Bridging the intergenerational divide in newsrooms

By Sheo Be Ho

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Preface

Introduction

Back in the days when "working from home" was unheard of, duty editors at Singapore's Chinese language daily, *Lianhe Zaobao,* had to wait patiently till 2am for the paper to be off stone.

Between 2011 and 2015, a group of us decided to make Thursday nights special: mid-level editors and senior journalists – mostly in our 40s and each with over a decade of service – would head up to the rooftop of our office after finishing our work, creating a space to share our weal and woe.

Illuminating the otherwise dark rooftop by the glow of our mobile phones, we built camaraderie. A wine connoisseur who helmed the newspaper's Sunday wine column added a touch of sophistication to the gatherings, offering a tip or two on wine appreciation. We would pair the reds, whites, and sake with timeless snacks like *ikan bilis* (fried anchovies and peanuts).

The sense of occasion grew, and sometimes invitations were extended to foreign journalists or university academics, enriching the exchange of ideas during these rooftop sessions that lasted for an hour or two.

Although we had never intended it to become an exclusive "in-group" activity, the predominantly older age of our group raised eyebrows among some management leaders. They were worried about potential negative vibes and their impact on younger reporters. When the newspaper adjusted its off-stone time to midnight, the rooftop gatherings came to a halt.

But the impression of the creation of an "in-group" has lingered in my thoughts.

Fast forward eight years, and the dynamics in our newsroom have shifted with the entrance of Gen Z and the exit of many Boomers. Conversations about work-life balance and fairness happen on one side of the corridor; on the other, talk of discrepancies in passion and work ethic.

You might overhear a Gen X editor saying, "They simply don't have the passion we used to have!" Or a Gen Z reporter retorting: "Yeah, we are strawberries, we don't want to spend all our time at work!" [1]

Exchanges like these are a hotbed for intergenerational conflicts and a breeding ground for the creation of the in-groups we want to avoid. Which is why this project hopes to explore the tensions, drawing insights from questionnaires distributed among Gen X, Millennial, and Gen Z journalists, as well as Gen X and Millennial supervisors from *Lianhe Zaobao, The Straits Times, The Business Times, Berita Harian* and *Shin Min Daily News*, all owned by SPH Media Trust.

What do journalists think of their supervisors' expectations of them? Do supervisors and journalists see eye to eye on what matters to them at work? And, since feedback is widely seen as what the Millennials and Gen Z prefer at work, what kind of feedback best motivate them?

I have combined a literature review, questionnaire results, and interviews conducted during my three-month fellowship at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, engaging feedback from professionals in Taiwanese and a Malaysian media, too.

The goal is to shed light on the complexities of intergenerational dynamics in newsrooms, recognising that addressing these issues is vital for the well-being of the newsroom, the quality of the news product, and ultimately, the satisfaction of our readers.

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[1] Chew, H. E and Chua, V., *The Straits Times,* 19 Sep 2022, *Singapore Youth: In Defence of 'Strawberries.* Available at https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/singapore-youth-in-defence-of-strawberries 【Accessed 1 November 2023】 The older generation often describe the youth of today as "the strawberry generation", a label that carries the perception of them as easily bruised, self-absorbed, entitled, pampered, lazy and overconfident.

'Of Youth and Age': the literature

The many difference between young and old people is a subject with rich literature. As early as 1625, Francis Bacon in his essay *Of Youth and Age* explores the pros and cons of quick youthful action and slow aged consideration.[2]

"The invention of young men is livelier than that of old," he writes. "And imaginations stream into their minds better, and as it were more divinely."

On the contrary, he thinks men of age "object too much, consult too long, adventure too little, repent too soon, and seldom drive business home to the full period, but content themselves with a mediocrity of success."

His advice: it is good to employ both people of youth and age, as the rightness of one will rectify the defects of the other; the aged teach while the younger learn.

Of Millennials and Gen Z

A generation can be defined as a group of individuals born within the same historical and socio-cultural context, who experience the same formative experiences and develop unifying commonalities as a result.[3]

For the newsroom, the joint employment of young and old – specifically as Gen X takes the helm, Millennials rise through the ranks, and Gen Z joins our legions – has, in the words of Professor Lucy Kueng, created "differences between the values and priorities of many younger professionals, and an often-older generation of leaders in news", cumulating in intergenerational tensions.[4]

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[2] Bacon, F., 1625. 'Of Youth and Age', The Essays of Francis Bacon. Available at https://antilogicalism.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/essays-bacon.pdf [Accessed 1 November 2023]

[3] Mannheim, K., 1952. Essays on the sociology of knowledge. London: Routeledge & Kegan Paul. Cited in Lyons, S. and Kuron, L., 2014. Generational differences in the workplace: A review of the evidence and directions for future research. *Journal of organisational behaviour*, *35*(S1), pp. S139-S157.

[4] Kueng, L: "Handling Inter-Generational Tensions in News Media" (2020), Supplementary to Journalism, Media and Technology Trends and Predictions 2020 report. Available at https://www.digitalnewsreport.org/publications/2020/handling-inter-generational-tensions-news-media/ [Accessed 1 November 2023]

In this paper, I have used Kueng's generational definitions. She has carried out over 100 interviews, including focus groups with Millennials and Gen Zs, and with their managers.

According to her definition, generation typically spans 15 years. Millennials (also known as Gen Y) were born between 1981 and 1996. Older members of this group are already in their 40s, many are in middle management and some even in senior leadership roles, especially those in the digital areas. Gen Zs were born between 1997 and 2012, many are new entrants and talents in the newsroom.

Kueng notes that Millennials – and to a limited extent Gen Zs – are already having a big impact and this will grow, triggering a rethink of many established priorities, practices, and assumptions.

Closer to Singapore, in Malaysia, studies on Millennials in the workplace by researchers like Marlin Malek and A.R. Jaguli gained momentum when businesses realised that this cohort has unconventional expectations that affect managerial practices, and the overall workplace culture.[5]

Employee retention became a complex endeavour, leading to research by the likes of Humaira Raslie to identify factors that would ensure Millennials' long-term loyalty to their respective hiring organisations, as well as generational differences concerning workplace expectation, job satisfaction and leadership style preference – all contributing factors. [6]

When it comes to communication style, Malek notes, Millennials are eager to engage with their superiors and seek constant coaching and feedback from their mentors. They respond well to open, transparent, and frequent communication, particularly through text-messaging and social media.[7]

As for Malaysian Millennials' perspective on leadership style, Hari Krishnan Andi notes that they gravitate towards transformational leadership, meaning they expect

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[5] Abdul Malek, M. M. A., & Jaguli, A. R. , 2018. Generational differences in workplace communication: Perspectives of female leaders and their direct reports in *Malaysia. Journal of Asian Pacific Communication,* 28(1), pp. 129-150.

[6] Raslie, H., 2021. Gen Y and gen Z communication style. *Studies of Applied Economics*, *39*(1).

[7] Abdul Malek, 2018

their leaders to communicate the organisational goals clearly and consistently, and to work with them to achieve the goals.[8]

Recognising that Millennials and Gen Zs do not display job loyalty in the same way Baby Boomers and Gen X did, Raslie notes, there is an opportunity to enhance talent retention through improved communication.

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[8] Andi, H.K., 2018. Leadership Styles Preference among Millennials Workforce. *Malaysian Journal of Youth Studies,* 19, 114-134. Cited in Raslie, 2021, pp. 2-3.

Exploring dynamics: the questionnaire

To explore intergenerational dynamics in five SPH Media newsrooms, I devised three questionnaires. The first was designed for journalists, the second for supervisors, and the third for those who have left the newsroom.

Each survey contained 13 similar questions about expectations in the newsroom: the first and third asked what journalists and newsroom-leavers needed at work, the second what supervisors thought journalists wanted at work.

The inspiration

The questions were inspired by three similar studies: McKinsey Quarterly's *Great Attrition or Great Attraction,* Perrault & Tham's *What if you hate your boss? How journalists evaluate newsroom leaders*, and Coffin et al's *Feedback in an intergenerational workplace*.[9, 10, 11]

In *Great Attrition*, McKinsey finds a clear disconnect between why employers think their employees are leaving and the actual reasoning behind employees' exits. It demonstrate that employees are more likely to prioritise relational factors – including feeling valued by their manager and organisation, and having a sense of belonging. In contrast, employers are more likely to focus on transactional factors, such as adequate compensation and work–life balance.

Perrault & Tham's conference paper *What if You Hate Your Boss* conducted interviews with 36 U.S. journalists to assess their relationship with their supervisors and their perceptions of what constitutes an effective leader in journalism.

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[9] McKinsey Quarterly, September 2021, *Great attrition or great attraction? The Choice is Yours.* Available at https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/great-attrition-or-great-attraction-the-choice-is-yours [Accessed: 1 November 2023]

[10] Perreault, G.P. and Tham, S.M., 2023. *What if you hate your boss? How journalists evaluate newsroom leaders*. 2023 International Communication Association. Toronto, Canada.

[11] Coffin, J. et al. (2013) *Feedback in an Intergenerational Workplace*, SO/AN 371A, St Olaf College: Foundations of Social Science Research: Quantitative Methods [Preprint].

The authors noted that much of an individual's passion and job satisfaction is reflected by their relationship with their leader. It cites several works to this end, including:

- (Linden, et al, 2021) Newsroom leaders want and reward passion in the newsroom[12];
- (Hollifield, 2019) With passion, journalists can be asked to work at no extra cost, harder and longer. [13]
- (Ferrucci & Perreault, 2021) Journalists tend to feel more strain in their work when their work expectations require hidden, unanticipated labour, or need to integrate a new form of innovation with little or no training.[14]

Two research questions featured prominently in their in-depth, semi-structured interviews with journalists: how do journalists evaluate leadership, and how do journalists evaluate their leaders' employee expectations?

From their analysis of the journalists' answers, the writers drew three dominant themes: the first theme is communication, the second is expertise (supervisors being good at what they do), and the third deals with trust and autonomy.

Communication was an important theme that showed up in most participants' answers, however it was mentioned most frequently as a leadership skill their supervisors lacked.

With so much emphasis on the need for feedback, I wanted to incorporate questions about the type of feedback journalists want. Here, the paper *Feedback in an Intergenerational Workplace* was a great help.

This research looks at intergenerational dynamics among Millennial, Baby Boomer, and Gen X employees by surveying to alumni and undergraduate students at a small liberal arts college in the U.S. Midwest. Two hypotheses guide the study: firstly, that there exists a divergence between the type of feedback that Millennials find most

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[12] Lindén, C. G., Lehtisaari, K., Grönlund, M., & Villi, M., 2021. Journalistic Passion as Commodity: A Managerial Perspective. *Journalism Studies*, 22(12), pp.1701-1719

[13] Hollifield, C. A. ,2019. Newsroom Management. *The International Encyclopaedia of Journalism Studies*, pp.1-9.

[14] Ferrucci, P., & Perreault, G., 2021. *The Liability of Newness: Journalism, Innovation and the Issue of Core Competencies*. Journalism Studies, 22(11), pp.1436-1449.

motivating for improving work performance and the type perceived as most effective by Baby Boomers and Gen Xers. Secondly, the research postulates a distinction between how Millennials respond to criticism and praise in the workplace compared to the perceptions held by Baby Boomers and Gen Xers on Millennials' reactions to feedback.[15] The survey results validate both hypotheses, revealing statistically significant differences in the perception of feedback between the younger and older generations.[16]

The questions

Having examined the questions and insights provided by all three studies, I wanted to ask my colleagues how they gauged satisfaction at work, whether they sensed intergenerational tensions within the newsroom, what they attribute tensions to, and whether they had solutions they would like to put forward. For this reason, my questionnaire included both multiple choice and open-ended questions.

The questions measured the importance journalists place (and the importance supervisors thought journalists would place) on eight key factors of satisfaction:

- Feeling valued by supervisors or organisation,
- a sense of belonging,
- work-life balance,
- caring and trusting teammates,
- potential for advancement,
- compensation,
- doing meaningful work, and
- ability to work autonomously.

Respondents ranked these factors from 1 to 8 (most to least important), with results tallied and expressed as a percentage of the total number of respondents (23 journalists and 22 supervisors). This approach aimed to discern whether there were any differences between the perspectives of journalists and their supervisors regarding job satisfaction.

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[15] Coffin, J., McGivern, S., Underwood-Price, L., Xiong, S. and Zander, H., 2012. Feedback in an intergenerational workplace.
[16] Ibid.

Are journalists (spanning across generations from Gen X to Millennials and Gen Zs) of the opinion that their supervisors' expectations are reasonable? Conversely, do supervisors believe their expectations align with what journalists deem as reasonable? Recognising the importance of this aspect, I included a specific question about expectations in my questionnaire.

The response

In all, 25 journalists and 24 supervisors responded to my questionnaire. Among journalists, the bulk (44%) were Millennials, 28% Gen Zs, 20% Gen Xs, while 8% preferred not to identify with a generation.

On the part of supervisors who responded, 50% were Gen Xs, 33% Millennials, while 17% preferred not to identify with a generation.

SPH Media employs over 1,000 editorial staff, meaning these results should not be considered representative (4.9%). However, they do offer some interesting insights. I offer them here, grouped thematically by:

- Job satisfaction: journalist need vs supervisor perception
- The weight of work: journalist expectation vs supervisor assumption
- Motivating factors: journalist preference vs supervisor provision
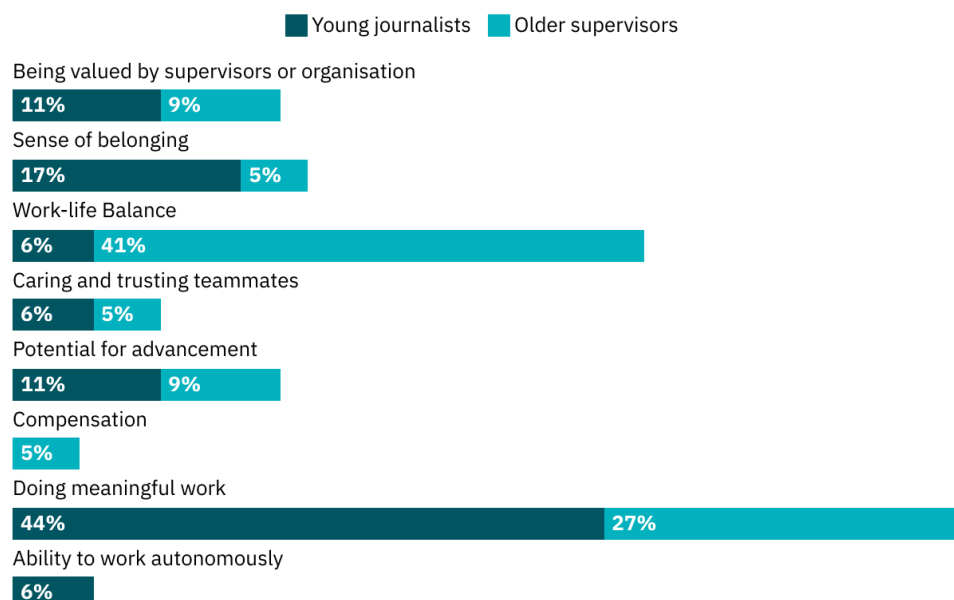- Intergenerational tensions identified

Job satisfaction: journalist need vs supervisor perception

- Journalists were most likely to rank "doing meaningful work" as an important factor in job satisfaction (44%)
- Supervisors expected journalists were most likely to list "work-life balance" as the most important factor (41%)

Drawing inspiration from the McKinsey survey, my questionnaire asked journalists to rank eight factors that contribute to job satisfaction in order of importance, and asked supervisors to predict how journalists would rank the factors.

A caveat here: due to a fault in the questionnaire design, first responders were only able to select one factor. Through much nudging, 23 out of the 25 journalist responders, and 22 out of the 24 supervisor responders were willing to resubmit their rankings.

Factors affecting job satisfaction: younger journalists' needs versus older supervisors' expectation of need

Young journalists   Older supervisors

Being valued by supervisors or organisation
11%   9%

Sense of belonging
17%   5%

Work-life Balance
6%   41%

Caring and trusting teammates
6%   5%

Potential for advancement
11%   9%

Compensation
5%

Doing meaningful work
44%   27%

Ability to work autonomously
6%

How young journalists ranked factors that affect their job satisfaction, and how older supervisors thought their journalists would rank the factors.

As can be seen in the graphic on the previous page, "Doing meaningful work" emerged as a paramount priority for journalists, with 11 out of the 23 respondents selecting this option. Of the 23 journalist respondents, three out of five (60%) Gen Xers identified it as the most important factor, and eight out of 18 Millennials (44%).

By contrast, among the supervisors who responded, nine out of 22 (41%) believe younger reporters would prioritise "Work-life balance". In fact, only one journalist chose work-life balance as the most important factor.

This disparity highlights a potential gap in understanding between journalists and their supervisors, emphasizing a need for further exploration into the factors that contribute to job satisfaction across different age groups in the newsroom.

One might argue that journalists responding to the questionnaire were saying what they thought their bosses would want to hear. Here, our survey of journalists who have left SPH Media serve as a helpful control group, because they have no incentive to please former bosses. Of six former colleagues questioned, 50% regarded "Doing meaningful work" to be most important, one treasured "Ability to work autonomously", another "Compensation", while the last opted for "Sense of belonging".

It is worth noting here that, in the McKinsey survey, "Doing meaningful work" was a factor of relatively lower importance to employees. That SPH Media journalists prize it highly warrants further exploration.

In follow-ups, I asked journalists what about their work they consider to be "meaningful". Does their definition extend beyond traditional journalistic tasks? For example, through involvement in the company's corporate social responsibility programmes or audience engagement projects?

One Millennial journalist told me there were two aspects to meaningful work in their view: "Functionally, my work should lead readers to reflect on issues, it should also be something that no one is writing about; personally, there should be space for growth."

A Gen X journalist told me: "I guess, to me, it is to serve the public interest in some way." He said he wanted to communicate "folk's voices and Singapore's position to the world."

The least important factors determining job satisfaction among respondents to my questionnaire were "Compensation" (0%) and the "Ability to work autonomously" (6%). I hypothesise that journalists who are early in their career are more likely to value input from supervisors with experience, and less likely to seek job satisfaction from robust compensation.

It is important to note though that while journalists did not specifically rank compensation as an aspect of job satisfaction in this question, in a later question and in subsequent follow-ups, many did express that adequate pay was a key factor in keeping them motivated.

Finally, unlike the McKinsey study, which found employees were likely to rank "Valued by manager" as more important to employees than employers appreciated, my journalist and supervisor respondents were fairly aligned in how important they felt being "Valued by supervisors and organisation" was (11% of journalists, 9% of supervisors). However, as with the McKinsey study, supervisors (5%(did not appreciate how highly journalists ranked "Sense of belonging" (17%).
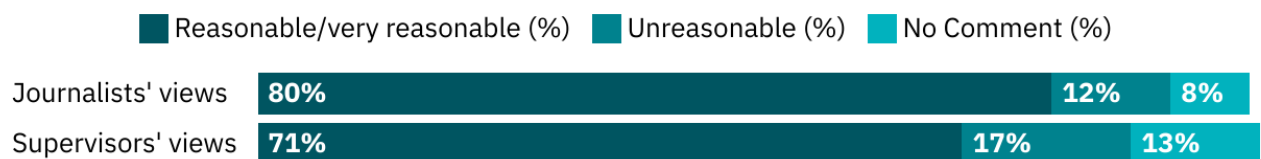
The weight of work: journalist expectation vs supervisor assumption

> "They have changed my job scope and their expectations for it constantly (changed) for the past year, and they do not have satisfactory answers when rookies ask about progression or transfers out of the desk." – Gen Z journalist respondent

Comments like the one above may be what supervisors like me were expecting to hear from journalists: journalistic work is not easy.

In fact, three out of 18 journalist respondents (12%) perceived supervisors' expectations of them as unreasonable. By comparison, 80% of journalists found their supervisors' expectations to be "reasonable" (76%) or "very reasonable" (4%).

How reasonable are job demands: journalists' view vs supervisors' expectation

Reasonable/very reasonable (%) Unreasonable (%) No Comment (%)

	Reasonable/very reasonable (%)	Unreasonable (%)	No Comment (%)
Journalists' views	80%	12%	8%
Supervisors' views	71%	17%	13%

Journalist and supervisor sentiment about whether the demands of the job were reasonable were fairly aligned, as graph shows.

Supervisors' perceptions of whether Millennial and Gen Z journalists would find their expectations reasonable, was fairly aligned: 71% of 24 respondents believed that younger journalists would consider their expectations reasonable.

In follow-up questions for the four supervisors who anticipated journalists would perceive their expectations as unreasonable, three suggested as reasoning that journalists lack passion for the work.

One supervisor predicted that journalists would cite work-life balance as a reason for rating their expectations unreasonable.

When framing follow-up questions about why journalists might find their expectations unreasonable, I intentionally only provided supervisors with the option "journalists today do not have the same passion as we did".

Among the journalists who reported supervisors' expectations unreasonable, one respondent gave as reasoning an "uneven distribution of workload in the newsroom" as the primary concern, while another felt that supervisors did not adequately respect work-life balance.

Among the control group of seven journalists who have left the newsroom, it's noteworthy that only one respondent felt supervisors' expectations were unreasonable. This individual commented that the supervisors lacked awareness of the workload already shouldered.

A similar sentiment was expressed in the conference paper *What if you hate your boss*, which noted: "[...] When journalists did not feel their supervisor's labour expectations were realistic, they often connected that to a lack of knowledge. At times, this lack of knowledge was about the job of their employees – as one participant put it, 'I don't think they realise just everything that goes into my job'."[17]

With the benefit of hindsight, I note that future questionnaires should ask respondents why they think supervisors' expectations are reasonable.

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[17] Perreault, G.P. and Tham, S.M., 2023.

Motivating factors: journalist preference vs supervisor provision

- Journalists expressed a diversity of thought around what motivates them at work, with significantly more being motivated by pay than their supervisors expected (28% vs 8%).

- The vast majority of supervisors (58%) thought journalists would be most motivated by mentoring, while only 44% of younger journalists selected this option.

The most significant disparities between journalists' needs and their supervisors' perception of need manifested in respondents' answers to questions about motivational factors at work.

Here, I drew inspiration from a hypothesis that *Feedback in an Intergenerational Workplace* put forward and asked journalists what factors best motivate them at work, while supervisors were asked what factors they thought best motivates journalists.
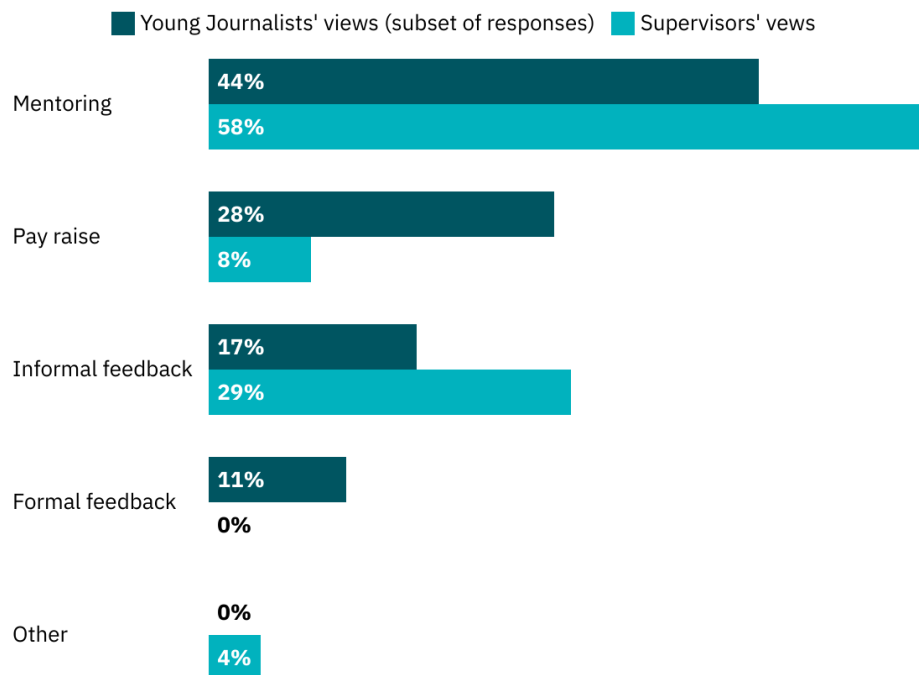
More than a third of all journalist respondents expressed that they are best motivated by mentoring, 24% leaned towards a pay raise and informal feedback, while 16% preferred formal feedback.

A more detailed breakdown isolated responses from the 18 youngest respondents to reveal that almost half (44%) consider mentoring as the most motivating, 28% prefer a pay raise, and the remaining 28% were divided between informal and formal feedback. (See graphic representation on next page.)

Meanwhile, of the five journalists who identified themselves as older Gen X, two preferred informal feedback, one was for formal feedback, while one preferred a pay raise, and another opted for mentoring.

The diversity of responses to motivational factors underscores the need for nuanced management of individuals: a tailored and personalized approach may be necessary to best motivate different members of a team and foster a supportive and effective feedback culture within the newsroom.

Which of these factors is most likely to motivate you?

■ Young Journalists' views (subset of responses) ■ Supervisors' vews

Mentoring
44%
58%

Pay raise
28%
8%

Informal feedback
17%
29%

Formal feedback
11%
0%

Other
0%
4%

*Graph reflects subset of views collected from younger
journalists, and how supervisors thought journalists would respond*

By contrast, most supervisors (58%) thought journalists would be best motivated by mentoring, 29% thought they would want informal feedback, and only 8% thought a pay raise would be the best impetus. None of the supervisors who responded mentioned formal feedback, compared to 11% of young journalists sampled.

The case for mentoring as a motivator

Mentoring is defined as a positive and influential interpersonal relationship between two employees, in which a senior employee advises and coaches a new employee.[18]

Informal feedback comes in the form of verbal delivery, it can be affirmations or praise of work done well or effort put into work, or regular encouragement.

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[18] Allen, T.D. and Eby, L.T. eds., 2010. *The Blackwell handbook of mentoring: A multiple perspectives approach*. John Wiley & Sons. Cited in Coffin, J., McGivern, S., Underwood-Price, L., Xiong, S. and Zander, H., 2012. Feedback in an intergenerational workplace.

Performance reviews or appraisals are key methods to deliver formal feedback in the workplace.

In 2019, Signe Ivask conducted a two-month study in Estonian newsrooms to evaluate feedback and coaching.[19] She found that newsrooms there lacked constructive feedback, and recommended coaching as a solution.

In *Coaching For Performance*, John Whitmore wrote: "People often confuse coaching with mentoring or use these terms synonymously, but they are not the same. The difference is that coaching is used as a tool for helping to learn rather than teaching or directing; it requires expertise in the techniques of coaching. Mentoring, on the other hand, emphasises passing down knowledge and skills from one individual to another."[20]

In other words, feedback shares information about the journalist's past performance, mentoring hands down information about the supervisor's past experience, and coaching prompts a journalist in real-time by offering a set of tools to find their own answers.

Praise, criticism, or a combination?

In my 20 years as a journalist, I have observed that praise is scarce in the newsroom: excellent reporting work is usually only recognised through formal awards. To test my sense that journalists might be motivated by more praise, I included a question asking journalists whether they preferred praise, criticism, or a combination of both.

Among journalists, 96% chose a combination of both, while a single Gen X respondent chose praise alone. No one chose criticism. Supervisors were split in their expectation: they thought 50% would want praise alone and 50% a combination of praise and criticism. No one thought criticism would be preferred.

This indicates another profound difference between journalists' need and the perception of their need.

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[19] Ivask, S., 2019. Communication between editors and reporters: Feedback and coaching in Estonian dailies' newsrooms. *KOME: An International Journal of Pure Communication Inquiry*, *7*(1), pp.24-41.

[20] Whitmore, J., 2010. Coaching for performance: growing human potential and purpose: the principles and practice of coaching and leadership, London/Boston: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, pp. 9–15.

Intergenerational tensions identified

- Asked if they thought intergenerational tensions existed, 67% of journalists said yes and 83% of supervisors.
- Asked to identify the cause of tension, journalists and supervisors were fairly aligned in pointing towards digitalisation and lack of communication.

Out of 24 supervisors asked whether there were intergenerational tensions in the newsroom, 20 (83%) said "yes". Only three (13%) did not think there were such tensions, while declined to comment on the question.

One supervisor gave three examples of intergenerational tensions they have observed in the newsroom:

"A fellow Millennial colleague recently fussed about being considered "too young" by an older colleague, which clearly upset her.

"In the past, there was an unwritten rule in my newsroom that holidays should not exceed two weeks. Recently, I came across fresh grad colleagues who took exceptionally long holidays of three to four weeks in a nonchalant way.

"In the past, editors or sub-editors would call journalists to clarify facts late into the night. As a Millennial supervisor, I have received feedback from young colleagues that they find this process too disruptive to their personal lives. They would rather editors/sub-editors look up press releases and speeches themselves since the materials are available in digital form [nowadays]."

On the part of journalists, 17 out of 25 (68%) who responded thought there were intergenerational tensions in the newsroom.

Do intergenerational tensions exist in your newsroom?

|	Yes	No	No Comment
Journalists	68%	28%	4%
Supervisors	83%	13%	4%
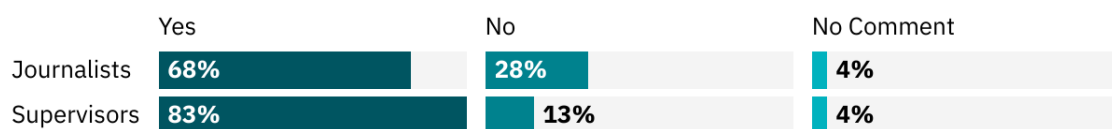
Graph shows significant disparity in belief that tensions exist

Interestingly, although only 17 journalists responded that they felt there were tensions, 20 opted to give me reasons for why tensions exist. (The same number of supervisors who felt there were tensions.)

Both journalists and supervisors were fairly aligned on the potential causes of intergenerational tensions: 70% of journalists and 67% of supervisors pointed to a lack of communication, and 65% of journalists and 62% of supervisors said digitalisation efforts have exacerbated tensions in newsrooms.

What is the cause of intergenerational tension?
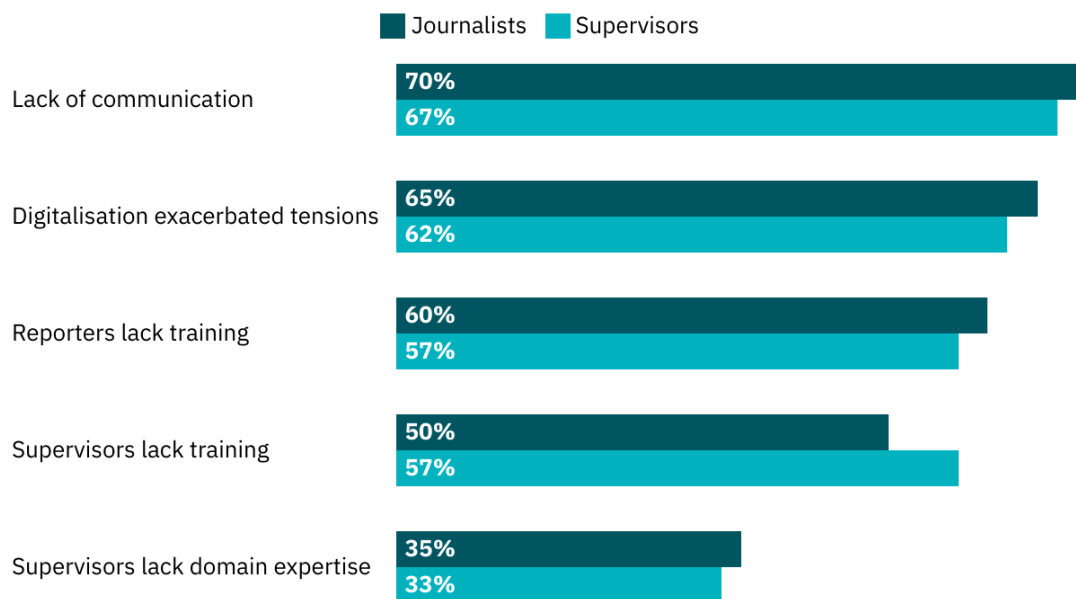
Journalists and supervisors are aligned in what they believe to be causes of intergenerational tensions in the newsroom

The digitalisation challenge

In the open-ended comments provided by respondents to elaborate on the perceived tensions in the newsroom and potential solutions, a predominant theme emerged: a heightened challenges arising from digitalisation.

Respondents noted the evolution of storytelling in the digital space, highlighting the need for a departure from traditional methods. Many journalists expressed perplexity with what they perceived as a lingering "print-centric" mindset among their supervisors, emphasising the challenges posed by this misalignment in adapting to the changing landscape. I reproduce some of these comments below.

"I think there needs to be greater efforts to reconcile the expectations of supervisors whose experiences were shaped in an older newsroom with the challenges that reporters face now in the light of a 24/7 news cycle and increasing digitalisation. Without attempts to hash out modern-day experiences and limitations, it seems that supervisors will continue [to] have unrealistic expectations that burn out reporters who are already doing their best."
– *Gen Z journalist*

"I think intergenerational tensions are most evident when it comes to stories. How journalism was 20 years ago and now can be different – in terms of how newsy the stories are, how stories are perceived in the digital space [...] among other factors. This can lead to discrepancies in ideas and expectations. In this sense, I think that communication is key. There could be more discussions on what kind of journalism and stories we are shifting towards and perhaps the decisions behind story ideas. It also helps when different generations interact in the newsroom often and understand one another better." – *Gen Z journalist*

Gen Z journalists were not alone in lamenting the print mindset of supervisors. Their Millennial peers mentioned more of the same:

"When [a] newsroom is transiting to digital-first approach, reporters and photographers might [need to] spend more time taking footage for social media use, however given the tight [print] cut-off time to meet, [...] print news tasks have to be done first. This might result in different expectations by different supervisors. [...] I think a 'common goal' has to be set by the whole newsroom, and all colleagues in the newsroom [have to] follow it no matter what challenges may come. Consistency creates better workflow." – *Millennial journalist*

"For one, the supervisors say they want more multimedia content but they're not willing to invest the time and money into creating an ecosystem that encourages more of such content. Instead, reporters are told to work on projects with insufficient time and resources to produce quality content. This is partly due to a lack of understanding of what is required to produce multimedia work. So both supervisors and reporters should be given more training to produce better work for our audience." – *Millennial journalist*

Supervisors noted rifts stemming from the impact of digitalization, too. One expressed concern that assigning the same individuals to handle both print and digital products has resulted in increased workload and competing demands. Another noted resistance from older colleagues when implementing changes, as well as a tendency of younger colleagues to take an "all or nothing" attitude to traditional approaches.

It was clear from both sets of comments that the "middle ground" in the newsroom needs to be recalibrated.

When supervisors are learning and adapting to new tools, roles, and workflows, it can impede effective supervision. As one supervisor put it: "Younger colleagues may feel that their supervisors know less than them in terms of digital storytelling and journalism practices," thereby intensifying tensions.

However, not everyone characterises the intergenerational differences as tensions. A senior editor prefers to frame them as differences in the pace of adopting new work processes and technologies. She remains optimistic, asserting that such differences can be bridged through a shared willingness to learn and seek help – values applicable to both the young and old.

Communication, communication, communication

Continuing on from the digitalisation theme, one Millennial journalist noted that new technology meant less physical facetime – communication is done mainly through emails or chat. "Text may not deliver the correct tone and lead to misunderstandings," they said.

The same journalist thought there should be more bonding activities:

> "The newsroom is too hectic and does not have enough social interaction time. Interaction during lunch is too rushed and usually limited to small group due to different work schedules." – *Millennial journalist*

Supervisors had a lot to say about communication, too. Several pointed to the need for regular, structured communication. To quote them:

> "The older generation feel that they are being left behind and what they used to do is no longer recognised or as useful in the newsroom. [...] More interaction on a

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> "daily basis is always helpful. Creating opportunities for both sides to interact is useful too - the older generation can pass on their skills and knowledge and the younger generation can help with the digital aspect of things." – *Supervisor*

> "Pockets of time to communicate, formally and informally can be encouraged and planned into the proper workflow." – *Supervisor*

> "Communication can only be improved when all stakeholders are really keen [on] this, especially those in the management level. There should be a change in organisational culture from top down in the first place. Regular internal briefings, newsletters can be considered; team leaders should be given time to do 1 to 1s with staff; have a mentor-mentee system; managers can consider hold weekly 'communication time' for staff to approach them, and organisation should give middle management such time to do these." – *Supervisor*

> "Senior management should interact more (formally or informally) with the reporters and hear their voices, answer, and clarify any questions. Most importantly, we should explain the bigger picture to them." – *Supervisor*

Work-life balance

The COVID-19 pandemic ushered in irreversible changes to work arrangements; chiefly, the realisation that physical presence in the newsroom may not be non-negotiable. While some supervisors felt that working from home should not be considered an entitlement for reporters of all ages, a journalist argued that if supervisors neglect the importance of work-life balance, it can lead to burnout and diminished motivation, ultimately resulting in job dissatisfaction.

Supervisors, too, acknowledge the need to address disparities in views on work-life balance and general work attitudes. A Millennial supervisor specifically highlighted the need for enhanced communication regarding policies and expectations related to flexible work arrangements.

Training

Apart from training for supervisors in the effective use of tools like Zoom and Teams, there was also a suggestion that supervisors receive training to help them understand the perspectives and priorities of younger employees.

Indeed, while many individuals in the newsroom became supervisors due to their excellent reporting skills, excelling in reporting does not translate to effective managerial skills. Supervisors must undergo training to provide constructive and meaningful feedback.

Morten Frich, a former RISJ fellow, noted in his paper on feedback the paradox of leaders, who are themselves high achievers, not being disposed to give feedback. "They tend to be impatient with everything that distracts them from the real work of getting from A to B. But their real job is not just to plan, manage time and projects; it's also to manage people – to ask for feedback and give feedback."[21]

> "There's [...] a need to assess newsroom editors' management skills, even include 360 evaluations. [...]" – *Millennial supervisor*

But there may be a problem with the "more training" suggestion:

> "Training content is usually not translated into practice, mainly because I think the newsroom does not have such a culture. If day-to-day work is packed to the brim, , training ends up as a 'luxury' activity that people are unwilling to participate in. If it's all talk then it's hard. – *Millennial supervisor*

Swedish public broadcaster, Sveriges Television (SVT) did it the hard way. It held two or three-day training programmes for 190 leaders at all levels, 80+ workshops attended for some 450 staff focused on goals, roles, responsibilities, and training in how to give and receive feedback. It established structures that allow scheduled regular feedback or coaching for everyone in the whole organisation. This is being

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[21] Frich, M., April 2022. How to implement a feedback culture in your newsroom, Journalist Fellowship Paper, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Available at https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/how-implement-feedback-culture-your-newsroom [Accessed: 2 November 2023]

followed up by "360 Feedback Survey" to monitor the improvement of quality of leadership on every level.[22]

Despite several comments indicating potential gaps in supervisors' digital skills (which may contribute to a widening divide between them and younger reporters), none of the respondents mentioned digital training for supervisors.

I would suggest that while supervisors may not need to be digital experts, possessing a foundational understanding of the components involved in creating digital content is essential. Keeping abreast of various presentation formats, such as explainers, videos, podcasts, and so on, is seen as valuable for supervisors, allowing them to better guide and collaborate with the younger generation of reporters in the evolving digital landscape.

The values gap?

In the words of one Millennial supervisor:

> "It's impossible to totally remove the generation gap and tension. We should accept that people all grew up differently and have very different life and work expectations. [But we could] try to bring in different generations to the management team […] to encourage diversity in opinion." – Millennial supervisor

Another Millennial from the control group, who has left the newsroom, said they felt differing values was the underlying cause tension and called for formal feedback mechanism:

> "My observation is that intergenerational tension is more often driven by differences in values and approach to news strategies rather than merely due to digitalisation efforts — for example I do observe that older colleagues […] are embracing change when it comes to adapting to new content platforms. Conflicts and disagreements arise mainly because of differences in how one feels about news treatment — younger generation of news professionals may want to try new formats or presentations but are told by older colleagues not to break away from the traditional mould or sometimes it is hard to break the dynamics dominated by more traditional hierarchies and legacy leadership. At the same time, due to a lack of experience, younger reporters may not feel as empowered to question

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[22] Kueng, L., 2020, p.14.

> traditional or old ways of doing things. At the heart of the issue is a lack of formal mechanisms for such feedback to come through." – *Millennial, former employee*

Media researcher Lucy Kueng echoes this viewpoint. While senior management draws up strategies, middle managers implement them. These managers in the middle of organisations face a different leadership challenge, Kueng said: "Those heading teams, units or departments need to know how to lead as well as how to do their 'day job'. This is new. Occupants of these roles often rose to them after successfully managing the news agenda, not managing people."[23]

Rooftop days: informal and formal outreach opportunities

Thinking back to the rooftop days, I included a question to see if there was any resistance to multiple generations coming together for a meal in a social setting. A substantial majority of 18 journalists (72%) said they have meals with colleagues, including supervisors. Six individuals (24%) dine with colleagues outside their age group, but exclude supervisors. Only one Gen X journalist mentioned abstaining from having meals with colleagues from a different age group.

Among supervisors, 83% said they dine with colleagues from different age groups, including with journalists, and none dined exclusively with supervisors from different age groups.

Socialising is only one way to build a "sense of belonging" or "meaningful work" among highly value-driven Millennials and Gen Zs. As Keung said: "If you can't ensure speed to leadership, you can create speed to impact. Create pathways to connect the bottom of the organisation with the top – via shadow boards, reverse mentoring schemes, regular lunch meetings. The goal should be that they can raise concerns, but also bring their ideas to those at the top."[24]

Lianhe Zaobao offers a series of audience engagement and community outreach programmes that provide opportunities for younger journalists to interact with their leaders. These initiatives include community service endeavours ("Sending Warmth"), and an annual vote to select a Chinese character that best sums up the year's events. "Reading Along with You" is an initiative that allows journalists to

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[23] Kueng, L., 2020., p.8.
[24] Kueng, L., 2020, p.33.

leave the newsroom with colleagues to read and explain news stories to the elderly.[25]

Ms Han Yong May, Executive Editor at *Lianhe Zaobao*, when asked about challenges facing older journalists in a "digital-first" age, said: "Embracing digital technology is no easy feat. For those who can't, there are still white space opportunities. They can perhaps be a guide of a cultural trail or a wine connoisseur who dines with readers."

A note of caution about relying on extra-curricular activities to build bridges: they must be actively supervised by higher management. Without proper oversight, journalists balancing these efforts with their "day jobs" may find the additional burden overly challenging.

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[25] Started in September 2014, "Reading Along With You" highlights a couple of important news for the week for readers 50 years old and above, at two locations (an active ageing centre and a public library). Some 22 reporters and editors are involved. The programme is so successful that policy makers have been using it to explain important policies.

Lessons from elsewhere

In May 2023, key players at Sin Chew Media Corporation, Malaysia's leading Chinese language media entity, were sparring over the supremacy of "traffic" and "content."

The clash unfolded publicly when the deputy executive editor of *Sin Chew Daily*, the corporation's long-standing newspaper, openly criticising digital colleagues for their blind pursuit of web traffic. By contrast, the editor overseeing *Pocketimes*, the corporation's online video platform, advocated for a focus on capturing audience attention in an era of widespread news avoidance.

I was eager to hear how much of this clash was fuelled by intergenerational differences, and spoke off-the-record to a digital media practitioner. She told me: "While content was king in the past, our current emphasis is on being audience-centric, particularly as we navigate the realm of subscriptions. The difference in news treatment reflects the distinct perspectives of two generations."

In an era saturated with so many information channels, she said, quality content alone is not enough. It must translate into tangible value for audiences to justify their financial investment. "We've progressed beyond short video clips and explainers; now, we're exploring reels and TikTok. Adapting to the times is imperative."

Shifting media strategies, remote work, and work-life balance have all prompted older supervisors to grapple with questions of discipline and management style there, she said. She now engages in regular communication with younger team members, holding monthly discussions on their career development, gauging satisfaction with their work, and helping in building professional networks. This proactive approach aims to bridge the generation gap and foster a collaborative and adaptive newsroom culture.

Digitalisation has not exacerbated intergenerational tensions in all Asian newsrooms. In the newsroom of Taiwan's United Daily News (UDN), staff embarked on a transformative journey after releasing a Digital Transformation Report in 2008.

Over the years, the department underwent multiple phases of organisational restructuring, witnessing the evolution of processes, products, and personnel.[26]

In its most recent phase of reform, the UDN Group focused on fostering public engagement in critical issues, leveraging both its online platform and traditional print newspaper. In November 2020, it officially introduced vip.udn.com, a subscription-based model. Beyond offering curated news stories of the day and premium content, the VIP service provides readers with valuable insights and exclusive scoops.

Leaders of the project said the age of staff was not a determining factor in receptivity to all of these changes. Instead, it revolved around individuals' ability to embrace data-driven approaches.

Amelie Lin, manager of UDN Group's data development department, said the new subscription model initially led to a decline in click-through rates, prompting some veteran journalists to question the change. The key in change management, Ms Lin noted, was helping veterans to see valuable metrics beyond just "clicks" – such as engagement, completion rates and sharing. Helping journalists understand the impact and resonance of their work in the digital landscape was key, she said.

Understanding where new value lay resulted in a shift in work habits for veteran journalists. Merely translating articles was no longer sufficient, as readers could simply extract the title of a paid article to seek similar digital content for free. Instead, journalists realised they had to diversify their sources and craft authoritative op-eds to captivate readers.

Lin Yi-chun, another leader in the data development work, challenges the notion that age is a limiting factor, emphasising that everyone, irrespective of seniority, wants their work to be seen. Collaborating with the data team gave journalists deeper understanding of who wanted to see their work, when and how. Many senior writers, dissatisfied with brief breaking news, willingly invested extra effort in creating well-crafted pieces that showcase their expertise.

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[26] The News Department: 10 Years of Digital Transformation. https://udn70.udn.com/digital-transformation/en

Both interviewees observe that journalists in their 50s, possessing extensive professional knowledge and broader networks, often outperform their younger counterparts once they overcome the initial resistance to the new model.

The adoption of the reader revenue model also fostered greater collaboration between different specialists to offer unique depth to readers (for example, a political journalist collaborating with an arms specialist on a single in-depth news story), leading to a better diversity of perspectives.

Conclusion

While this paper highlights numerous disparities between what journalist say they want and what supervisors think they need, there was a notable convergence in their views on what might be causing intergenerational tensions in the newsroom.

If we can agree on the problems, there is hope that we can find collective solutions to such tensions.

Gaps made evident in journalists' need will require attention, namely: the significance of monetary reward to younger journalists, and the necessity of formal feedback channels.

Supervisors, for their part, can take confidence in the finding that a higher proportion of journalists find the expectations placed on them to be reasonable.

Younger journalists and their more experienced supervisors both identified a communication deficiency and acknowledged that digitalisation has exacerbated intergenerational tensions. They collectively called for more openness to diverse opinions, stressing the importance of actively listening to varied perspectives rather than dismissing them.

There was a shared acknowledgement that we might foster more empathy among all age groups and make space to understand each other's viewpoints and priorities.

Perhaps that space might come in the form of informal interactions between newsroom leaders and journalists – like the rooftop gatherings of old. But, this time, ensure that they are bottom-up inclusive initiatives aimed at bridging the generational gap. And involve senior management: putting them in the hot seat to answer questions from different generations.

Both journalists and supervisors expressed a desire for improved communication and increased feedback. While informal channels may be beneficial, there is a case to be made for structured and regular communication.

Should SPH Media, or any other newsroom, look to replicate this research with a bigger sample, I offer some notes on execution. Including clearer definitions of terms used in the questionnaire would have prevented ambiguity. Additionally,

conducting in-depth interviews alongside the questionnaires might have provided richer insights.

Fortunately, open-ended answers were incorporated into the questionnaire design – particularly around mitigating intergenerational newsroom tension – allowing many respondents to generously share their perspectives.

The intergenerational tensions explored here are not unique to SPH Media – or even to Singapore. Counterparts in Malaysia and Taiwan have also faced challenges associated with digitalisation.

Any media organisation that looks to engage in this conversation instead of shying away from it will reap the benefits of a newsroom that can bring together – not put aside – their differences to best serve evolving audience needs.

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