

Foreign Correspondents' Club of China Annual Reporting Conditions Survey

Over the past year, foreign journalists have kept up robust efforts to report on significant and sensitive political, economic and cultural developments in China. Regrettably, China's government continues to harass, threaten and intimidate overseas media and their local staff in an apparent effort to shape news coverage.

The annual Reporting Conditions survey conducted by the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China and the group's review of interference incidents reported over the last 12 months sheds light on the situation.

The FCCC survey*, conducted in May 2014, found that 99% of respondents do not think reporting conditions in China meet international standards. 80% feel conditions have worsened or stayed the same in the past year – up 10 percentage points from the May 2013 survey. Not one member said conditions had improved.

Half of survey respondents with assistants said their assistants have been harassed or intimidated at least once; up from 35% in 2013 survey. One out of four respondents said Chinese authorities had put pressure on editors at headquarters in their home country over news coverage.

The FCCC's other top concerns include:

- Interference, harassment and physical violence by authorities against foreign media during the reporting process
- Attempts by authorities to pre-empt and discourage coverage of sensitive subjects
- Intimidation and harassment of sources
- Restrictions on journalists' movements in Tibetan-inhabited areas and Xinjiang
- Pressure directed to editors and managers at headquarters outside of China
- Cyber harassment and blocking of websites.

"Not just in Beijing, but also at locations across China, the authorities used plainclothes individuals to block access, intimidate interviewees and physically assault us as we attempted to report. On one occasion, a busload of such thugs arrived, escorted by police cars. The police cars then drove away and the plainclothes thugs attacked the human rights lawyers we were with. Our equipment was damaged and we had to barricade ourselves in the local government prosecutor's office and wait four hours to be rescued." -- Sky News (UK)

INTERFERENCE, HARASSMENT AND PHYSICAL VIOLENCE

About 2/3 of respondents said they experienced interference, harassment or violence while attempting to report in China. Among them, 10% -- primarily TV journalists -- said they were subjected to manhandling or use of physical force. Attempts to cover the trial of New Citizens Movement leader Xu Zhiyong in Beijing in early 2014 resulted in multiple reports of physical violence:

"In Beijing at the Xu Zhiyong trial, uniformed police prevented us from standing outside the courthouse. Plainclothes state security personnel, some wearing sunglasses, hoods and scarves, manhandled us away. I was ushered over a low wall, seriously damaging my ankle. My hand was cut and bruised as I protected my camera. Dozens of unidentified plainclothes personnel then kept us two streets away, pushing and shoving us if we tried to film or report. Later in the year I identified the individual who had pushed me over the wall. This time, he was wearing a police uniform, but on the day plainclothes personnel refused to reveal their identity. As I filmed the CNN team being dragged away into a van, my press card was ripped from around my neck. The police kept my press card for six weeks, which prevented me from reporting. Each week I was requested to attend basement meetings with the Beijing visa police. I was berated for breaking the law. I was threatened with my visa not being renewed, told that my boss would bring me home anyway and my family members also mentioned. The police asked me to write and rewrite self-criticism style confessions that I had broken the reporting rules and would not do so again in future. We had not broken any reporting laws." -- Sky News, UK

"I and several other journalists were manhandled away from the Malaysian Embassy in Beijing by plainclothes and uniformed police when reporting on the MH370 relatives' protest in April 2014." -- Calum MacLeod, USA Today

"We received rough treatment by the police when covering the dissident trials. We have also seen a rise in indirect pressure, including visits to reporters' homes by the police and requests to staff by plainclothes officers to report on our story plans." -- European News Agency

"We were attacked in Nanle County while filming a story about Christians. What is alarming is the fact that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Chinese Embassy in London genuinely seem to think that we had crossed police lines and were justifiably dealt with by uniformed police. Neither fact is correct. The men who attacked us on every occasion wore no uniform or ID – they even ripped our own ID from our necks. And on no occasion did we cross police lines. We always abide by [Chinese law.] It is they who repeatedly fail to abide by their own laws." -- Sky News, UK

For harassment and physical violence during reporting see:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-25838209>

<http://news.sky.com/story/1198942/amnesty-fears-over-trial-of-chinese-lawyer>

<http://www.cnn.com/2014/01/22/world/asia/china-activist-trial-media/>

ATTEMPTS TO PREEMPT OR DISCOURAGE COVERAGE

Before reporters even arrive on a scene, authorities are attempting to preempt coverage and discourage outlets from covering certain “sensitive” events such as the Xu Zhiyong trial or the anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen Square military crackdown.

In the weeks leading up to the 25th anniversary of the Tiananmen crackdown, some reporters

were harassed for reporting on the “sensitive” subject. Public security officers summoned a number of journalists to their office and, while videoing, lectured them about reporting related to the anniversary. Some of the journalists were warned of serious consequences should they disobey authorities. This is the first time in three years that the Public Security Bureau has summoned a large number of journalists for lectures in an apparent effort to deter news coverage. In 2011 many reporters were told to report to the PSB offices after covering attempts to organize walking protests related to the Jasmine Revolution in the fashionable downtown Wangfujing shopping area.

“We were reporting on the strict security in central Beijing ahead of the June 4th anniversary. In a span of two hours, police asked me for my documents five times. The next day two policemen came into my flat, which also serves as my office. They came with two women, who didn’t wear uniform. These women recorded my house with some mobile phones while the police asked us documentation. The police said the documentation was for internal use.” -- European broadcaster

“I was called to the Entry and Exit Bureau, and basically told this year security will be specially strict during the "sensitive period", in "sensitive areas", and with the "sensitive interviews" related to the June 4th anniversary. They asked me to convey this to the bureau chief and other journalists in our bureau. They said that this is a second warning for me personally, and if I do not abide Chinese law, I should ‘expect the most serious consequences.’” -- North American Media

"The news assistant was called by someone at the Public Security Bureau, and he told the news assistant that it was “in our best interest” that we do not attend the Xu Zhiyong trial. He said that if we did, we could not count on his “help” in the future.” -- TV correspondent

HARASSMENT OF NEWS ASSISTANTS

Half of survey respondents with assistants said their assistants have been harassed or intimidated at least once; up from 35% in 2013 survey. In total, the FCCC received reports on a total of at least 79 such cases.

"One research assistant was detained overnight and an intern was pressured to spy on us, and then forced to quit the internship when he refused to cooperate with the Public Security Bureau.” -- U.S. media organization

"Colleagues [were] visited very late at night in a hotel by the local propaganda office, and advised not to continue along a particular storyline. This happened on at least 2 stories, in different provinces.” -- European broadcaster

"After a run-in with a local city government, authorities threatened an assistant and continued to call him periodically for months afterwards, warning him not to return.” -- European media outlet

HARASSMENT OF SOURCES

Previous FCCC reports on working conditions in China have noted the official harassment of Chinese citizens who exercise their free speech rights stipulated in China's Constitution and talk with reporters. This is also a violation of Chinese government regulations stipulating foreign journalists may interview anyone who consents. Such harassment is ongoing and may be increasing. In the 2014 report, 66 incidents were reported by 39 members, which may include multiple cases of harassment of a single source. In 2013 there were 23 cases reported.

"The most clear cases that come to my mind were 1) a couple who shared with me a very sad story of a mental disturbance after being forced into an abortion; the couple was taken away by the police minutes after my interview and 2) the harassment that a group of former Chinese officials are being subjected to in Hunan province following our report on their torture and abuse during Shanggui detention." -- Sky News, UK

"As we were filming at a monastery where nuns take care of unwanted kids, officials from the local government called the nun and later showed up while we were filming, telling the nun that if she talks to us, they would take away the kids." -- Christine Adelhardt, ARD German TV

"After visiting a village for a story on family planning, all of our sources were afterwards contacted by police and state security and issued stern warnings. One source was told, "you know you can lose your life by talking to foreign journalists." -- European TV reporter

LIMITS ON TRAVEL IN TIBETAN-INHABITED AREAS, XINJIANG + ELSEWHERE

At least 42 respondents said that they were told reporting from Xinjiang (28) and Tibetan inhabited areas (14) was restricted or prohibited, which is not the case under government reporting rules. Many reporters did visit these areas and did encounter problems, such as:

"In our Kashgar hotel room, during night, people knocked at door constantly in September 2013. Three men suddenly appeared in front of door, muscular and well trained. They were constantly patrolling in front of the door; others were calling our room constantly. The men were banging on the door and pretending to try to open door." -- Angela Koeckritz, Die Zeit

"While attempting to enter Shanshan county of Turpan, Xinjiang, we were stopped at a roadblock, then later escorted out of a nearby rural area by armed police. After registering with the waiban (local foreign affairs office) we were pursued for a day by plainclothes people in a car. When we eventually tried to speak with them, a Uighur man with a pistol in a holster stepped out (while a Han Chinese man sat in the car), denied following us and then drove away. They appeared later following us again." -- European News Agency

"During a trip to Xinjiang at the end of March, police officers in Kashgar informed me that I was not allowed to conduct interviews in Kashgar - or report from there. The officers were waiting for me at my hotel - however, this only happened after I had already been out on the

street conducting interviews and I didn't encounter any problems while taking pictures and doing interviews on the street. The officers said I needed a permission from the local authorities in order to report from Kashgar. They insisted that they were only applying rules that were no different from the rest of China. In the city of Hotan, I was told by the police that I was not allowed to be there and that I had to leave." -- Martin Gøttske, Information (Denmark)

CHINESE AUTHORITIES ARE APPLYING PRESSURE OUTSIDE OF CHINA

A quarter of respondents said there was pressure applied to editors in headquarters about their coverage.

"On quite a few occasions, officials from the Chinese Embassy in Tokyo have told our editors that they were not pleased with some reports by our reporters in China. Their complaints cover a wide variety of topics, from domestic incidents such as suicide attacks in Xinjiang to international affairs including China's recent confrontations in the South China Sea with Vietnam and the Philippines. They think our reporters express too much sympathy for terrorists or Vietnam and the Philippines. The Tokyo headquarters of other Japanese media have received similar visits." -- Japanese Newspaper

"Diplomats in contacted my editor several times. They also had a meeting where the Chinese embassy sent three people including a lawyer." -- European newspaper

VISA DIFFICULTIES

In a separate survey specifically about visa issues released in March 2014, the FCCC found that Chinese authorities abuse the press card and visa renewal process in a political manner, treating journalistic accreditation as a privilege rather than a professional right, and punishing reporters and media organizations for the content of their previous coverage if it has displeased the government.

While most correspondents (89%) received their new residence visas within the 15 working days that the PSB had said would be necessary, 18% had difficulties renewing their press cards or visas – twice as many as in the last survey (covering the visa renewal process at the end of 2011.) Half of those who had difficulties said that they had been threatened with the non-renewal of their accreditation or visa because of their reporting.

Authorities withheld new press cards and visas until the very last moment from all foreign employees of the New York Times and Bloomberg, which had published articles about the private finances of relatives of leading members of the government. In the absence of any official explanation for the protracted delay in the issuance of their accreditation and visas, that delay would appear to have been intended to intimidate the bureaus concerned.

Paul Mooney, whose professional reputation largely rests on his writing about human rights issues in China, was unable to take up the offer of a post with Reuters in Beijing because he was

denied a visa in November 2013, for reasons that the Chinese authorities would not disclose.

New York Times Beijing bureau chief Philip Pan is still waiting for a journalist's visa two years after he applied for one; New York Times reporter Chris Buckley has been waiting for a visa for more than a year and a half; New York Times reporter Austin Ramzy was obliged to leave China at the end of January 2014 because the authorities had not processed the visa application which he had filed with them in June 2013.

The FCCC is disappointed that despite assurances from Foreign Ministry officials to the contrary, the Entry/Exit police refused to issue 'fast track' visas to reporters who needed to travel abroad urgently for professional reasons. The police insisted that they could not issue visas in less than 15 working days.

Except in two cases, the police issued such rapid visas only to applicants whose close relatives were seriously ill or who had died.

This meant that foreign correspondents were unable to travel abroad to work during the 15 working days that the police held their passports in order to stamp them with new visas.

This is an unacceptably long time for reporters with region-wide responsibilities to be unable to fulfill them. If the Chinese government wants foreign media to locate their Asian regional HQ's in Beijing, it should ensure that correspondents are free to travel region-wide as and when they need to.

A total of 162 foreign correspondents responded to the visa-survey, including 42 non-FCCC members.

CYBER ATTACKS/BLOCKED WEBSITES

Cyber attacks on FCCC members have become routine. Though we cannot identify the origin of these efforts to install malware and spyware on our computers, the club's cyber security consultant has found that many of the attacks are targeted deliberately at foreign correspondents in China.

The websites of New York Times, The Guardian and Bloomberg are blocked in China. The Chinese authorities target entire news organizations for intimidation and punishment especially after investigative reporting on so-called "sensitive" topics.

"After being part of the investigative team that published the "China Offshore Leaks" story the website of NDR (one of the regional broadcasters of ARD) was blocked and is still not available." -- Christine Adelhardt, ARD German TV

*About the survey: The FCCC conducts an annual survey on reporting conditions. The survey was sent to 236 FCCC correspondent members in May 2014, of whom 123 replied. Figures indicate an absolute number of responses, unless otherwise indicated. When percentages are used, they reflect all respondents to that particular questions; not all respondents answered every question.

Data may be used if credit is given to the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China (FCCC).

The FCCC is a Beijing-based professional journalist organization representing 122 news organizations from 29 countries.

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