



Country Report

Journalists in Hong Kong

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Backgrounds of Journalists

The typical journalist in Hong Kong is a young, university-educated person who was likely to have had journalism education. Among the 471 journalists interviewed in the study, 44.9 percent were women and 55.1 percent were men. The average age of the respondents was 30.01 years old ($s=9.05$ years), and the median age is 26. Nearly nine in ten journalists had university education (88.9%), and 11.6 percent held a postgraduate degree. Another 7.4 percent held a post-secondary diploma. Besides the generally high level of education, the respondents were also likely to have been majoring in journalism or a related communication discipline: among those with a college degree, 64.7 percent of the journalists majored in journalism, 10.1 percent majored in a communication-related program other than journalism, whereas another 2.9 percent had a double major with journalism. Those without professional training constituted more than one-fourth of the sample (22.3%, including those who did not provide a valid answer to the question).

Journalists in the Newsroom

Among the interviewed Hong Kong journalists, 88.1 percent were in full-time employment, 8.3 percent were employed part-time, and 3.6 percent were interns. There were no freelancers in the sample. The journalists had worked in the field for an average of 7.31 years ($s=7.50$ years), while the median number of years working in the field is only 4.0. The Hong Kong journalistic profession is arguably rather inexperienced.

Only 45.0 percent of the interviewees indicated the beat that they focused on. It suggests that the majority of Hong Kong journalists did not focus on a specific news beat. Among those who indicated a beat, 29.2 percent chose “news/current affairs,” 25.5 percent chose “economy,” and 15.1 percent chose “politics.” Other beats were chosen by fewer than 7 percent of those who indicated that they were working on a beat. The Hong Kong journalists worked for an average of only 1.06 newsroom, i.e., working for more than one newsroom is the exception rather than the norm (4.1%); 13.9 percent of the respondents held a job outside journalism, and only 19.4 percent of the interviewees were members of a professional association.

The journalists in the sample came from daily newspapers (46.1%), television stations (31.4%), and radio stations (22.5%) only. It is due to the fact that only the three types of organizations were included in the sampling frame of the study. It should be noted that magazines focusing on news and public affairs is a rare breed in Hong Kong, and the city does not have any major local news agencies. Some of the newspapers and broadcast media organizations have online sites, but the operation of the online sites is typically integrated with the “traditional newsrooms.” Moreover, at the time of the survey, there was no stand-alone online news outlet with a significant staff size in Hong Kong. The situation changed only in 2015 when two online news outlets with more than 60 journalists each were established.

Journalistic Roles

Hong Kong journalists treated as most important the roles of monitoring and scrutinizing political leaders, reporting things as they are, monitoring and scrutinizing businesses, providing analysis of current affairs, and letting people express their views (Table 1). Given the emphasis on monitoring the power holders, “to be a detached observer” was treated as important only by slightly more than half of the respondents.

Twelve of the 18 roles included in the questionnaire were treated as important by fewer than half of the respondents. About one-third saw the advocacy role of the press as important, and about three in ten saw setting the political agenda and motivating people to participate in politics as important. The Hong Kong journalists were least likely to see conveying a positive image of political leadership, supporting government policy, providing entertainment and relaxation, and supporting national development as important roles. However, the percentage of journalists seeing the press as an adversary of the government is also low (14.4%). It indicates that the Hong Kong journalists saw themselves as an independent watchdog without being an adversary to the power holders.

Table 1: Roles of journalists

	N	Percentage saying “extremely” and “very important”	Mean	Standard Deviation
Monitor and scrutinize political leaders	465	80.0	4.09	.91
Report things as they are	465	79.8	3.99	.75
Monitor and scrutinize business	468	75.4	4.04	.90
Provide analysis of current affairs	468	69.0	3.80	.91
Let people express their views	462	65.6	3.82	1.01
Be a detached observer	460	58.7	3.57	.82
Provide information people need to make political decisions	464	49.6	3.44	1.03
Influence public opinion	464	39.9	3.24	.94
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	468	37.6	3.26	.88
Advocate for social change	460	38.3	3.17	1.04
Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience	465	35.1	3.14	.95
Motivate people to participate in political activity	460	30.7	2.98	1.09
Set the political agenda	454	30.2	2.99	1.00
Be an adversary of the government	450	14.4	2.34	1.10
Support national development	450	14.2	2.31	1.08
Provide entertainment and relaxation	464	12.9	2.46	1.02
Support government policy	458	8.1	1.90	1.00
Convey a positive image of political leadership	459	8.1	1.75	1.01
Educate the audience	—	—	—	—
Tell stories about the world	—	—	—	—
Promote tolerance and cultural diversity	—	—	—	—

Question: Please tell me how important each of these things is in your work. 5 means you find them extremely important, 4 means very important, 3 means somewhat important, 2 means little importance, and 1 means unimportant.

Professional Ethics

Hong Kong journalists are strongly committed to professional ethics. Nearly nine in 10 journalists agreed that journalists should always adhere to codes of professional ethics regardless of situation and context. But interestingly, there is also a significant degree of ethical relativism in the thoughts of Hong Kong journalists. Nearly half of the respondents agreed that what is ethical is situation-dependent. About one-third agreed that journalism ethics is a matter of personal judgment, and nearly 30 percent regarded it as acceptable to set aside moral standards if extraordinary circumstances require it.

Hong Kong journalists rarely see a set of ethically controversial reporting practices as “always justifiable.” At most, about one in ten regarded “claiming to be somebody else” and “using hidden microphones or camera” as always justified (Table 3). Meanwhile, about 60 percent of the journalists treated these two practices as “justified on occasion.” These findings are arguably consistent with the journalists’ emphasis on monitoring the political leaders and businesses, which sometimes requires investigative journalism and the use of means to uncover information not willingly divulged by the sources. The same argument could also explain the relatively large percentage of journalists finding the unauthorized use of confidential business or government documents justified on occasion.

Fewer than 7 percent of the respondents treated each of the other items as always justified. The Hong Kong journalists are least likely to find accepting money from sources and altering or fabricating quotes from sources as justified, even just on occasion.

Table 2: Ethical orientations of journalists

	N	Percentage saying “strongly” and “somewhat agree”	Mean	Standard Deviation
Journalists should always adhere to codes of professional ethics, regardless of situation and context	469	89.8	4.32	.76
What is ethical in journalism depends on the specific situation	466	48.5	3.30	1.01
What is ethical in journalism is a matter of personal judgment	469	33.7	3.01	.99
It is acceptable to set aside moral standards if extraordinary circumstances require it	443	29.1	2.87	1.00

Question: The following statements describe different approaches to journalism. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree. 5 means you strongly agree, 4 means somewhat agree, 3 means undecided, 2 means somewhat disagree, and 1 means strongly disagree.

Table 3: Justification of controversial reporting methods by journalists

	N	Percentage saying “always justified”	Percentage saying “justified on occasion”
Claiming to be somebody else	451	10.9	61.0
Using hidden microphones or cameras	444	10.1	68.7
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	447	7.2	67.3
Using re-creations or dramatizations of news by actors	400	7.5	56.8
Getting employed in a firm or organization to gain inside information	440	5.0	59.5
Making use of personal documents such as letters and pictures without permission	449	4.7	57.7
Paying people for confidential information	440	4.5	45.2
Exerting pressure on unwilling informants to get a story	425	4.7	46.8
Publishing stories with unverified content	443	4.1	30.7
Altering photographs	448	3.8	17.0
Altering or fabricating quotes from sources	462	3.5	6.7
Accepting money from sources	459	3.3	7.2

Question: Given an important story, which of the following, if any, do you think may be justified on occasion and which would you not approve of under any circumstances?

Professional Autonomy and Influences

Hong Kong journalists did not perceive themselves as having a higher degree of autonomy. Only 16.6 percent of the journalists reported that they “very often” or “always” participate in editorial coordination activities. In fact, the majority of Hong Kong journalists did not regard themselves as having complete or a great deal of autonomy in selecting stories or deciding story emphasis. Only 30.4 percent of the

respondents saw themselves as having a great deal of or complete freedom in selecting stories, with 50.1 percent reporting having “some freedom.” About one-third (33.4%) reported having a great deal of or complete freedom in determining story emphasis, while more than half (54.2%) reported having “some freedom.”

Hong Kong journalists’ perception of relatively limited autonomy is also reflected in their rating of perceived influence on their work. Among the top five influences recognized by the journalists are editorial supervisors and higher editors, managers of the news organization, and editorial policy (Table 4). These findings reflect a strong sense among the respondents about organizational constraints on their work. Nevertheless, journalism ethics remains recognized as the most important influence, while time limits completes the top five list of most influential factors.

Notably, press freedom has been a concern among journalists in Hong Kong, and local academics have emphasized how the state attempted to control the press through co-opting the media owners. In the study, owners of news organizations were regarded by 35.3 percent of the journalists as influential on their work. The factor ranks 8th in the list of 25 factors included in the Hong Kong survey. Interestingly, the item also registers the largest standard deviation among the 25 items, indicating a relatively strong disagreement among the journalists regarding how influential media owners are. Meanwhile 23.8 percent regarded censorship as influential, though only 12.9 percent saw government officials as influential. Hong Kong journalists are least likely to see business people, pressure groups, politicians, personal connections, and public relations as influential.

Table 4: Perceived influences

	N	Percentage saying “extremely” and “very influential”	Mean	Standard Deviation
Journalism ethics	461	55.3	3.53	1.05
Editorial supervisors and higher editors	468	52.4	3.50	.98
Time limits	466	49.4	3.42	.98
Managers of the news organization	462	47.2	3.37	1.06
Editorial policy	466	46.1	3.35	1.00
Your personal values and beliefs	453	40.8	3.24	1.04
Availability of news-gathering resources	453	36.9	3.10	1.10
Owners of the news organization	450	35.3	3.00	1.16
Information access	457	33.7	3.13	.95
Media laws and regulation	457	27.6	3.00	.92
Feedback from the audience	458	23.4	2.86	.96
Competing news organizations	465	22.8	2.87	.96
Censorship	453	23.8	2.76	1.04
Relationships with news sources	456	22.6	2.80	1.00
Your peers on the staff	462	19.0	2.80	.91
Audience research and data	419	14.3	2.44	1.03
Government officials	450	12.9	2.32	1.01
Advertising considerations	416	13.5	2.29	1.05
Colleagues in other media	453	12.1	2.54	.93
Profit expectations	412	13.3	2.24	1.10
Public relations	443	11.1	2.32	.97
Friends, acquaintances and family	419	11.0	2.32	.95
Politicians	449	9.8	2.26	.96
Pressure groups	445	9.2	2.22	.92
Business people	445	8.3	2.20	.93
Religious considerations	–	–	–	–
Military, police and state security	–	–	–	–

Question: Here is a list of potential sources of influence. Please tell me how much influence each of the following has on your work. 5 means it is extremely influential, 4 means very influential, 3 means somewhat influential, 2 means little influential, and 1 means not influential.

Journalism in Transition

Hong Kong journalists who had at least five years of professional experiences regarded the importance of the use of search engines as having increased the most in the previous five years, followed by the increase in average working hours and the importance of interactions of journalists with their audience (Table 5). Amidst social, political, technological changes, more than half of the experienced journalists regarded the relevance of journalism for society as having increased. At the other end, many experienced journalists perceived a decrease in time available for researching stories, the credibility of journalism, and journalists' freedom to make editorial decisions.

Experienced Hong Kong journalists also perceived the influence of social media and user-generated content (UGC) as having strengthened the most (Table 6). Probably partly due to the rise of social media and UGC, audience involvement and feedback were also regarded as having had more influence on journalism. These items were followed by competition, pressure toward sensational news, audience research, and profit making pressures. At the other end, the influence of journalism education was perceived as weakening by more than 20 percent of the journalists. Yet there are also more than 40 percent of the experienced journalists treating the influence of journalism education as increasing. Meanwhile, the largest percentage of journalists regarded the influence of ethical standards as weakening. It is also the only item on which more journalists saw as weakening than as strengthening.

Table 5: Changes in journalism

	N	Percentage saying has "increased"	Percentage saying has "decreased"
The use of search engines	189	86.2	4.8
Average working hours of journalists	188	69.1	6.9
Interactions of journalists with their audiences	188	63.3	8.5
The relevance of journalism for society	182	59.3	10.4
Technical skills	179	55.3	11.1
Having a university degree	185	37.8	9.2
Time available for researching stories	183	27.9	44.8
Having a degree in journalism or a related field	185	26.5	15.1
The credibility of journalism	184	20.7	46.2
Journalists' freedom to make editorial decisions	179	17.9	38.5

Question: Please tell me whether you think there has been an increase or a decrease in the importance of following aspects of work in [country]. 5 means they have increased a lot, 4 means they have somewhat increased, 3 means there has been no change, 2 means they have somewhat decreased, and 1 means they have decreased a lot.

Table 6: Changes in influences on journalism

	N	Percentage saying has "strengthened"	Percentage saying has "weakened"
Social media	184	81.0	2.7
User-generated contents, such as blogs	182	73.1	4.9
Audience involvement in news production	183	69.9	4.9
Audience feedback	186	64.5	5.4
Competition	181	55.8	8.8
Pressure toward sensational news	175	48.6	6.9
Audience research	172	42.4	4.1
Profit making pressures	178	39.3	7.3
Journalism education	180	41.7	21.1
Advertising considerations	175	37.1	7.4
Public relations	175	33.1	8.0
Ethical standards	187	22.5	43.3
Western ways of practicing journalism	—	—	—

Question: Please tell me to what extent these influences have become stronger or weaker during the past five years in [country]. 5 means they have strengthened a lot, 4 means they have somewhat strengthened, 3 means they did not change, 2 means they have somewhat weakened, and 1 means they have weakened a lot.



Methodological Information

<i>Size of the population:</i>	11,554 working journalists (estimated)
<i>Sampling method:</i>	Purposive quota sampling for newsrooms and simple systematic sampling for journalists within newsrooms
<i>Sample size:</i>	471 working journalists
<i>Interview methods:</i>	mail/e-mail
<i>Response rate:</i>	59%
<i>Period of field research:</i>	07/2012-09/2012