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Faridah Ibrahim

## **Participation In Newsroom Decision-Making: A Study In Role Stress**

Organisations exist in order to pursue goals through the most efficient available means. In any organisations, both employees and employers will encounter problems or challenges at work that require them to choose alternative courses of action in order to make objective and reasoned decisions, normally achieved through adequate information (Conrad, 1990).

The decision process of an organisation follows certain characteristics namely a knowledge of alternatives, a knowledge of consequences, a consistent preference ordering and a decision rule. It is assumed that in such an organisation, the decision makers are aware of all alternatives, the possible consequences and subjective value attached to each alternative and decisions are made by selecting the alternative with the highest expected value (March, 1981).

Exploring the parallels between human decision-making and organisational decision-making, Herbert Simon (1965), one of the pioneers of "the decision-making approach" argued that organisations can never be perfectly rational because their members have a limited capacity to obtain and process information. He said most of the time people have limited information about options, values and probabilities that will help them in making effective choices. In fact, people rarely have adequate information and analytical skills to attach accurate values to outcomes.

Morgan (1986) argued that if organisation is indeed a product or reflection of information-processing capacities, then new capacities and innovations will lead to new organisational forms.

Today, we can see this in industries where electronic information processing has assumed a major role for example, in airlines, banking, the media, hotels, and also in high-technology firms such as those in the electronics, computing, and aerospace industries.

In the media industries, the introduction of computers and micro-processing has created radical changes in the nature and style of the organisations. Technological changes have created new media industries, new ways of developing information, and new ways of promoting and selling media products. These changes create major issues for media managers, especially those at the decision-making levels.

Media managers must constantly monitor and adopt new technologies to keep their organisations competitive. Thus, basic consideration in media decisions are tied closely to the organisational goals and needs.

It is the very complexity of these constraints and responsibilities within the media organisations that place media managers and journalists under stressful conditions (Cook and Banks, 1993). Such is the nature of the media organisations that a slight occurrence of unexpected important events can greatly enhanced tension in the newsroom. Making news decisions in a hurry and deadline constraints are tension inducing situations that media managers and journalists have to deal with everyday.

### **Role Stress and Decision-making**

The internal mechanisms within a news organisation such as the division of power, authority, labour and status, organisational rules, news format, leadership, degree of autonomy given to journalists (Gans, 1980; Joseph, 1985; Cooks and Banks, 1993) may affect the role behaviour exhibited by journalists in the newsrooms.

In the newsroom, the daily agenda of reports produced by the media and labelled as "news" is by no means a product of chance events; it is actually the result of crucial decisions made within a news organization. Many of these decisions are made prior to the event itself (Epstein, 1981).

News decision-making in the newsroom comes in various forms which include news evaluation and selection by the news staff, the expenditure of time and resources for news gathering, and the allocation of space for the presentation of the news.

Many theories have been put forth about how the selection of news is done (Gans, 1979). Studies done by scholars have shown that journalists have strong needs for greater participation in news decisions (Gans, 1979; Epstein, 1981; Joseph, 1983; Adams and Fish, 1987; Gaziano and Coulson, 1988; Gaunt, 1990).

Basically, in making news decisions, news organisations need to consider their own goals and requirements for surviving in a competitive environment. Decisions made will be based on key decision makers, namely the editors and editorial managers, who will make decisions consistent with the organization's interests. These decisions will in turn shape its product - the news (Epstein, 1981, p. 120).

The search for news requires not only a reliable flow of information about the past and present, but also for the foreseeable future. News organisations collect information regarding certain important events, analyse the information according to some written or unwritten rules, present them in an acceptable news format and channeled to a particular audience. Like many other organizations, news organizations operate in an environment of competition that requires three important characteristics: secrecy, speed and precision (Epstein, 1973, p. 120).

Due to speed and precision, news decisions and story selection are usually made in a hurry. According to Gans (1980) the newsroom is flooded by hundreds of news choices everyday and if news makers are to treat all the news as formal decisions, they would be unable to meet their daily news deadline. Instead they normally act on the basis of quick virtually intuitive judgements, which some ascribed to "feel" or "news sense". Based on these judgements, decisions are made quickly and easily so that choices can be made without too much deliberation.

In this case, simple considerations or rules also help journalists to avoid excessive uncertainty about whether they have made proper choices. The considerations are usually flexible and can be easily rationalised so that if one story is replaced by another, an acceptable reason for doing so is always at hand. Such considerations are also designed for efficiency so as to guarantee the necessary supply of suitable news utilizing the least amount of time, effort and money (Gans, 1980, p.83).

Thus, any assessment of the process of news decisions would be shortsighted if it failed to take into account of the increasingly centralized and bureaucratized nature of the news industry brought about by various factors such as division of power and labour in the news organisation; organisational rules and editorial policies; news format and presentation; to name a few.

**Division of power and labour in news organisation.** Gans (1980) has listed the staff of news organizations according to decreasing rank and power. On top of the power structure, are the policy makers, followed by top editors (or producers), section heads, reporters and writers (or film makers) and researchers. These are complemented by various supporting staff, some of which play an indirect role in story selection. Hence, we can see that in most news organisations, the top editors or producers and his assistants have the power to decide what gets into print or on the air, at what length, and in what order, subject only to suggestions or vetoes from news and corporate management. The lower level staff, mostly journalists, have little autonomy over news selection.

Gaziano and Coulson (1988) found from a research done on 125 journalists at two metropolitan newspapers in the United States that journalist's participation in news decision-making is an important factor that can improve the work environment. They found this goal, however important both to the editors and reporters, was not implemented frequently regardless of newspaper management style. They also found that there is a lack of communication between the editors and reporters in both newspapers.

According to Epstein (1973), journalists, especially the more established ones, often were given the freedom to select their own news coverage. However, the organization generally imposes constraints in the form of deadlines which are set to a certain time period. Gans (1980) who did a study on CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek and Time over a ten year period found that it is often the top editors, producers, as well as senior editors who will make suggestions about story design. They are also the ones who will scrutinize, filter, review and edit stories brought back by journalists. Stories may be "spiked" or postponed because the needed information is not available in time, or because they require too much rewriting and editing.

**News format and presentation.** It is during the final stage in the presentation of news that the news organization exerts ultimate control over the product. Before a news story is published or broadcast, it is filtered, screened, edited by designated individuals in the news organization. According to Epstein (1973) the presentation process of television news faces tighter control by organization. Most reports are filmed days or hours in advance and sent for editing before going on air. Producers thus have the opportunity to review the story, and to instruct the editors and reporters on how to construct, "play," and narrate it. And if editing fails to conform to organizational values, the producer can kill the story with ease.

The same goes for print news. Editors had to gradually inculcate values through conferences, reediting and "spiking" stories that failed to fit the mold. And ultimately, whatever the discretion and autonomy a journalist may feel he has, his story must be approved at a higher level before it is printed or broadcast.

Besides the daily filtering and screening by editors, the process of news selection is also influenced by availability of space and newshole. The number of pages of an edition or air time is fixed in advance by media managers, usually in the higher hierarchy, according to newshole requirements and advertising projections. Usually, due to limited space, the advertising and editorial departments have to fight for what is available. This also means that certain news by certain reporters has to be edited heavily, shortened or simply discarded. More often, several news have to be put aside to make way for advertisers who have made prior bookings for advertising spaces.

**Organisational rules and editorial policies.** To coordinate the efforts of hundreds of individual journalists, editors, producers and technicians into a news product that meets certain standards and preset schedules, a news organization requires a set of internal rules and policies. Although the rules and policies in news organization are less stringent and are often informally stated, it is felt that some form of "operating rules" are necessary at every level of a news organization. Some of these rules apply to the daily responsibilities undertaken by reporters and editors in their effort to fill up the newshole. These rules act as guidelines for editors and reporters in filter-

ing and evaluating information and making decisions. Similarly, producers must impose guidelines on all those involved in the production of news so that they can meet the budgets, schedule, and other standards that they are responsible for maintaining (Epstein, 1973, p.42).

Although "operating rules" may not predetermine certain news stories, news organizations feel that they need these rules to maintain media credibility. For instance, media organisations predetermine that any news about the leader of a country, President or Prime Minister will be covered.

However, such "operating rules" which are not stated clearly and spelled out on paper have the tendency to create uncertainty. Unclear organizational rules will make controls exerted by the organization still more uncertain. In such a situation, the degree of autonomy and discretion that media managers - the decision makers - have can also be uncertain.

According to role theorists (Katz and Kahn, 1978) members of organisations may experience an increase in role ambiguity when there are uncertainties about one's task responsibilities, unclear organisational goals and conflicting personal values and professional needs.

Likewise, journalists may also experience an increase in role conflict due to various factors in the newsroom such as the pressing deadline pressure, decreasing autonomy, lack of participation in making decisions that affect them; pressing demands from leaders; and incompatible directives and policies.

Role stress refers to the pressure people feel with regard to the role they are expected to perform and role stress occurs when people experience role conflict and role ambiguity.

The questions of journalistic autonomy and participation in decision-making as well as factors that influenced decisions in the newsroom which were highlighted here could also be traced in many newspaper organisations in other countries. The Malaysian newsroom is without exception. Amidst the different cultural, economic and political background, Malaysian journalists, like their Western counterparts, share similar obligations, responsibilities and ideals. The strain resulting from the conflict between organisational demands and the needs of journalists to maintain autonomy and aspire for greater participation in newsroom decision-making is becoming critical in Malaysian journalism due to the proliferation of media organisations.

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## **Decision-making In TheNewsroom: A Malaysian Case**

The basic functions of the media organisations in Malaysia are to provide news, information, entertainment, education and other services to the public. Media organisations not only manufacture news and information which are basically intangible products, but also function as a socio-political institution.

The print media and broadcast media entities are primarily business enterprises and like all commercial organisations would have to pay for their raw materials and ensure a reasonable revenue. On the other hand, media organisations in a developing nation such as Malaysia, also have socio-political obligations. Their media products reflect the people's lives and their socio-political and economic environment.

Malaysia acquired, at independence, a pro-government but cautiously autonomous press (Means, 1991). A. Samad (1991, p. 30) writing about the role of the media in line with Vision 2020 said that "while the press must be given every opportunity to exercise its freedom to express its views, the right to free expression must be balanced against the larger interests of the nation".

Malaysia, like so many other Southeast Asian countries, has put aside the freedom of expression guarantee. Several of the reasons given have to do with the internal sensitivity resulting from Malaysia's multiracial background and also for the sake of national security and nation building. The newspapers and other media, majority of which are corporate entities, are expected to cooperate with government policy.

The print media organisation, for instance, is a service industry whose prime objective is the dissemination of news, analysis of events and the moulding of public opinion to promote community welfare, national aspirations and economic progress (Faridah, 1984). Thus, media managers not only have to exercise their judgement and pursue managerial policies to ensure viability of their business, but also have to provide public services.

Every media organisation has a policy. Policies can be defined as the consistent orientation shown by a newspaper in its editorial and news columns (Breed, 1955). Thus, journalists working in the newsroom are also expected to adhere or conform to the policy. In Malaysia, organisational and editorial policies are something journalists must learn more or less



informally. Several case studies conducted on local media organisations suggest that these policies are not clearly spelled out (Faridah, 1990; Liew, 1990). Looking from the role theory perspective, these conditions in turn make journalists more unsure of their roles.

Journalists' tasks in the newsroom can be divided between functions performed inside and outside media organisations. Although most of their news stories may be done within the confines of a newsroom, journalists involved in news gathering spend more of their time outside the organisation covering events and beats, and contacting news sources. While other tasks such as writing, editing, editorialising, re-writing, preparing headlines and identifying appropriate pages are done in the newsroom, there are also other functions that affect journalists in the newsroom such as hiring, training, firing and disciplining of journalists, evaluating and promoting, determining salary and leave options. Decisions on most of these tasks and many others concerning newsroom personnel have to be worked out by the chief editor who functions as the media manager.

Although the structure of newsrooms may differ from one newspaper to another; or from one media organisation to another, each newsroom performs similar tasks that include news evaluation, selection, editing, correcting, headline writing and placement of news and visuals. Whatever the shape and size of the newsroom, its functions remain the same across culture (Chamil, 1987).

Within the policy framework of a newspaper, the chief editor is responsible for the news contents, the operation of the newsroom and holding an inquest on news which has been missed or not satisfactorily covered (Kadir, 1987).

In the case of Malaysian newsrooms, chief editors normally hold daily meetings with their news editor, chief sub-editor and chief reporter at which the subjects and angle of editorials and lead stories for the forthcoming issue are decided. Other news are usually left in the hands of the news editor and chief subeditor, who determine the placements of selected news items according to the established editorial formula. One Malaysian national daily follows its traditional philosophy "the media will progress if the nation is progressive; journalism is stable if the nation is stable". Based on this philosophy, the newspaper organisation has opted on its own

free will to work along the roles prescribed by the establishment in order to enhance its contributions to nation building (A. Samad, 1991; Kadir, 1987).

As a result of the proliferation of media organisations, there appear to be two major consequences of organisational expansion in the newsroom: first, journalists' tasks become more specialised; and second, the control of editorial operations becomes more centralised and key decisions are placed in the hands of fewer people (Johnstone *et al.*, 1976). Such is the case in Malaysia. These conditions have led to a gradual erosion of journalistic autonomy (A. Samad, 1991).

Several studies have shown that decision-making is one organisational process that has important implications for the amount of role strain experienced by workers (Van Sell *et al.*, 1983). With this view in mind and based on findings of past newsroom researches, this paper attempted to look at the relationship between the perceived levels of role stress (role conflict and role ambiguity) among journalists and participation in newsroom decision-making.

## Method

The research problem reported in this article was to determine the relationships between the perceived level of role stress namely role conflict and role ambiguity experienced by journalists with regard to participation in newsroom decision-making. Apart from these, the paper also identified the different newsroom tasks executed in several Malaysian newsrooms by Malaysian journalists. The questions raised in this paper formed part of the questionnaires from a survey on newsroom decision-making conducted in 1994 on a total of 226 randomly selected journalists (Reporters and Subeditors) from nine media organisations centred in Kuala Lumpur.

## Findings

The descriptive data in Table 1 shows that journalists in Malaysia came from a younger age group where 82.3 percent were below 36 years old. The minimum age of respondents was 20 years old and maximum was 54 years old, and the mean age was 30.5 years. In terms of working experience, the mean was 7.3 years which indicated that the majority of the journalists had a fair amount of experience in the journalism field. The data indicate that most of the respondents (65.5

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percent) have been working in the journalism profession less than eight years.

**TABLE 1**  
Distribution of respondents by Age, Years of Experience, Educational Level and Salary

Factors	No. of respondents	%
<b>Age</b>		
25 below	50	22.1
26-35	136	60.2
36-45	32	14.2
46 above	8	3.5
Total	226	100.0
Mean = 30.5 S.D.=6.4 Min. = 20.0 Max. = 54.0		
<b>Working Experience</b>		
1 year and less	34	15.1
1.1-8	114	50.4
8.1-13.43	19.0	
Above 13.1 years	35	15.5
Total	226	100.0
Mean = 7.3 S.D. = 6.6 Min. = 1.0 Max.= 35.0		
<b>Educational Attainment</b>		
SRP/LCE	2	0.9
SPM/MCE	40	17.7
STPM/HSC	63	27.9
Diploma	68	30.1
BA/BSc	44	19.5
MA	3	1.3
Others	6	2.7
Total	226	100.0
<b>Salary</b>		
Less than RM800.00	25	11.0
801-1600	110	48.7
1601-2400	66	29.2
2401-3200	21	9.3
3201-4000	3	1.3
Above 4001	1	0.4
Total	226	100.0
Mean = 1582.6 S.D = 682.9 Min. = 400 Max = 5000		

The minimum educational level of the respondents was at the Lower Certificate of Education (LCE or SRP which is equivalent to nine years of formal education) and the maximum educational attainment was at the Masters level (an equivalent of 19 years of formal education). In terms of salary, the respondents were lowly paid; the maximum was RM5,000; while the minimum was RM400 (salary level for a staff trainee) and an average salary was RM1582.60 with a standard deviation of 682.9.

Respondents of the study were also asked in an open-ended question to list out what were the major factors which they thought could lead journalists to role stress. Out of the 226 respondents only 153 responded to this open-ended question. Table 2 shows that 36.6 percent of those responded cited deadline pressure as the major cause of stress among journalists in the newsroom.

Factors	Frequency	Percentage
1. Deadline Pressure	56	36.6
2. Lacking Support from Leaders/ Management	44	28.8
3. Job Characteristics and Demand	43	28.1
4. No Cooperation from News Sources	32	20.9
5. Heavy Work Load	30	19.6
6. Interpersonal Relations (Communication, trust)	27	17.6
7. Imbalance between Work and Income	22	14.4
8. Instruction not Clear	20	13.1
9. Lacking Ability	17	11.1
10. Physical Environment	17	11.1
11. Lacking Peer Support	16	10.5
12. Doubts about Career Prospects/ Below Expectations	16	10.5
13. Inadequate Manpower and Resources	15	9.5
14. Evaluation Criteria not Clear	14	9.2
15. Political and Governmental Involvement	14	9.2

TABLE 2  
Factors  
Leading to  
Role Stress as  
Perceived by  
Respondents  
(n=153)

With regard to decision-making on the different newsroom tasks, the aggregate mean for current practice in the newsroom was 1.62 as shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3  
Decision-  
making on  
Newsroom's  
Tasks -  
Aggregate  
Mean Data  
(n=226)

Decisions	Mean
Aggregate	1.61
1. News Suggestion	1.73
2. How to Cover	3.36
3. Length of Story	2.64
4. Editing News	1.45
5. Rewriting the News	1.81
6. Headline Suggestions	1.64
7. Time Needed to Write News	4.54
8. Page Suggestion	1.18
9. Killing a News Story	1.18
10. Positioning a Story	1.45
11. News Assignment	1.36
12. Evaluating Journalists	1.00
13. Training Journalists	1.00
14. Hiring Journalists	1.00
15. Firing Journalists	1.10
16. Promotions	1.10
17. Byline Assignments	1.10
18. Final Editing	1.18
19. Visual Suggestions	1.64
20. Long Range News Plan	1.55
21. Salary and Fringe Benefits	1.09
22. Disciplining Journalists	1.27
23. Leave Options	1.55
<p>Scale: 1 = Management make decisions                      2 = Management consults journalists,                      but management makes final decisions                      3 = Management and journalists discuss,                      and make decisions together                      4 = Journalists consult management,                      but journalists make decision                      5 = Journalists make decision,                      no management involvement</p>	

Table 3 shows that the recorded mean falls within the first category where management makes decisions and the second category where management consults journalists but makes the final decisions. The ideal state where journalists have greater autonomy in decision making is at the fourth category where journalists consult management but journalists

make the decisions and the fifth category where journalists make decisions without management involvement. Table 3 shows that the respondents had little autonomy where news tasks are concerned. The respondents had greater autonomy only in matters such as how to cover news and the time taken to write news.

However, decisions regarding the length of news story, news suggestions, editing and rewriting the news, postponing a story, visual suggestions, long range news plans and leave options involved some consultations by management with the journalists, even though the final says are in the hands of management.

The study also looked at the relationships between participation in newsroom decision-making with the two role stress variables namely role conflict and role ambiguity. Both role dimensions were measured with the original role conflict and role ambiguity scales developed by Rizzo *et al.* (1970). Role conflict was measured based on 13 items and role ambiguity, 9 items. Participation in decision-making or perceived influence was assessed using the four items from Vroom's (1959) measure of influence ( $\alpha = .83$ ) and the three items developed by Latham and Steele (1983) to measure participation in task decision. Apart from these, the scores from the 23 newsroom tasks were summated to form a summary measure of Participation in Newsroom Task Decisions. Table 4 shows the correlations between the role variables and the two decision-making constructs.

Decisions	Role Conflict	Role Ambiguity
Participation in Newsroom Decision	-.11*	-.37*
Participation in Task Decisions	-.18*	-.21*

\*One-tailed significant at .05

TABLE 4  
Correlation Coefficients between two Role Dimensions and Decision-making (n=226)

The results in Table 4 indicate that the journalists perceived themselves to have experienced higher role conflict and role ambiguity when they felt that they were not given the opportunity to participate in the process of newsroom deci-

sion-making as well as making decisions with regard to journalistic tasks that involved them.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

In terms of the profile of the respondents, the descriptive statistics in the study showed that journalism is truly a young people's profession. The typical reporter is 31 years old, with an average of 7.3 years of experience in the journalism field, holding a Diploma and getting an average salary of RM1582.60 per month, which was considered low. Based on the open-ended question, it was found that the work-income imbalance was identified by respondents as one of the factors that could lead to perceived role stress among journalists. The respondents have cited several potential factors that could lead to stress and these factors include deadline pressure, lacking support from leaders and management, job characteristics and demands, heavy work load, unclear instructions and several others.

Where journalistic task is concerned, it was found that generally respondents of the study have little say in the day-to-day newsroom tasks in which they're involved. Journalists only found some autonomy in several journalistic tasks such as how to cover news stories, amount of time spent on writing the news and determining the length of the news. Management have the final say in most of the newsroom tasks.

This paper has highlighted that factors such as participation in decision-making and participation in task decisions could affect role conflict and role ambiguity. The importance of participation in influencing role conflict and role ambiguity had provided support for Schuler's (1980) and Jackson's (1983) studies which suggested that with greater participation, employees were able to reduce grievances and differences, and hence reducing role conflict; and with greater participation employees were able to clarify certain roles and actions and thus, reducing role ambiguity.

Generally, as reported in several newsroom studies internationally (Gans, 1980; Joseph, 1982; and Gaziano and Coulson, 1988) and locally (Liew, 1990; Faridah, 1990), it is the traditional practice within the media organisations that most editorial and other newsroom decisions lie in the hands of management. The study suggested that journalists perceived a higher level of role conflict and role ambiguity with lesser participation in newsroom decision-making.



These findings implied that in order for media organisations to cope with the existing role stress experienced by journalists, it is important that some initiative and freedom of decisions be permitted among the journalists particularly in matters that affect them and their job. It is also implied that a participative environment in the newsroom, or ideally, a participative management style, could help provide a conducive work setting with lesser role stress.

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