

FCCC Annual Working Conditions Report

China's importance in current affairs continues to grow, and foreign journalists' efforts to chronicle the important events and changes have kept pace. Unfortunately, getting access to the news in China is not getting any easier. Official harassment, obstruction and intimidation of foreign correspondents and their local staff remain serious problems.

Over the past year, foreign leaders and diplomats continued to raise the issue of foreign media press freedoms at the highest levels of the Chinese government, but with no detectable result. Foreign governments, meanwhile, have refrained from reciprocating by obstructing the work of the increasing number of Chinese state media journalists posted abroad.

China's Foreign Ministry has for years offered assurances that working conditions are improving and will continue to do so.

The annual Working Conditions survey conducted by the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China and the group's review of interference incidents reported over the last 12 months makes it clear what has happened and how correspondents feel about it.

96% of respondents say working conditions for foreign journalists in China almost never meet international standards. 44% say working conditions are about the same as last year, 33% say they deteriorated. None of the 117 respondents said conditions had improved.

This represents a negligible improvement over last year's survey, which found that 99% of respondents do not think reporting conditions in China meet international standards. 80% felt conditions have worsened or stayed the same in the past year – up 10 percentage points from the May 2013 survey. Again, not one member said conditions had improved.

Several egregious incidents that made headlines in the past year include:

- Authorities arrested Zhang Miao, assistant to Angela Köckritz, correspondent for the German weekly Die Zeit last October. Zhang had expressed support for pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong. Köckritz fled China after police threatened her with arrest.

- Police pointed assault rifles and shotguns at Al Jazeera correspondent Adrian Brown and his TV crew as they were covering the aftermath of violent protests in Sichuan province in May 2015. They struck Brown's cameraman, snatched away their equipment, and returned it after deleting their footage. They also jostled local officials who were accompanying the team.

Further reading on these cases:

<http://www.zeit.de/feature/freedom-of-press-china-zhang-miao-imprisonment>

<http://www.aljazeera.com/blogs/asia/2015/05/violent-protest-unfolded-china-150518145553715.html>

The FCCC's 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 border and ethnic minority regions
- Staged press conferences
- Pressure directed to editors and managers at headquarters outside of China
- Surveillance and censorship

INTERFERENCE, HARASSMENT AND PHYSICAL VIOLENCE

More than 72% of respondents reported interference or obstruction by police or unidentified individuals while reporting in China, up from about two-thirds last year. Less than 5% were subjected to manhandling or physical violence, about half of last year's total.

"While I was interviewing relatives of MH370 passengers outside the Temple of Heaven, police told me not to interview them. They briefly confiscated press cards and pushed me away from relatives. The police would not show any ID. When asked why we were not allowed to interview the relatives, a male officer said he couldn't say." -- News Agency Correspondent

"At 2:00, police escorted the reporter to an interrogation room, and locked him to a metal chair, 'for his safety'. He asked if he could make a phone call or contact a lawyer for advice, but he was not allowed to. Then he was questioned again." -- Western News Agency

"I was pushed by police (both in uniform and plainclothes police) when attempting to cover an artists' event in Beijing in support of the Hong Kong Protests in October. When I objected, my press card was taken away for 1 day." -- European Broadcaster

HARASSMENT OF NEWS ASSISTANTS

About 31% of respondents reported that their Chinese assistants have been harassed once or multiple times, down from about half of respondents in 2014. The rest either said their assistants had not been harassed (22%), they didn't know (26%), or the question did not apply to them (21%).

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

Some respondents believe their assistants quit their jobs due to pressure from authorities.

Two publicly reported cases bear mentioning. One is that of Zhang Miao, assistant to Angela Köckritz correspondent for the German Newspaper Die Zeit. She was arrested last October after participating in a demonstration in support of pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong. As this report is being written, she remains in detention. Zhang was not registered as a news assistant, as required by Chinese regulations.

The other case is the detention of Xin Jian, news assistant at Japan's Nikkei News Agency. *"Reports that her detention was connected with an interview she had conducted with human rights lawyer Pu Zhiqiang, himself now under arrest, raise the disturbing possibility that she is being punished for the routine discharge of her professional duty on behalf of her employer"*, the FCCC said in a statement at the time.

"Several cases over the past year of local staff being invited to tea with plainclothes officers -- presumably state security. They are sometimes warned off of stories and other times pressed for information about our reporting plans. And these are only the cases I know about." -- European news organization

Further reading: <http://asiasociety.org/blog/asia/interview-chinese-news-assistants-react-arrest-colleague-zhang-miao>

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, a quarter of respondents to our survey say their sources were harassed, detained, questioned or punished at least once for speaking to them.

Dutch radio and television correspondent Marieke de Vries reports that on a trip to Liaoning province last summer, one of her interviewees was dragged away, bundled into a car and driven off by 5-8 men in plainclothes. These men were "thuggish in appearance" and offered no explanation for their actions. Local officials said the plainclothesmen were "local people concerned for their elders." A convoy of seven cars full of local officials trailed Marieke and her team for the remainder of the day, making further interviews impossible.

"Several people I interviewed for a report about torture and abuses in the Communist Party's internal anti-corruption investigation system were threatened by the authorities for talking about their experiences to the foreign media. At least two of them have since been taken back into some form of custody for unknown reasons, their whereabouts unclear." -- US News Organization

“While reporting about the democracy movement and local elections, four people who had agreed to be interviewed by a journalist working for a European newspaper were hindered from doing so. One interviewee was taken from his home to another town and forced to stay there overnight. Another interviewee in the same town, whom the reporter was able to meet, was repeatedly called by police and threatened with arrest if he didn’t cooperate with them. A well-known dissident was prevented from leaving home to meet the journalist. In the fourth case, a women’s rights activist was prevented from leaving home to meet the journalist and was warned not to have contact with foreigners and not to ‘collaborate with the enemy.’” -- European Newspaper, September 24th, 2014

LIMITS ON TRAVEL AND HARASSMENT IN MINORITY AREAS

Tibet proper remains off-limits to foreign journalists. At least 42 respondents said that they were told reporting from Xinjiang (28) and Tibetan inhabited areas outside of Tibet proper (14) was restricted or prohibited, which is not the case under government reporting rules. Many reporters did visit these areas and did encounter problems.

In addition, the China-Myanmar border and Inner Mongolia were new trouble spots this year.

“I was prevented from talking to people in Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia. I was detained for several hours and ultimately escorted out of Xinjiang (to the nearest airport). I had three cars following me in Inner Mongolia, and eventually was so closely tailed and hassled we decided to leave. The validity of my press card was questioned more than once; I was told I could not report in both places without prior permission, that I needed a letter from the embassy. People we talked to were subsequently intimidated, while one was told to go indoors because a reporter was coming to the area.” -- US Newspaper

“Although Xinjiang is definitely a place where it is difficult doing any real reporting without having a long tail of security agents, I have the feeling that the line of what is sensible is becoming thinner and thinner. Even the most innocent, non-sensitive stories are now also out of reach due to the way local authorities keep shutting access or harassing sources... and there doesn't seem to be any real action from central authorities to reverse this longstanding attitude at the local level.” -- US News Organization

“During a reporting trip to Kunming last September we were followed after visiting a mosque. Police were also temporarily stationed outside our hotel as well... There was a strong police presence in the city at that time, but there were not police outside our hotel until after we arrived. They packed up when we left.” -- US Journalist

CHINESE AUTHORITIES ARE APPLYING PRESSURE OUTSIDE OF CHINA

Respondents suggest that Chinese authorities are going farther to apply pressure to foreign media management outside China, complaining about a broader array of issues. 22% of respondents said they observed signs of pressure on their editors at their organizations' headquarters.

“Last year a team from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) travelled to Xinjiang to prepare a report, crossing the province over two weeks. They were harassed by uniformed and plain clothes officers and government representatives virtually all the way. The ABC team returned to Beijing and, before the script had even been written, China's ambassador to Australia asked the Managing Director to stop the program from going to air. Representatives of China's ambassador Ma Zhaoxu went to the headquarters of the ABC in Sydney and met face to face with a representative of the ABC's Managing Director passing on the message that the ambassador would like the program to be pulled. The reason given was that this would be bad for China-Australia relations. ABC aired the half-hour documentary on the 30th of September 2014.” -- Stephen McDonnell, ABC

“After the publication of the ‘China Leaks’ files beginning in 2014 in our newspaper, Chinese embassy officials visited our headquarters to tell the editors to ‘stop attacking the Chinese nation.’ ” -- German Newspaper Correspondent

“Separately, the Chinese embassy in Berlin contacted headquarters of ARD and complained about a fictional movie ARD produced in which a Chinese diplomat was portrayed as a bad guy. They asked ARD to stop airing biased movies.” -- Christine Adelhardt, ARD

Further reading: <http://www.abc.net.au/foreign/content/2014/s4097689.htm>

VISA DIFFICULTIES

The FCCC conducted a separate survey on visa issues, as it did last year. The survey was sent to 216 FCCC correspondent members in January 2015, of whom 126 replied.

In general, the visa renewal process went more smoothly this year than last, when New York Times and Bloomberg reporters were made to wait until the last moment for their visas.

We are disturbed, however, to find that the Chinese authorities are continuing to 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.

We are especially alarmed that the Entry/Exit Police failed to respond in a timely fashion to a reporter's emergency request that they return her passport, despite her doctor's written warning that she was suffering from a life-threatening condition that required her immediate medical

evacuation to Hong Kong.

All respondents to the survey received their Foreign Ministry press cards within the stipulated 12 days, and 93% were issued with their residence visas within the 15 working days that the Entry/Exit Police had said would be necessary. By comparison, 18% of respondents to last year's survey had difficulties renewing press credentials or visas.

But ten reporters said they had been threatened with the cancellation or non-renewal of their visas, either in the course of their work or when they sought to renew their visas at the end of the year, because of the content of their reports.

Some were explicitly warned by the police that if they did not change the nature of their reporting they would not be granted a new visa.

Another reporter, who had been detained for several hours by the police in October, was issued a press card valid for only six months, instead of the usual one-year period, in a clear indication that he is "on probation" and that the extension of his press card will depend on his behavior.

It is also important to recall that The New York Times has been unable to secure visas for new resident correspondents since the paper published an article about the private finances of relatives of former Prime Minister Wen Jiabao in October 2012 that appears to have angered the Chinese authorities.

A cryptic remark in November by President Xi Jinping -- "when a car breaks down on the road, perhaps we need to get out of the car to see where the problem lies. And when a certain issue is raised as a problem, there must be a reason. In Chinese, we have a saying: The party which has created a problem should be the one to help resolve it" -- strongly suggested that the Chinese authorities would not relax its ban on New York Times resident visas until the newspaper showed some sign of contrition or apology.

This, and the warnings issued to foreign reporters in China whose work had displeased the authorities, constitute a gross and persistent breach of international standards, by which journalists' visas should be issued on the basis of professional criteria, not of their previous reporting.

The FCCC is pleased to report that 94% of visa applications by journalists intending to take up existing posts in China (replacing an outgoing correspondent) were approved within three months by the Chinese embassies concerned, and over 40% were issued in less than two months. Though this marks an improvement in an area about which the FCCC has long complained, we still believe that this process should not take longer than 30 days.

Problems persist for those who apply from abroad for J-2 visiting journalist visas. The survey found eight occasions on which journalists were obliged to abandon plans for reporting trips

because of extreme delays in the provision of J-2 visas, and we suspect that many more such cancellations occurred without our knowledge.

The standard annual press card and visa renewal process for resident foreign correspondents was even more time-consuming and onerous this year, since the Foreign Ministry took up to 12 days to issue press cards and the Entry/Exit Police then took 15 working days (three weeks) or more to issue visas in 84.5% of cases – during which time the police kept reporters' passports.

Nearly half of survey respondents said their work was seriously impeded by the requirement that they leave their passports with the police for three weeks or more. That made it impossible for them to cover major regional stories such as the Hong Kong protests, Japanese general elections, the tenth anniversary of the 2004 tsunami anniversary and the terrorist attack on a café in Sydney.

About half of the 21 correspondents who requested expedited visa procedures were granted them; half were not, in what appears to be an arbitrary and unpredictable decision-making system. But no requests for quicker visas in order to carry out professional duties abroad were granted, only those made for personal reasons.

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.

SURVEILLANCE AND CENSORSHIP BY AUTHORITIES

Authorities continue to monitor correspondents' communications, and in some cases, confiscate their reading matter. For example, police showed German newspaper Die Zeit's correspondent Angela Köckritz printouts of her own e-mails and Wechat instant messaging communications.

Authorities continue to censor foreign media's reporting in China. The English and Chinese-language websites of the New York Times and Wall Street Journal are blocked and inaccessible inside China. Bloomberg is blocked as well. When TV broadcasters CNN and BBC report on subjects the government deems sensitive, their transmissions are blocked and viewers' TV screens go black.

"It's pretty clear that our phones and emails are monitored, judging from the actions of the authorities. Two staff have reported having their homes searched this year." -- European News Organization

"The usual: strange interference with phone calls, conversations with police that indicate an usual familiarity with my private life, etc." -- US Media

"In November, 2014 a European correspondent left China after several years working for a

news agency. Before his departure, his private belongings were apparently approved to be shipped a few weeks later. He was then informed by his shipping company, after leaving Beijing, that customs officers confiscated 40 books and dozens of magazines and other documents, including print-outs of his own stories, research material, notes and other stories, mostly covering human rights and political topics. The books and documents were all deemed to contain 'political or sensitive' material, including publications in English, Chinese and Japanese. Some of the books are banned in China but others are available in bookstores – including two books in English about the Communist Party from official publishers. All of the confiscated books were either imported into China for personal use or, in a few cases, bought from official bookstores.” -- European Correspondent

GENERAL CLIMATE

96% of respondents say working conditions for foreign journalists in China almost never meet international standards. 44% say working conditions are about the same as last year, 33% say they deteriorated. None of the 117 respondents said conditions had improved.

This represents a negligible improvement over last year's survey, which found that 99% of respondents do not think reporting conditions in China meet international standards. 80% felt conditions have worsened or stayed the same in the past year – up 10 percentage points from the May 2013 survey. Again, not one member said conditions had improved.

“Social media is stricter. E-mailing is impossible with gmail and sometimes yahoo. Our servers get hit frequently. The Internet is a pain and hurts productivity. Everything is harder.” -- US Broadcaster

“It is becoming increasingly difficult to secure interviews. Even the most mundane of topics can be perceived to be sensitive. The climate is having an impact on our ability to hire and retain news assistants. We are frequently reminded of what authorities feel are the limits as to what we can and cannot report on and authorities have taken a more proactive approach warning reporters before-hand in an apparent effort - it seems - to pave the way for refusing to renew visas if they choose to do so.” -- US News Organization

“More and more people are afraid to talk to foreign media. Many of the sources we talked to in the past are already in prison or under close watch. Even to get an interview with an university professors is nowadays sometimes really hard especially if you want to talk about a sensitive topic.” -- Christine Adelhardt, ARD

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. 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 journalistic ethics. Some media have written policies explicitly banning reporters from submitting questions for pre-screening. Our survey found 80% of respondents do not think they should participate.

“This is not an acceptable procedure. This is a kowtow to the power of those we are here to question. It is farcical to play along with this particular requirement.” -- FCCC Member

*About the survey:

The survey was sent to 210 FCCC correspondent members in April 2015, of whom 120 replied. Not all respondents answered every question. Data may be used if credit is given to the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China (FCCC).

The Foreign Correspondents Club of China is a Beijing-based professional association comprising more than 200 correspondents from 35 countries and regions.

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