

## **Developing T-Shaped Media Graduates: Bridging Digital Skills, Ethics and Industry Realities in Malaysia**

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### **Abstract**

There is an urgent need to reform the media and communication studies curriculum in Malaysia with greater emphasis on digital skills, ethical literacy, and practical components to produce graduates who are relevant to the demands of the digital-era industry. However, the current curriculum in Malaysian higher education remains overly focused on traditional theories and lacks sufficient attention to the practical competencies and digital literacy required by the rapidly evolving digital media sector. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the necessity for curriculum reform in media and communication education in Malaysia to ensure its alignment with technological advancements and the dynamic needs of the media industry in the digital age. This study employed a qualitative interpretive phenomenological approach, using online semi-structured focus group discussions with six purposively selected academics experienced in the media industry, and analyzed the data through thematic analysis using Atlas.ti software. The findings reveal six key themes representing the dimensions of curriculum transformation in Malaysian media and communication education: (1) industry-aligned curriculum, (2) curriculum adaptation to contemporary realities, (3) hybrid interdisciplinary curriculum, (4) digital media convergence curriculum, (5) cultivation of humanistic (soft) skills, and (6) development of T-shaped graduates. In conclusion, the outdated media and communication curriculum in Malaysia requires comprehensive reform to ensure it remains relevant, innovative, and aligned with current technological and socio-economic changes, enabling universities to pioneer new knowledge frontiers and meet the evolving demands of the digital communication landscape.

**Keywords:** Curriculum, Communication, Media Studies, Media Industry

### **INTRODUCTION**



Media and communication studies in Malaysia are currently facing critical challenges in adapting their curricula to the wave of digital transformation that is reshaping how people interact, work, and think. The rapid advancement of communication technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), the Internet of Things (IoT), Virtual Reality (VR), and social media has fundamentally transformed the global communication landscape, creating a growing demand for hybrid, analytical, and data-driven skills. This phenomenon compels higher education institutions (HEIs) to reassess their teaching strategies, pedagogical approaches, and learning outcomes to ensure that graduates remain relevant in an increasingly digital-oriented job market (The Asia Foundation, 2024). At the global level, digital transformation has driven a significant shift within the media industry ecosystem from journalism and broadcasting to advertising and digital entertainment content where interactivity, audience analytics, and user experience design now dominate (Rahman & Nor, 2021). In the Southeast Asian context, Yee (2024) highlights that the integration of AI and automation in content production has accelerated the need for reskilling among media professionals, yet academic readiness continues to lag behind the pace of industrial innovation.

Nationally, the main challenge in media and communication education lies not only in ensuring technical proficiency but also in cultivating graduates who are multi-competent and ethically grounded. Digital literacy today encompasses more than technological competence; it also involves critical thinking, social responsibility, and the ability to evaluate the authenticity of information within a digital ecosystem prone to manipulation. That holistic digital literacy is a prerequisite for developing competent and credible media practitioners, while Yee (2024) found that problem-based learning enhances reflective thinking and problem-solving skills among communication students. Therefore, restructuring the media and communication curriculum must go beyond pedagogical reform, it must be strategic, ensuring a balance between technical expertise, humanistic values, and professional ethics so that Malaysia's media and communication education remains relevant in the era of the global creative economy.

The practical dimension of media curricula also requires serious attention. Ibrahim and Salim (2023) found that media students in Malaysia still lack exposure to real-world technological training such as audience data analytics, advanced video editing, and digital content management. This issue is not unique to Malaysia but is also evident in South and Southeast Asia, where digital facility gaps and unequal educational infrastructure have created a digital divide that affects learning quality (Haque et al., 2024). These findings underscore the urgent need for curriculum reform in Malaysia's media and communication education to ensure that higher learning remains relevant, competitive, and aligned with the digital era. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the need for curriculum reform in Malaysian media and

communication programs to ensure alignment with technological developments and industry demands in the digital media age.

The digital media era has brought radical changes to the communication industry landscape, compelling higher education institutions (HEIs) to reassess the relevance and effectiveness of their existing curricula. In Malaysia, media and communication studies face the pressing challenge of adapting to technological advancements such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), big data analytics, and content automation. Despite various reform initiatives, there remains a significant gap between the skills taught in universities and the actual needs of the communication industry (Tee et al., 2024; Dooley, 2024). This issue raises a fundamental question about whether current media and communication curricula are capable of producing graduates who not only understand theoretical frameworks but also possess the technical proficiency and adaptive capacity required in the global digital creative industry revolution.

Muhammad and Hisham (2022) found that most media and communication programs in Malaysia are still rooted in conventional theoretical approaches, with limited integration of digital technologies and analytical competencies. This aligns with findings by The Asia Foundation (2024), which reported that universities across Southeast Asia also struggle to align academic content with the rapid pace of industrial innovation. Furthermore, Yee (2024) highlighted the lack of project-based learning and real-world industrial experience that could help students develop competencies in contemporary skills such as data visualization, multimedia editing, and the use of generative AI in creative content production. The limited technological integration within these programs has left many media and communication graduates underprepared for the increasingly complex and competitive job market.

Additionally, this study identifies weaknesses in multidisciplinary skill development as well as insufficient digital literacy and professional ethics training. Dooley (2024) emphasized that the creative industry now demands professionals who can combine technical, creative, and analytical dimensions within a comprehensive competency framework. However, most curricula remain compartmentalized, lacking holistic integration across communication theory, entrepreneurship, and data analytics (Rahman & Nor, 2021; Albardía et al., 2025). Infrastructure limitations and inadequate access to digital media laboratories further exacerbate this situation, as reported by Ibrahim and Salim (2023) in Malaysia and Neira et al. (2024) in Indonesia and the Philippines, where the absence of practical media facilities hampers hands-on learning. In this regard, Halpern (2024) stress that universities must not only strengthen digital competencies but also foster ethical awareness and critical media literacy to produce graduates who balance technological expertise with social responsibility.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review discusses the evolutionary development of media and communication studies in Malaysia and its connection to the rapid transformation of the digital media industry. It traces the role of higher education institutions (HEIs) in shaping a media and communication knowledge ecosystem that not only supports national development needs but also adapts to technological change and the dynamics of the global market. In this context, the paradigm shift from traditional media to an interactive, data-driven digital ecosystem has fundamentally altered how knowledge, information, and values are produced and disseminated, thereby necessitating a more agile, industry-oriented reform of communication curricula.

### Media and Communication Studies in Malaysia

Media and communication studies in Malaysia have undergone significant evolution since the 1970s, reflecting the nation's broader social, political, and economic transformation. Although the development of this field is relatively young compared to its Western counterparts, its impact on shaping Malaysia's academic and professional communication discourse has been substantial. According to Narimah Ismail (2003), early developments in the field were largely influenced by Western educational models particularly American and British traditions, which emphasized mass communication theory, journalism, and public relations. However, Malaysian scholars localized these approaches by embedding Eastern values and multicultural perspectives, thereby creating a unique academic identity aligned with the nation's socio-cultural context.

The first phase of communication development in Malaysia was marked by the pivotal role of print media, especially newspapers, in fostering national consciousness and postcolonial identity. Syed Arabi Idid (2008) noted that during this period, communication functioned primarily as a vehicle for information dissemination and a tool for promoting nationalism. Although formal academic programs in communication had not yet been established, journalists and editorial writers played a crucial role in cultivating public awareness about communication's societal functions. The country's independence in 1957 ushered in a second phase of growth, as interest in communication surged alongside the establishment of national media institutions such as *Bernama* (1968) and professional bodies like the Institute of Public Relations Malaysia (IPRM) in 1971. These developments laid the foundation for structured and professionally oriented communication education.

The third phase witnessed the academic institutionalization of communication studies with the establishment of communication departments in major public universities such as Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

(UKM), and Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) during the 1970s and 1980s. Narimah Ismail (2003) highlighted that this era marked a shift from purely technical training to an academic approach integrating research, theory, and applied practice. Academic inquiry expanded into subfields such as development communication, political communication, public relations, and intercultural communication reflecting Malaysia's evolving social structure and developmental priorities.

Entering the fourth phase, from the 1990s to the present, the field experienced extensive diversification. Academic programs now include corporate communication, organizational communication, strategic communication, digital broadcasting, and new media studies. Syed Arabi Idid (2014) observed that amendments to the Universities and University Colleges Act and the emergence of private universities such as Taylor's University, Limkokwing University, Monash University Malaysia, and Sunway University enriched the communication education ecosystem. Private institutions tend to be more flexible in adapting their curricula to market trends and technological changes, unlike public universities that operate within stricter accreditation and policy frameworks.

However, the main challenge remains aligning academic curricula with the evolving demands of the media and communication industry. Public universities are often criticized for being overly theoretical, whereas private universities, though market-oriented, are perceived to lack strong academic foundations (Nurul Aini & Muhammad Abd Hadi, 2020). This imbalance perpetuates the gap between theory and practice among communication graduates. In the contemporary context, new challenges have emerged with the advent of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (IR 4.0) and the digital creative economy, requiring educators and policymakers to rethink pedagogical frameworks and embed reskilling and upskilling elements into communication studies. As Herbst (2008) emphasized, communication curricula must be socially and technologically responsive to remain relevant and to produce graduates who are critical, creative, and ethically grounded.

In essence, over five decades of development in Malaysia's media and communication studies reveal an enduring continuum between tradition and transformation. The field now faces the imperative of advancing curricular reform that is not only academically rigorous but also responsive to the realities of the digital media ecosystem. A collaborative framework involving universities, industry stakeholders, and government agencies is vital to ensure the sustainability of communication education as a cornerstone of Malaysia's intellectual and social development.

### **Malaysia's Media and Communication Industry in the Digital Era**

The Malaysian media and communication industry is undergoing profound structural transformation driven by the rise of digital media

technologies and shifts in audience behaviour. Over the past decade, the dominance of traditional media such as television, radio, and newspapers has given way to a more dynamic, interactive, and data-driven digital ecosystem shaped by algorithms. As Yusof et al. (2022) observed, this transition represents more than a mere change in platform, it signifies an evolution in work culture, media organization structures, and communication strategies. The emergence of social media, streaming platforms, and mobile applications has reshaped the dissemination of information, making it increasingly user-generated and characterized by two-way interaction. This phenomenon compels media practitioners to be more attentive to audience behaviour, feedback, and values within the digital public sphere.

This transformation has also disrupted the traditional economic models of media organizations. From an ethical and integrity standpoint, the shift toward digital media introduces serious challenges. The proliferation of misinformation, data privacy concerns, and the overabundance of unverified content have redefined the landscape of media responsibility. Media professionals are now expected to possess strong digital literacy and a deep understanding of online broadcasting ethics. Failure to uphold these standards not only undermines the credibility of media institutions but also erodes public trust in information systems. Consequently, communication education in Malaysia must prioritize the cultivation of information evaluation skills, digital ethics, and source reliability, an approach aligned with Kamaruddin and Hamid's (2022) recommendations on media ethics and trust restoration.

The digital transformation of the media industry has had a direct impact on higher education institutions (HEIs). Universities in Malaysia are now required to ensure that their curricula align with the realities of the digital media landscape. Nurul Aini and Muhammad Abd Hadi (2020) argued that media and communication programs must incorporate new modules such as digital marketing, data analytics, and content management systems (CMS) to equip graduates with essential technical and analytical competencies. Similarly, Mohamad et al. (2021) found that graduates who possess strong digital media literacy and creative thinking skills are better able to adapt to the demands of the digital job market, particularly in areas such as content production, social media management, and strategic communication.

In this evolving context, strategic academia–industry collaboration has become vital to ensuring the employability and competitiveness of Malaysian communication graduates. Idid (2014) asserted that a symbiotic relationship between universities and industry partners must be strengthened through initiatives such as industrial training, short-term professional courses, and technology-sharing programs. Initiatives like “industry-in-classroom” implemented by local universities (e.g., UiTM and UUM) demonstrate how integrating industry professionals into academic teaching effectively bridges the gap between theory and practice. This approach enhances students’

understanding of real-world industry dynamics and better prepares them to navigate a rapidly evolving media environment.

Overall, Malaysia's media and communication industry is at a critical juncture of digital transformation. To ensure sustainability and global competitiveness, two imperatives must take precedence: first, the realignment of media and communication curricula to build a digitally skilled and creatively agile workforce; and second, the cultivation of ethical awareness and social responsibility in the use of communication technologies. Together, these priorities will ensure that Malaysia remains resilient and innovative in the face of an increasingly complex global media ecosystem.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study is grounded in two key theoretical perspectives, the Media Convergence Theory (Jenkins, 2006) and the T-Shape Graduate Theory (Karjalainen et al., 2021; Andersson, 2023), which collectively form the conceptual foundation for understanding the need to reform media and communication curricula in Malaysia. Both theories offer complementary insights into the interrelationship between structural transformations within the digital media industry and the design of higher education programs capable of producing competitive, creative, and reflective graduates.

The Media Convergence Theory, introduced by Henry Jenkins (2006), explains the phenomenon of integrating multiple communication platforms including television, film, journalism, and social media into an interactive and participatory digital ecosystem. In the context of this study, the theory provides a lens through which to understand how advancements in digital technology and the creative economy necessitate transformation in the way communication knowledge is taught and applied. Convergence occurs not only at the technological level but also within professional practices and competencies, requiring media and communication education to align with an industry environment that demands cross-disciplinary understanding, analytical acumen, and the ability to manage diverse media forms simultaneously. This theoretical lens reinforces the importance of developing a convergent curriculum that emphasizes digital storytelling, data-driven journalism, and audience analytics as integral components of modern communication training.

Meanwhile, the T-Shape Graduate Theory (Karjalainen et al., 2021; Andersson, 2023) serves as a conceptual model for defining the ideal graduate profile in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the digital economy. The theory highlights two essential dimensions of graduate competency: (i) depth, referring to specialized expertise in a primary field such as journalism, strategic communication, or media production; and (ii) breadth, referring to broad interdisciplinary knowledge across domains such as information technology, entrepreneurship, digital design, and professional ethics. Within

the context of curriculum reform in Malaysia, this theory underscores the need for a hybrid and collaborative educational approach that integrates academic theory, practical training, and real-world industry experience. The T-Shape graduate is envisioned not merely as a technically skilled practitioner but as a strategic thinker capable of synthesizing knowledge, creativity, and humanistic values to produce media content that is both innovative and socially responsible.

Together, these two theories provide a cohesive framework for analyzing how curriculum design can respond effectively to the demands of a convergent digital media environment while cultivating graduates equipped with both technical mastery and ethical intelligence, a combination essential for sustaining Malaysia's competitiveness in the global creative economy.

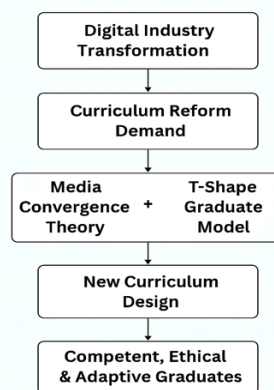


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study

Figure 1 illustrates the flow connecting changes in the digital media industry with the need for curriculum reform in communication studies. It begins with Digital Industry Transformation, which drives the Demand for Curriculum Reform. This leads to the integration of two key theories, the Media Convergence Theory (Jenkins, 2006) and the T-Shape Graduate Theory (Karjalainen et al., 2021; Andersson, 2023), combined as a conceptual foundation for designing a New Curriculum Framework. The final outcome of this process is the development of Competent, Ethical, and Adaptive Graduates who are holistically prepared to meet the challenges of the digital media industry.

The integration of these two theories provides a robust analytical framework for understanding the dynamic relationship between education and the media and communication industry. The Media Convergence Theory explains the structural and cultural transformations within the industry, while the T-Shape Graduate Theory offers the foundation for developing competency models and curriculum designs suited to the demands of the digital media era. The synergy between both theories, as shown in Figure 1, reinforces the justification for reforming Malaysia's communication

curriculum to make it more adaptive, innovative, and grounded in professional values and human ethics.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive methodology grounded in a phenomenological paradigm to explore how academics in media and communication education experience digitalisation, industrial expectations, and curriculum transformation. Phenomenology was chosen because the focus is not on curriculum as a policy text but on lived meanings negotiated by educators in their professional contexts. The study views curricular change as a human and interpretive practice shaped by institutional culture, judgement, and professional values rather than a technical reform process (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Van Manen, 1990).

Data were collected through a 90-minute online Focus Group Discussion (FGD) conducted via Zoom, guided by a semi-structured protocol that balanced thematic direction and open dialogue. The discussion served as an interpretive arena where participants exchanged reflections, challenged assumptions, and co-constructed meaning. The moderator ensured equitable participation and encouraged elaboration of critical experiences, particularly given Malaysia's hierarchical academic culture. This approach aligns with phenomenological inquiry, which values the emergence of meaning through interaction rather than predetermined frameworks.

Six educators were purposively selected based on their dual roles as academics and industry practitioners, providing rich insight into the intersection of pedagogy, institutional policy, and industrial realities. Each informant possessed more than ten years of teaching experience and professional involvement in media sectors such as broadcasting, advertising, digital content, or corporate communication. Their selection was guided by epistemic richness rather than demographic representation, recognising them as knowledge producers who have navigated the digital evolution of Malaysia's media ecosystem. This purposive sampling reflects the interpretive logic of phenomenology, which privileges experiential depth and contextual authority over statistical generalisation.

Data analysis employed a reflexive thematic approach using ATLAS.ti software. Coding was iterative and interpretive, with themes emerging inductively from participants' own language and meaning-making practices. Member checking was conducted to verify interpretive accuracy, while peer review of coding ensured analytic coherence. Saturation was determined when no new interpretive horizons appeared, confirming thematic sufficiency after the sixth informant. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review committee, and informed consent was secured from all participants. Anonymity, confidentiality, and data security were maintained throughout. This interpretive approach does not seek generalisation but aims to capture

situated meaning systems and professional experiences that reflect how academics negotiate curriculum reform in Malaysia’s evolving digital communication landscape.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis of the FGD and semi-structured interview data produced six main themes that summarize the priorities for improving the media and communication curriculum in Malaysia, namely: (i) industry-aligned curriculum, (ii) curriculum adapted to current realities, (iii) hybrid cross-disciplinary curriculum, (iv) digital media convergence curriculum, (v) development of human-centered skills, and (vi) T-Shape graduate profile. These six themes reflect an interconnected system of educational reform that integrates industry needs, academic flexibility, and human values within a curriculum ecosystem responsive to changes in the digital media landscape, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Six Core Thematic Dimensions for Curriculum Enhancement

Theme	Main Focus	Implications for Curriculum
Industry-Aligned Curriculum	Alignment of learning outcomes with labor market needs	Strengthening university–industry collaboration
Curriculum Adapted to Current Realities	Responsiveness to changes in the gig economy and Industry 4.0	Enhancing graduate employability
Hybrid Cross-Disciplinary Curriculum	Integration of communication, technology, and entrepreneurship knowledge	Producing multidisciplinary workforce
Digital Media Convergence Curriculum	Integration of broadcasting, digital, and data-driven journalism platforms	Supporting digital-first transformation
Development of Human-Centered Skills	Cultivation of values, ethics, and social empathy	Balancing technical and moral competencies
Developing T-Shape Graduates	Combination of deep expertise and broad-based knowledge	Producing flexible and reflective professionals

This Table 1 also illustrates a comprehensive and integrated framework for curriculum transformation in communication studies. It connects theory with practice, technology with values, and academia with industry within an education system grounded in relevance, flexibility, and social responsibility. Through this alignment, media and communication studies in Malaysia have the potential to become a progressive, inclusive, and competitive educational model within the regional digital creative industry ecosystem.

### INDUSTRY-ALIGNED CURRICULUM

This study found that the most critical issue in Malaysia's media and communication education is the mismatch between university learning outcomes and the actual needs of the industry, particularly within the digital creative media sector. While the theoretical foundations of communication and journalism remain strong, implementation continues to be conventional and overly classroom-oriented, lacking deep integration with practical and technological dimensions. Graduates produced under this system possess sound conceptual understanding but lack technical competencies such as digital audience analytics, data-driven marketing strategies, content automation, and proficiency in multimedia production software. This reflects a clear epistemological gap between academic instruction and real-world professional practice. These findings reinforce the view of Nurul Aini and Muhammad Abd Hadi (2020) that Malaysia's media and communication education system has yet to fully transition towards experiential learning, thereby weakening students' ability to adapt to the evolving digital market as summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Comparison Between Industry Requirements and University Learning Outcomes

<b>Industry Requirements</b>	<b>Identified Gaps</b>
Mastery of social media and data analytics	Universities remain theory-oriented rather than data-driven.
Multi-platform content production	Teaching modules remain segregated between broadcasting and digital media.
Creative project management and design skills	Limited exposure to real industry projects during student training.

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Ethical literacy and social responsibility      Not systematically assessed in learning outcomes.

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The study's findings also indicate that the issue of curriculum–industry misalignment is not merely local but aligns with global trends, where the digital skills gap remains a key barrier to communication graduates' employability. Dooley (2024) revealed that employers in the international creative media industry now assess candidates not only based on critical thinking and interpersonal communication skills but also on technical proficiencies such as data analytics, content automation, and cross-platform storytelling. This is further supported by Tee et al. (2024), who reported that more than two-thirds of media employers in Malaysia perceive university curricula as still “less relevant” to current industry practices.

Therefore, realignment between universities and industry must become the core foundation of communication curriculum development not merely a supplementary feature. Approaches such as the industry-embedded curriculum, dual training systems, and project-based assessments as successfully implemented in countries like Singapore and Thailand (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023), should serve as reference models for Malaysia. Beyond bridging the gap between theory and practice, these strategies can foster graduates who are flexible, innovative, and well-prepared to navigate rapid technological and social transformations. This relationship is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

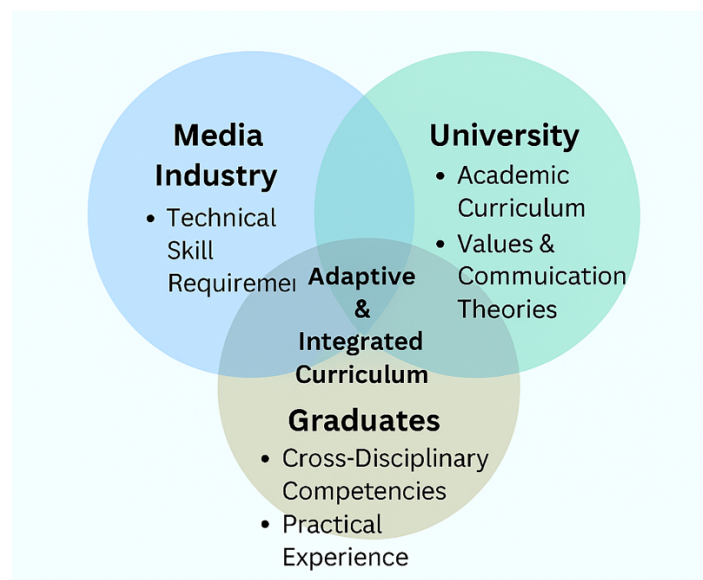


Figure 2: Industry–Academia Relationship Model

Figure 2 illustrates a synergistic relationship among the three core entities within the communication education ecosystem the media industry,

universities, and graduates. In the context of developing an industry-relevant curriculum, this figure highlights the need to align technical requirements and labor market demands (set by the industry), academic and theoretical communication values (shaped by higher education institutions), and cross-disciplinary competencies and practical experience (acquired by graduates). The intersection of these three elements produces the concept of an “Adaptive and Integrated Curriculum,” one that is responsive to the changing landscape of digital media and the creative economy. This approach not only enhances graduate employability but also ensures that communication education remains relevant, ethical, and future-oriented.

### **CURRICULUM FOR ADAPTING TO CONTEMPORARY REALITIES**

The findings also reveal that media and communication education in Malaysia must strengthen its adaptive capacity to respond to rapid changes driven by digital technology, the gig economy, and the Fourth Industrial Revolution (IR 4.0). Modern employment realities are no longer linear or based on fixed structures; instead, they demand media professionals who can operate in flexible, project-based ecosystems. Communication graduates must be prepared for a labor market that evaluates them not merely by academic qualifications, but by their ability to self-manage, build professional networks, and adapt their skills across diverse industry sectors. This aligns with the Media Convergence Theory (Jenkins, 2006), which asserts that in the digital era, the boundaries between platforms, roles, and disciplines are increasingly blurred. Technological, cultural, and economic convergence has transformed not only how media is produced but also how competencies are conceptualized. Hence, Malaysia’s media and communication curriculum must shift from a single-discipline framework to a cross-domain approach that allows students to comprehend the complex interplay between communication, technology, and society.

The study further emphasizes that curriculum flexibility should be realized through active, collaborative, and industry-situated learning approaches. Pedagogical methods such as project-based learning, problem-based learning, and experiential education help students cultivate adaptability, creative thinking, and the ability to connect communication theory with field realities. Albardía et al. (2025) affirm that in the constantly evolving digital media ecosystem, the ability to critically evaluate information and master emerging technologies is the key determinant of graduate employability. Therefore, universities must design modules that integrate media theory, technical training, and social values to ensuring that learning enhances not only technical proficiency but also ethical awareness and digital responsibility. Rahman and Nor (2021) similarly stress the importance of embedding social and humanistic values into curriculum design so that communication graduates become not just technology users, but ethical and meaningful creators of digital narratives. Ultimately, the effectiveness of

communication curricula in the digital age depends on balancing technological agility with moral maturity, consistent with the spirit of media convergence that demands harmonious interaction between humans, machines, and meaning..

### **HYBRID AND CROSS-DISCIPLINARY CURRICULUM**

The findings indicate that knowledge hybridization is a critical strategy in reforming Malaysia's media and communication curriculum to address the challenges of a complex, interdependent digital ecosystem. The boundaries between fields are increasingly blurred, as media and communication are no longer isolated disciplines, they now intersect with information technology, data science, digital design, and social entrepreneurship. Communication graduates can no longer rely solely on theoretical mastery; they must also be able to interpret audience data, manage multi-platform content strategies, and understand the innovation-driven digital economy. Mohamad et al. (2021) found that employers in media and communication industries tend to prefer cross-disciplinary candidates, as such flexibility enhances employability and creativity in problem-solving.

Within this context, the T-Shape Graduate Theory (Karjalainen et al., 2021; Andersson, 2023) provides a strong conceptual foundation, emphasizing that graduates must possess depth (specialization in communication) and breadth (knowledge spanning technology, analytics, and entrepreneurship). This model supports curriculum designs that promote faculty collaboration, cross-disciplinary project-based learning, and competency-based assessment. Beyond technical aspects, the hybrid approach also encourages the integration of humanistic and ethical values into media education. Abidin (2021) asserts that Southeast Asia's creative digital ecosystems thrive when creativity is combined with social empathy and cultural literacy. This resonates with Johori et al. (2024), who emphasize that a hybrid approach blending Islamic values with digital skills can cultivate graduates who are critical, creative, and ethical in multicultural societies.

### **DIGITAL MEDIA CONVERGENCE CURRICULUM**

The findings reveal that digital media convergence is a core pillar in reforming Malaysia's communication curriculum, in line with technological transformation and the global evolution of media ecosystems. The boundary between traditional and new media has become increasingly blurred, as journalism, broadcasting, and corporate communication now operate within the same digital space and interact dynamically. However, most higher education institutions still retain curricula structured by separated disciplines, even as the industry shifts toward multi-platform models that demand integrated skills. This supports the argument of Rahman and Othman

(2021) that Malaysian media organizations are moving toward a digital-first model, which emphasizes the creation of interactive content, real-time audience data management, and adaptive narratives across multiple platforms. Within this context, Media Convergence Theory (Jenkins, 2006) provides the conceptual foundation to explain how the integration of technology, user culture, and organizational strategy produces new, collaborative, and participatory forms of communication. Therefore, communication curricula must be designed integratively, combining technical, strategic, and creative dimensions within a learning ecosystem that mirrors the realities of converged media industries.

Within Jenkins's (2006) theoretical framework, convergence is not merely a technical process involving multiple digital channels, but also a cultural and institutional phenomenon requiring a paradigm shift in teaching and learning. Media and communication graduates must understand the interconnected relationships between media production, content circulation, and audience engagement in a digital era driven by data and artificial intelligence (AI). Hashim and Mahmud (2023) emphasize that data-driven journalism, digital storytelling, and audience analytics should be core components of professional media training. This approach not only enhances organizational efficiency but also builds analytical capacity among graduates, enabling them to assess the social and economic impact of digital content. Mhaske et al. (2025) further assert that closing the digital skills gap strengthens not only workforce competitiveness but also national cultural identity amid media globalization. Consequently, Malaysia's media and communication curriculum must be structured according to a logic of convergence that integrates communication theory, technological literacy, audience analytics, and creative narrative design so that graduates are not only technically competent but also capable strategic communicators who preserve local voices within the global digital media landscape.

## **HUMAN SKILLS DEVELOPMENT**

The findings also demonstrate that human (soft) skills remain a central pillar in cultivating competitive media and communication graduates, even in an age increasingly dominated by automation and artificial intelligence. In an algorithm-driven communication landscape, the ability to think critically, communicate empathetically, and act ethically represents the key distinction between humans and machines. Communication graduates must not only master technology but also possess moral literacy, social awareness, and reflective capacity in understanding the human implications of mediated messages. As highlighted by Kamaruddin and Hamid (2022), ethical literacy and social responsibility in media dissemination enhance audience trust toward local media and sustain institutional credibility. This aligns with Human-Centered Communication Theory (Habermas, 1984; Craig, 1999), which views communication as a social action grounded in communicative

rationality, where meaning and trust are built through honest dialogue, mutual respect, and a commitment to truth. Hence, communication curricula must strike a balance between cognitive (knowledge), affective (emotion and empathy), and spiritual (values and ethics) dimensions to produce practitioners who are not only technically skilled but also humane and principled.

The integration of human and technological skills should be a core strategy for strengthening professional integrity and adaptive capacity among communication graduates. Combining interpersonal competencies such as collaboration, leadership, and complex problem-solving with digital literacy forms the foundation of 21st-century media professionalism. However, Wiley et al. (2025) highlight the global phenomenon of "digital unpreparedness," in which graduates, despite being technologically adept, often struggle to function effectively in collaborative and ethical contexts. Therefore, Malaysian media curricula should adopt holistic pedagogical approaches such as service learning, reflective journaling, and ethics-based projects to cultivate self-awareness and social empathy. On a broader scale, Albardía et al. (2025) emphasize the need to strengthen critical media literacy and moral consciousness to build a media workforce that is both responsible and principled. Accordingly, universities should embed character education and values-driven leadership as core learning outcomes within communication programs. This human-centered pedagogical framework ensures that graduates are not merely proficient technology users but become ethical agents of social change who uphold truth, integrity, and humanity in every form of digital communication.

## **DEVELOPING T-SHAPE GRADUATES**

The findings emphasize that developing T-Shape graduate profiles represents a strategic direction for enhancing the employability and competitiveness of communication graduates in Malaysia. This concept, increasingly adopted in global higher education (Andersson, 2023; Karjalainen et al., 2021), stresses a balance between depth, referring to mastery in core areas such as journalism, broadcasting, or strategic communication, and breadth, referring to interdisciplinary understanding that includes digital technology, data analytics, interactive design, and creative entrepreneurship. T-Shape graduates are not merely specialists in a single field but are cross-functional and agile in responding to the complexities of a rapidly changing industry. Dooley (2024) found that global creative organizations increasingly prefer candidates with T-Shape competencies because they can integrate technical and human skills to solve problems collaboratively. In Malaysia, Tee et al. (2024) confirm this trend, reporting that 72 percent of employers in the media industry consider professional agility a key factor in hiring new graduates. Based on these findings, the T-Shaped Competency Model provides a relevant conceptual framework to understand

how the balance between expertise, adaptability, and professional empathy has become a prerequisite for success in the digital media ecosystem.

To realize the development of T-Shape graduates, the design of communication curricula must move toward a hybrid educational model that integrates theory, technological applications, and real-world industry experiences. Karjalainen et al. (2021) highlight that the T-Shape model can be achieved through project-based learning, work-integrated learning (WIL), and strategic university–industry collaboration. This approach has proven to increase graduate employability by up to 25 percent in universities across Europe and East Asia. Similarly, Li et al. (2024) note the success of Chinese universities that practice convergent learning with the technology sector, producing graduates who are flexible and innovative. In the Malaysian context, strategies such as micro-credential programs, dual-degree collaborations, and partnerships with technology companies should be expanded to strengthen students’ digital literacy, data analytics skills, and content strategy expertise. This model also emphasizes social empathy, professional ethics, and cultural literacy as essential pillars of media professionalism.

As Nyale et al. (2025) explain, T-Shape graduates play a vital role in bridging technology and humanity, positioning themselves as catalysts for regional digital economic innovation. Therefore, higher education institutions in Malaysia must treat the T-Shape model not merely as a competency framework but as a national educational paradigm that cultivates a new generation of strategic communicators who are creative, reflective, and ethical in navigating the future of the media industry based on knowledge and human values.

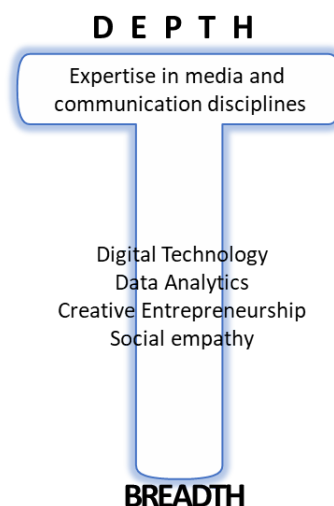


Figure 3. Dimensions of T-Shape Graduates in the Field of Media and Communication

Figure 3 illustrates the dimensions of the T-Shape Graduate in the field of media and communication through a graphical representation of the letter

“T,” emphasizing the two core components of graduate competency development. The vertical axis (Depth) represents deep expertise in core areas of communication such as media theory, ethics, and broadcasting, which form the foundation of professional knowledge and academic integrity. Meanwhile, the horizontal axis (Breadth) symbolizes complementary interdisciplinary knowledge that includes digital technology, data design, creative entrepreneurship, and social empathy. These elements are essential in responding to the dynamic and multidimensional demands of the digital media industry.

The integration of both dimensions produces graduates who are not only technically proficient but also capable of strategic thinking, innovation, and effective interaction across various professional contexts. As described in the figure, T-Shape graduates combine in-depth specialization with cross-disciplinary understanding to meet industry needs holistically and competitively, positioning themselves as adaptive and forward-thinking professionals in the evolving digital communication ecosystem.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, this study affirms that the media and communication curriculum in Malaysia must undergo a comprehensive, strategic, and integrated reform to ensure its alignment with the increasingly dynamic creative industry ecosystem. In line with the perspective of Muhamad Razak Idris (2012), an educational system that remains static and unresponsive to change will inevitably lose its relevance in the modern job market. Therefore, curriculum reform should not be limited to updating syllabi but should also involve a restructuring of educational philosophy to emphasize lifelong learning, digital literacy, and advanced human competencies. An approach grounded in industry-driven curriculum design and experiential learning must serve as the foundation for bridging academic theory with real-world market realities, thus strengthening the synergy between intellectual knowledge and practical skills within the field of communication and creative media.

This study identifies six core dimensions that should guide the development of a renewed curriculum: alignment with industry needs, adaptation to contemporary realities, hybridization across disciplines, digital media convergence, cultivation of human skills, and the development of T-Shape graduates. Future research is recommended to empirically assess the effectiveness of implementing hybrid and convergent curricula, particularly in terms of their impact on graduate employability and cross-disciplinary competency development. Further investigations should also explore the implications of artificial intelligence (AI), automation, and the Fourth Industrial Revolution (IR 4.0) on media education to ensure that Malaysia’s higher education policy remains progressive and human-centred. Through these approaches, media and communication education can serve as a core

driver for the development of creative and ethical human capital, thereby enhancing Malaysia's global competitiveness in the digital industry landscape.

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