

WORKING CONDITIONS SURVEY 2016

The reporting environment for foreign journalists is proving hostile for yet another year in China - a situation that correspondents judge to be distant from basic international standards. Intimidation of sources and local staff, growing harassment and obstruction are major challenges for journalists conducting their work.

The annual Working Conditions survey conducted by the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China finds an alarming new form of harassment against reporters, some of whom have been called into unspecified meetings by the State Security Bureau. They survey also finds an increase in use of force and manhandling by authorities against journalists performing their work.

This year, 98% of respondents said reporting conditions rarely meet international standards, with 29% saying conditions have deteriorated. Harassment, detention and questioning of sources remains worryingly common, with 26% of respondents reporting such activity, while 57% of correspondents said they personally had been subjected to some form of interference, harassment or violence while attempting to report in China.

Vast areas of the country still remain inaccessible to foreign reporters. Those who took part in government-sponsored trips to Tibet and Tibetan areas expressed mixed satisfaction about the degree of access obtained. It is still largely impossible for foreign journalists to report from Tibet, Tibetan areas or Xinjiang without incurring serious interference.

The general climate for reporting in China deteriorated over the last year, respondents said. Many denounced pressure exerted on organizations and academia, and cited growing difficulties in securing interviews with sources and experts.

Some major events have triggered manhandling and the use of force against journalists performing their work, including at the trial for lawyer Pu Zhiqiang and at demonstrations in Wukan.

The FCCC's top concerns include:

- Interference, harassment and physical violence by authorities against foreign media during the reporting process
- Calls for meetings by the State Security Bureau
- Attempts by authorities to pre-empt and discourage coverage of sensitive subjects
- Intimidation and harassment of sources
- Restrictions on journalists' movements in border and ethnic minority regions
- Staged press conferences
- Pressure directed to editors and managers at headquarters outside of China
- Surveillance and censorship

Survey invitations were sent to 200 correspondents. The FCCC received 112 responses.

INTERFERENCE HARASSMENT AND PHYSICAL VIOLENCE

Most respondents (57%) said they had been subjected to some form of interference, harassment or violence while attempting to report in China. 8% of respondents experienced manhandling or use of physical force, an increase from last year, while 26% said they had been obstructed from reporting at least once by unknown persons. One person reported the breaking of news gathering equipment.

Several secret police showed up unannounced at my apartment after waiting for me to get home "for several hours," according to my terrified doormen. They forced me to speak with them (I was on my way to the airport to a flight I almost missed) and they tried to get me to sign a document saying I would follow the rules of being a journalist in China, which of course we already agree to when we get our visa. It took a while, but they then specifically brought up Tiananmen Square (this was on or about June 2). They

wouldn't allow me to photograph the document they wanted me to sign or give me their names. I tried to record audio of the meeting but they wouldn't allow that either. They also didn't want to allow me to call anyone from my company. So I refused to sign. They then threatened that it might hurt my visa renewal process.

-U.S. broadcaster

Was shoved roughly and repeatedly by unidentified men wearing smiley face stickers while trying to cover the trial of lawyer Pu Zhiqiang in Beijing.

-Josh Chin, Wall Street Journal

In what appears to be an added form of pressure applied on foreign correspondents, 27% of respondents said they had been asked to meet with the Ministry of State Security. Respondents said the tone of those conversations has been friendly, although the questions have in some instances been of concern.

Asked to spy and report on colleagues, and could refuse in the same friendly way.

-European broadcaster

Two people came to meet me in a cafe I chose. They were interested in my ideas about the Winter Olympics, One Belt One Road and pollution. I think they were also interested in whether I have Chinese friends, and in how good my Chinese is. The second time they met me they tried to make me tell them all the stories or topics I had been writing articles about lately. The person in charge of the discussion was a lady who told me -- I asked about this -- that she is in charge of taking care of people from my country. She said the purpose of these meetings was to know the "personality and specialization and so on" of people.

- European journalist

The tone of questions was very calm, but they sometimes referred to other media outlets which they think are violating Chinese laws, and asked me to follow their rules.

-Japanese correspondent

HARASSMENT OF NEWS ASSISTANTS

33% of respondents said their news assistants had been harassed or pressured by government officials in some way, a slight increase from last year. Some correspondents reported news assistants quitting over a perceived negative reporting bias against China and the Communist Party.

Officials often target the Chinese staff. They often attempt to separate them from us, attempt to warn them that their perceived "support" of the foreign media is "un-Chinese" and sometimes threaten and verbally insult them.

-western news organization

My assistant tells me that when we go on assignments where we get obstructed either by police or unidentified elements - which is something that happens more and more frequently- she will often be asked things along the lines of, why does she want to help the foreign press and its "anti-China bias"? She has been told that by doing so she is a "traitor."

-European correspondent

After authorities became upset at some of our reporting, national security officers repeatedly contacted my assistant, forced her to go to an interview/interrogation at which I was not allowed to be present and the location of which was kept secret from me.

-U.S correspondent

I had a strange incident where an assistant who was working for me quit after some reporting related to the Cultural Revolution anniversary, saying I was too negative and he did not want to "harm his country or

his Party." I am pretty sure he came under pressure, but can't confirm it and he would neither confirm nor deny.

-western news organization

HARASSMENT OF SOURCES

Official harassment of Chinese citizens who speak to foreign reporters is a violation of these sources' constitutional rights. It also violates Chinese government regulations governing foreign journalists' work, and Chinese officials' public statements that sources will not be harassed.

However, 26% of respondents say their sources were harassed, detained, questioned or punished at least once for speaking to them. In other cases, fear of harassment has led sources to decline interviews.

In the most extreme case, a woman who talked to us about losing money to a P2P lending website was detained by police for a number of days.

-Joe McDonald The Associated Press

Our driver in Xinjiang was questioned by local officials after our trip.

-German broadcaster

LIMITS ON TRAVEL AND HARASSMENT IN MINORITY AREAS

The Tibet Autonomous Region remains unreachable for foreign correspondents outside formally-organized trips by the Foreign Ministry. However, respondents have also encountered troubles reporting in other sensitive border or ethnic minority areas.

Of those who tried to report from Tibetan-inhabited areas, 60% reported encountering problems, while 44% had trouble in Xinjiang. Correspondents have also been told reporting was restricted or prohibited in other sensitive areas, such as the North Korea border, areas around the Tianjin explosion site, and coal mining locations where protests had taken place. Restrictions have extended to officially-sanctioned trips into areas normally open for reporting.

Conversely, officials showed some openness to reporting on one trip to the TAR. Half of correspondents rated their satisfaction as three on a scale of five; the remainder were evenly split between greater and lesser levels of satisfaction. But most respondents who applied to go to Tibet were denied access.

I was surprised at the relaxed nature given that it was a government tour of Tibet

-correspondent for UK media

Was followed in Tibetan area. While there, was questioned by government officials and police who also harassed our sources, translators and driver. We were told it was a special area and that we must do what we were told while there. On the upside they did not kick us out.

-FCCC member

Went on a government-sponsored reporting trip to Tibetan Sichuan -- extremely tightly controlled, no opportunities for independent reporting

-U.S. correspondent

I would have liked to go to the Larung Gar but was told from sources that this would not be possible. It is in Sichuan and not the TAR, so should be open to foreign reporters. But this does not seem to be the case.

-FCCC member

PRESSURE OUTSIDE CHINA BY CHINESE AUTHORITIES

18% of respondents said they had seen signs of Chinese pressure on editors at their headquarters, a slight decrease from last year. Such visits have included complaints about sensitive stories, attempts to secure more "balanced" coverage and formal notes of complaint.

Visit by the head of the press department of the Chinese embassy to my editor at the foreign desk - he delivered a nearly two-hour lecture on my "biased", "not objective", "negative" reporting. Half of it was being read out from several pages of a prepared script. There was some critique of me allegedly attacking Xi Jinping. But the main line was: "Your correspondent is questioning the system." My editor has had visits like this before, including when my predecessor was in Beijing. But this time, he said, was "the crassest"

-German correspondent

Consular officials in the home city of my newspaper demanded a meeting with my editors after they became unhappy about my coverage.

-U.S. correspondent

SURVEILLANCE AND CENSORSHIP BY AUTHORITIES

Correspondents have long doubted the security of their communications and privacy where they live and work in China. This year, 85% said they worried about violations of privacy in phone calls and SMS messages, while 89% said they worried about their ability to communicate privately over the Internet, through email and Chinese social messaging applications (WeChat). Another 69% expressed concern over listening devices installed at home and at the office.

Censorship of foreign media organizations continues, with authorities blocking Internet access in China to The Economist and Time following cover articles about Xi Jinping.

Further reading [here](#).

Media outlets that continue to be blocked in China include Wall Street Journal, South China Morning Post, Bloomberg, Reuters and New York Times.

Some respondents provided concerning examples of electronic intrusions.

My laptop was hacked by someone, and a story I was writing (about the CPC) was prefaced in a new typeface by the remark: "The glorious CPC, with you always"

-western correspondent

It's clear that sources we have contacted have been harassed after our communication with them, following the bugging of our phones, etc. When in sensitive areas communication devices like Internet dongles have been blocked.

-western correspondent

We had several occasions where it became obvious to us that our offices had been "visited" over night. The point of it seemed to have been to leave us the message that we are being watched. We filed a complaint via the embassy. It has stopped so far.

-German broadcaster

"The day before G20, my email was hacked twice. WeChat and WhatsApp stopped working. I had to change all of my passwords to restart them"

--European correspondent

GENERAL CLIMATE

Respondents broadly agree that reporting conditions in China rarely meet international standards, with 50% saying this is “not usually” the case and 48% saying it is “almost never” true. Two respondents said China “usually” meets international standards.

One respondent said reporting conditions have improved, while 77% said conditions have either remained the same (48%) or deteriorated (29%), roughly in line with results from the 2015 survey. (The remainder offered no opinion, or said they had not been in China sufficiently long to judge).

The worsening in conditions includes additional pressure exerted on news organizations and mounting difficulties in securing interviews with knowledgeable sources. Such problems have also begun to extend beyond the borders of Mainland China, respondents said.

More people (mostly academics, NGOs) tell you straight up that being interviewed by foreign media is not an option. One NGO specified: 'out of self-protection'.

-FCCC member

Many old sources, particularly scholars, who have long been media-friendly, are now too scared to be interviewed. Many schools and institutions now require interviewees' colleagues to sit in on interviews to monitor what they say.

-U.S. broadcaster

"I do notice that certain sources, especially academic, seem less willing to talk, on the record or at all -- including one even in Hong Kong, which has never happened to me before."

-FCCC member

STAGED PRESS CONFERENCES

Chinese officials continue to try to manipulate media coverage by only allowing reporters whose questions are submitted and approved in advance to ask questions at important press conferences, particularly at – though not limited to – the annual National People’s Congress media availability with the Chinese premier. Chinese officials sometimes justify this on the grounds of screening out irrelevant questions.

This practice is not new, and China may not be the only one to do it, but acceding to such requirements violates standard international journalistic ethics. Some media have written policies explicitly banning reporters from submitting questions for pre-screening. Our survey found 75% of respondents do not think they should participate, down slightly from last year.

Our survey question on this topic generated more comments than any other, indicating the degree to which correspondents wrestle with an issue that heavily influences the practice of journalism in China.

I find it quite disturbing, but these are the Chinese rules. We live here and I think we have to get used to them, and try to do our best – even if we cannot have the answers we'd like.

-European broadcaster

FCCC members should not take part in pre-arranged so-called press conferences or ask pre-approved questions.

--Peter Svaar, Asia correspondent, Norwegian Broadcasting

YEAR-ON-YEAR COMPARATIVE FIGURES

| | 2016 | 2015 |
|---|-------------|-------------|
| Respondents have experienced interference | 57% | 57% |
| Respondents have experienced manhandling or violence | 8% | 4% |
| Respondents have been obstructed by unknown persons | 26% | 22% |
| News assistants have been harassed or pressured by government officials | 33% | 31% |
| Sources have been harassed, detained or questioned | 26% | 34% |
| Respondents who have tried to report from Tibet-inhabited areas have encountered problems | 60% | 75% |
| Respondents who have tried to report from Xinjiang have encountered problems | 44% | 72% |
| Respondents have received pressure on editors at headquarter | 18% | 22% |
| Reporting conditions have remained the same | 48% | 44% |
| Reporting conditions have deteriorated | 29% | 33% |