is more open, where people can speak up, disagree and fix things without being punished immediately, we are more likely to treat journalists with that same mindset.

In practice, that can look very simple. Taking the trouble to actually read what a reporter has written before picking up the phone. Saying thank you when someone produces a fair and balanced piece, even if it is not glowing. Calling to clarify first instead of firing off a legal sounding email at the first sign of discomfort.

None of this is glamorous. But it is how trust is built.

So who owns the agenda, really?

After going around in circles, maybe the point is this: nobody fully "owns" the news agenda.

On any given day, it is shaped by politicians, civil servants, activists, businesses, citizens with smartphones, algorithms, editors and yes, communications people.

Journalists, editors and media owners still decide what goes on the front page, what becomes a push notification, what gets buried on page ten. That is their role.

But when PR and communications teams outnumber them, especially in technical and sensitive sectors like IT and digital infrastructure, we cannot pretend we are just observers.

We are the ones preparing the data, the charts and the Q&A sheets. We are the ones advising leaders on what to say and what not to say. We are the ones suggesting whether to be transparent, vague or silent. We are the ones who decide whether a story gets drowned in ten small updates or addressed properly once.

In that sense, we are not just pitching to the public conversation. We are co-writing it. If we accept that, then a few things follow quite naturally.

We should be more selective about when we push for coverage, and save our firepower for issues that truly matter, instead of trying to turn every small internal milestone into "news".

We should respect journalists enough to give them time, context and honest answers, not just carefully cut quotes.

We should commit to explaining complex digital and policy issues in plain language, instead of hiding behind terms that even our own colleagues struggle to understand. We should be willing to push back internally when what is being asked of us crosses basic ethical lines.

Owning influence over the agenda is not about being the loudest voice in the room. It is about being the voice people still listen to after a few years of watching what you actually do.

A quieter kind of leadership

Most of the time, good communications work is invisible. If things go well, people forget we were even involved. If things go badly, our names suddenly appear in all the wrong conversations.

That is part of the job.

For me, a simple question helps to keep perspective: are we, through our work, making the information environment slightly better or slightly worse than it would be without us?

If we are helping to bring more clarity, more honesty and more context into the system, then having "six PR people for every journalist" is less of a threat and more of an opportunity. It means more hands to do the hard work of explaining, listening, clarifying and, when needed, admitting mistakes.

If we are mainly adding noise, distraction and spin, then the imbalance becomes something else entirely. Something that rewards those with bigger teams and bigger budgets, and sidelines those without.

In the end, the agenda is shaped by everyone who chooses to speak into it. As communicators, we already believe in the power of stories. Maybe what we need to show, a bit more often, is that we also believe in restraint, in fairness and in the long term value of being trusted.

That, more than any single headline or campaign, is the kind of legacy worth aiming for.

For journalism, this imbalance between PR and newsroom resources makes professional judgement even more important. Reporters remain the ones responsible for verifying claims, questioning official narratives and providing context that organisations may not always offer voluntarily. For those of us working in communications, recognising and respecting that role is essential. A healthy media ecosystem ultimately depends on both professions fulfilling their responsibilities to the public, whose trust remains the foundation of credible journalism.