

# **BEYOND THE COMFORT ZONE: WESTERN JOURNALISTS IN THE NEWSROOMS OF SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA**

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August 2019

Michaelmas, Hilary Terms 2018-19

Sponsor: Thomson Reuters Foundation

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work would not have been possible to pursue and complete without the help and support of many people. First of all, I would like to thank my supervisor and distinguished colleague **Caroline Lees** with whom I discussed this project thoroughly and who guided me with her good ideas, wise suggestions and deep sensitivity.

**Meera Selva**, the Director of the RISJ Fellowship Programme has made this report much more focused and better readable through her sharp questions and several inputs.

**Olga Rodak** of the Koźmiński University in Warsaw greatly helped to sharpen my initial research questions and design. **Polly Curtis**, former editor-in-chief of the HuffPost UK and a senior editor at the Guardian, and **dr Chris Westcott**, director at the Ridgeway Information and former head of the BBC Monitoring, contributed their precious comments and shared invaluable observations. Those who have worked as correspondents in different parts of Asia: **Joe Cochrane**, **Benjamin Doherty**, **Marc Edwards**, **Duncan Hewitt** and **Niva Whyman** shared their vast experience from both Asian and European outlets.

Special thanks are due to all the interviewees, including **Claire Anthony**, **Simon Duncan**, **Jack Ellis**, **Jacob Goldberg**, **Clare Hammond**, **Ben Kritz**, **Kevin McSpadden**, **Victoria Milko**, **Todd Ruiz**, **Craig Ryder**, **Robert Stevens**, **Francis Wade**, **Walter Wuthmann** and those who participated but, for various reasons, cannot be named.

Finally, I would like to thank my sponsor, the **Thomson Reuters Foundation**, whose engagement and generous support made it possible for me to spend two academic terms in Oxford, whole the marvelous team at the **Reuters Institute**, particularly **Philippa Garson**, who have created a friendly and intellectually stimulating atmosphere and, last but not least, **the brilliant journalist fellows** at the Institute from Michaelmas and Hillary term 2018-2019 who helped me to refine many ideas and made whole the stay in Oxford truly memorable.

# INTRODUCTION

## **i) Goals and objectives**

This study is aimed to outline a profile of a Western<sup>1</sup> journalist who have worked in the newsrooms of the selected countries in South and Southeast Asia. <sup>2</sup> It is to capture their interactions with host organisations, the challenges they face, the skills and expertise they develop and finally determine the possible implications for the global practice of journalism.

### **There are three research questions:**

- (1) What are the main challenges in expat journalists' daily editorial and reporting work, what new skills, knowledge and expertise do they develop?
- (2) How do local and expat journalists influence each other?
- (3) How and in which areas can these experiences be used to improve the global practice of journalism and how can they help other industries?

### **The broader goal of the study:**

- (1) To provide the first, explorative profile of a Western expat journalist in selected Asian markets, outline their skills, strategies, challenges and dilemmas.

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<sup>1</sup> In this study, Western media practitioners have been defined as those both educated and trained in liberal democracies, holding citizenship of at least one of the listed countries and territories (see 'Methodology' below).

<sup>2</sup> For stylistic reasons, such media professionals will be called in various passages of this report 'expat journalists', 'interviewees', 'expatriates' etc.

## ii) The context of the research

The wider relevance of this study goes well beyond its scope. In the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a new trend has unfolded in the already globalised news world. Namely, international migration of media professionals on an unprecedented scale. Among them, a number of Western journalists decide to leave their previous jobs and seek life changing experiences in cultural circles other than their own, particularly in Asia. The phenomenon has been enhanced by the post-2008 global financial crisis, decline of print media, fast economic development of many Asian countries and the consequent shift of the world centers of power (Khanna, 2019).

It is not only the expanding Chinese media industry<sup>3</sup> that is hiring foreigners in large numbers. The same is happening elsewhere on the largest continent. There have been important news outlets recruiting foreign industry insiders in **Cambodia** (for instance *Cambodia Daily* and *The Phnom Penh Post*) and **Indonesia** (such as the *Jakarta Globe*). There is a number of news organisations employing English speaking staff in **Myanmar** and **Thailand**, in **Malaysia** and **Singapore**. They are also present, although to a much lesser extent, in **Sri Lanka** and the **Philippines**. According to the HSBC 2017 Expat Explorer report, foreign employees of the ‘marketing, media and creative’ sector play a particularly large role in **Hongkong** and **Taiwan**. A relatively small handful of Western reporters and managers work for **Indian** media.

Newspersons in many Asian countries perform their work in circumstances greatly differing from those in Western democracies, in the context of limited freedom of expression, unavoidable risk of self-censorship, increased surveillance and harassment (see Chapter 4).

A tiny minority of Asian states rank high in the **2019 Press Freedom Index** (Taiwan, 42, being the highest-ranked on the continent, followed by South Korea).

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<sup>3</sup> Notably such organisations as the CGTN, CCTV, ICS, China Radio International, The Global Times, South China Morning Post and the Sixth Tone.

China, still the most populous state on Earth, that often blocks media material considered sensitive and bans some means of communication (i.a. WhatsApp and Facebook) ranks 177/180. Singapore, the promised land for international expats with heavily controlled press, 151.

The press in these countries do not always function as government watchdog. It often becomes a tool of strategic communication and propaganda or simply serve national agendas. For this reason, joining news organisations controlled by undemocratic regimes has increasingly become a problem in the industry and some of those who had joined have later decided to quit for ethical and political reasons.<sup>4</sup>

But most of the day-to-day issues faced by expatriates comes – as this study will show – from cultural differences. Westerners and Easterners often do not think, act or run their media in the same way and these differences are deeper rooted than most researchers dare to admit.<sup>5 6</sup> This researcher only raises one aspect of this vast matter: the journalism cultures (see the literature review and Chapter 3).

Challenges faced by journalists working in the studied newsrooms (such as: lack of access to certain online resources, limited communications, and difficulties with protecting their sources), often force reporters to develop new abilities.

In undemocratic and non-Western contexts and hostile legal systems, journalists still play a vital role in everyday lives of societies as – according to some media scholars – journalistic roles in political domain might include, aside of the critical and advocative one, also the analytical-deliberative, informational-instructive, collaborative-facilitative and developmental-educative one (Hanitzsch 2018).

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<sup>4</sup> [https://archives.cjr.org/the\\_water\\_cooler/dave\\_marash\\_why\\_i\\_quit.php](https://archives.cjr.org/the_water_cooler/dave_marash_why_i_quit.php)

<sup>5</sup> Nisbett (2004) argues that scientific rationality based on forward reasoning from axioms and strong ontology is essentially Western, drawn from ancient Greek intellectual tradition. Asians in turn, base their reasoning on ancient Chinese tradition and see the world in holistic terms. Easterners see objects in relation to their environments, while Westerners look at things in analytic terms, see objects as separate from their environments and events moving lineary. According to Nisbett, they tend to see fewer objects and fewer relationships between them.

<sup>6</sup> See also: David Robson. BBC Online. 2017. *How East and West think in profoundly different ways*. Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20170118-how-east-and-west-think-in-profoundly-different-ways>

The author of this study, who had previously worked as a journalist in Europe, has been himself further trained in a news organisation in New Delhi and has worked as a foreign correspondent in South and Southeast Asia for a number of years. Thus the personal interest in the topic.

The literature review has shown a significant gap. While various journalistic cultures (i.a. those in Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea and China) have been studied by researchers (Hanitzsch, 2011, Weaver, Willnat et al., 2012), and some aspects of interactions between Western and Eastern practitioners of journalism have been looked at (Mughtar and Hanitzsch, 2013), not a single English study on expat journalists in Asia has previously existed and this gap needed to be filled. Expat reporters, editors, anchors, producers and other media professionals working in the largest continent form a growing group, therefore understanding their perspective and perceived roles will be important for the global practice of journalism and shedding light on the future of this craft.

### **iii) The literature review**

**Journalism cultures and various roles of journalists.** Hanitzsch (2007) defines a journalism culture as ‘a particular set of ideas and practices by which journalists legitimate their role in society and render their work meaningful.’ These ideas and practices differ from country to country and even more so – between world’s regions and continents.

Researchers note that journalism can play different roles in democratic and non-democratic contexts. Some even acknowledge that academics ‘have tended to study journalistic roles from within a Western framework oriented toward the media’s contribution to democracy and citizenship’ and therefore overlooked the realities in nondemocratic and non-Western context. They have also failed to account for types of journalism other than political news. As a result, they argue, the vision of journalism promoted by them is narrower than reality (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018). In

their opinion, functions assigned to journalism by many scholars (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995, Christians et al 2009) emphasize individual liberties and freedom, whereas other (non-Western) societies may prioritize collective needs and social harmony instead.

The concentration of academic efforts in the northern hemisphere and focus on journalists' roles in democratic contexts, have contributed to Western scholars' tendency to pin journalism to the idea of democracy. But the analysis of many examples shows that democracy is not necessarily a precondition for journalism. 'Journalism offering accurate and verified information resting on independent news judgment also happens in places that are deemed semi- or non-democratic', says Josephi (2013), adding that it is freedom of expression and relative journalistic autonomy that are crucial for media practitioners. Also Zelizer (2013) argues that 'the idea that democracy is the lifeline of journalism has not been supported on the ground' (p. 465). What Western and Eastern reporting likely have in common could be found in the domain of everyday life. Mediafolk in both the cultural circles is expected to provide help, advice, guidance, and information about everyday life and the management of self (Eide and Knight, 1999; Underwood, 2001).

**Ethical differences.** Belonging to a separate culture implies having own values. The results of the comparative study *Mapping journalism cultures across nations* (Hanitzsch et al., 2011) have shown that non-Western journalists tend to be more interventionist in their role perceptions and more flexible in their ethical views comparing to their European and American counterparts. Journalists from China showed relatively high willingness to convey a positive image of political and business leadership of the country but also declared difficulty of realising their professional ideals in the Chinese political and market system. The scholars have found that Western journalists are less supportive of any active promotion of particular values, ideas and social change and are more likely to base their ethical decisions on universal principles. Media professionals in China and Indonesia were more skeptical towards universal ethical principles (they favoured situational ethics)

and more attuned to the potential consequences of their reporting (Hanitzsch, 2007).<sup>7</sup> Some Asian academics stress the media's responsibility to **the preservation of social harmony and respect for leadership**. Mehra (1989), argued that 'unlike the individualistic, democratic, egalitarian and liberal tradition of Western political theory, some societies value their consensual and communal traditions with their emphasis on duties and obligations to the collective and social harmony'. **Journalists in these places are expected to restrain from coverage that could potentially disrupt social order** (Masterton, 1996; Xiaoge, 2005). Pakistani and Indonesian journalists are inclined to defend and preserve national sovereignty, unity, and foster societal development (Pintak and Nazir, 2013; Romano, 2003).

**Cross-cultural interactions.** Given all these differences, no wonder why many efforts to train media professionals from one culture according to the values taken directly from another are often ineffective. In some cases, adoption of Western normative ideas could be impossible. Muchtar and Hanitzsch (2013) show this on the example of radio journalists from Indonesia who have gone through training aimed at strengthening democracy and civil society. The tutoring has been conducted mostly by journalism professors and media professionals from countries such as Australia, Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States. According to the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University<sup>8</sup>, some of these trainers claimed they had achieved their goals but still **failed to change journalism practices in recipient countries**, blaming the standards and values existing in these places (Valentine 2005). Why was their impact so low? Muchtar and Hanitzsch give us some ideas. Their interviewees pointed out that some of the materials provided by the foreign trainers were not related at all to the Indonesian context and did not take audiences' needs into account. 'People in these [Western] countries might speak right to the point, but our people love beating around the bush. I admit the training material is very good, but it should be based on the society we serve' - a trainee from

<sup>7</sup> Plaisance, Skewes and Hanitzsch (2012), as part of the Worlds of Journalism Study, have analysed ethical orientations of those producing the news in 18 countries. 87.5% of those asked endorsed the statement on universal ethical principles, whereas overall global support for situational ethics was just 45.2%. The idea of journalists developing their own ethics codes was supported by 34.6% of the responders.

<sup>8</sup> Sue Valentine. 2005. *When Journalism Training Isn't Enough*. Nieman Reports 59 (2). <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/article/101129/When-Journalism-Training-Isnt-Enough.Aspix>.

Jogjakarta told them. Others mentioned that trainers' suggestions on the best way to do conflict reporting did not apply to their country and could not possibly be put in practice. They cited different media system, regulations and a different set of threats. Neither the public nor the police, for example, treats journalists in Indonesia in the same way as it happens in the West. Another issue was Indonesia's multicultural society and its sensitivities. 'Frank and straightforward reporting of controversial issues is valued highly in Western countries. In the context of Indonesia, such a reporting style might well be considered overly confrontational and, therefore, culturally inadequate,' the researchers concluded. As a result of these training endeavours, 'better quality journalists' might have emerged but in the same time it did not lead to better media in Indonesia (Muchtart, Hanitzsch 2013).

**Is there any common ground for Western and Asian journalism?** Willnat, Weaver and Choi (2013) attempted to discover cross-national patterns of similarities and differences between societal roles of journalists basing on the data collected and published by Willnat and Weaver (2012) that included Hongkong, China, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia and Singapore. They stress that there is some likeness in journalistic competencies and skills that cut across 'the boundaries of geography, culture, language, society, religion, race, and ethnicity'. They looked for any emerging global patterns of journalistic competencies. 'How journalists define their desired roles in society is closely related to the professional competencies of journalists. This is because their perceived roles tend to set the boundaries of journalistic skills, knowledge, and abilities' - they said. What they have found was the global acknowledgment of the importance of the '**watchdog**' role of the media. But, the researchers pointed out, its exact meaning is defined differently across cultures, and there was also the widest range of disagreement among countries when it comes to the exact importance of this role. Being a watchdog of the government (i.e. investigating government claims) was considered very important among those 'coming from the more democratic countries of Belgium and the United States', while others were less likely to support this role, for example only 21 percent of the

interviewed Malaysians.<sup>9</sup> Weaver and Willnat found that the ‘**disseminator**’ and ‘**analyst**’ roles were also highly valued by journalists globally.

Views surprisingly convergent with notions developed in Europe and America can be found in some cultures that otherwise greatly differ from the West. For example allowing the news to be influenced by beliefs and convictions is decidedly disapproved of by journalists in Indonesia. Generally however, there is far more disagreement than agreement over the importance of particular journalistic roles and values. Clearly, journalism is not about the same things everywhere and expat media professionals interviewed in this study had just the same perception.

#### **iv) Methodology**

I have conducted **structured, in-depth interviews with 15 media professionals** who have worked for news organisations in countries of South and Southeast Asia. They were asked **82 questions** that focused on their profiles, the media landscape they have operated in, the values and journalism role models in their host countries, the challenges that these media professionals faced, the way they interacted in their newsrooms, and finally the skills, knowledge and expertise they have gained along with the ways it could be potentially used. This information has been collected through an online questionnaire or, in some cases, face-to-face, Skype and WhatsApp interviews. I have later ran a series of direct **follow-up conversations** to grasp the nuances and the full complexity of the raised issues.

Almost 30 people in total have contributed to this report. Ahead of interviewing the expatriates, to establish the key question marks and main challenges faced by them, **I have done 5 exploratory interviews with both Western expat journalists and foreign correspondents**, present and former.

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<sup>9</sup> This could be attributed to the constraints placed on journalists by numerous laws and regulations limiting press freedom in Malaysia (Tamam, Raj, and Govindasamy 2012).

To limit the scope of the study, I have excluded China, arguably the largest market for expat journalists on the Earth. Due to its size and unique features, it should be subject to separate studies. However, among the people I talked to were professionals who have worked for Chinese state media (see Appendix 2). India has been excluded for similar reasons.

I have eventually decided to look at six smaller (and less explored by academics) **countries of South and Southeast Asia** – the regions from where I have reported as a correspondent – and my own expertise has given me important insights. These countries are: **Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Thailand**. All the selected states ranked low (below the 100th position) in the World Press Freedom Index, therefore generally lacking free media. Overall popularity as an expat destination according to the HSBC Expat Explorer survey was another important indicator.

The abovementioned places have been chosen also because of how different they are from the West. Working and political environments there significantly differ from that in Western liberal democracies. Also culturally, journalists are expected to play much different roles. There is a large cultural distance in everyday life, differing journalism cultures, political systems, legal frameworks, infrastructural and technical issues. Organisational culture and communication styles in these, predominantly high-context, collective, hierarchical societies (Qingxue 2003) can be confusing for a newcomer, the way of addressing certain issues, such as privacy, might seem unfamiliar. These factors influence daily reporting and editorial work. However, the same offers expats the opportunity to develop unique skills and exclusive knowledge of journalism and beyond. Working effectively in such circumstances requires a new set of journalistic methods, that could in turn reshape the practice of this craft worldwide.

I defined Western media practitioners as those both educated and trained in liberal democracies, in countries and territories such as Australia, Canada, the European

Union, New Zealand, Norway, South Africa, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States of America, holding citizenship of at least one of these countries and territories. Asian news outlets have been defined as those based in Asia, subject to local laws and targeted at both domestic and international audiences. Whether they are government or private ran, established by local citizens or foreigners, legacy printed media or digital-first outlets has not been taken into consideration while selecting the sample.

In my research, I have used the conceptual structure of journalistic roles in political life proposed by Hanitzsch and Vos (2018), that fall under 6 broader functions: informational-instructive, analytical-deliberative, critical-monitorial, advocative-radical, developmental-educative and collaborative-facilitative. In the catalogue of these 18 roles, I mention, among others, providing analysis, educating the public, reducing social tensions, curating information, supporting political leadership as well as monitoring it. I have asked each interviewee how much particular roles were valued in their host newsrooms (see Chapter 3).

Finally, I talked to **experts from the field of media, public diplomacy and consulting**. These informal interviews helped me to interpret the findings and outline the implications of the study.

Rather than a purely academic endeavour, this report is a comprehensive journalistic work, incorporating some scientific methods and could be read as an exploratory piece that might inspire future researchers.

## **Executive summary (key findings)**

This study shows that even within the relatively small geographical area, there is a great diversity of journalistic cultures, values and moral codes. There is far more disagreement than agreement over the importance of particular journalistic roles and values in different places. There seem to be little common values, little mutual influence and no deep understanding between journalistic cultures, as shown in testimonies of media professionals who had moved from Western liberal democracies to work in the above mentioned countries.

In the course of my research, I have managed to outline the profile of a Western expat journalist in the selected markets, their skills, challenges and dilemmas that they typically face – and to find the answers to important questions:

### **(1a) What are the main challenges in expat journalists' daily editorial and reporting work?**

*Most of the day-to-day issues faced by expatriates comes from cultural differences. These differences, some of them specifically related to work and journalism cultures, are even more difficult to overcome than political pressures. Apart from that, the interviewees mentioned other challenges: those related to infrastructure, differing legal frameworks and political issues (censorship included).*

### **(1b) What new skills, knowledge and expertise do they develop?**

*The interviewed media practitioners said their Asian experiences have helped them to better understand their host societies, their local audiences, the current affairs in their regions and increased their cultural sensitivity. They have taught themselves how to access local sources, gained experience in multicultural environments and some said they better understand the roles that journalists play beyond liberal democracy. Six interviewees said they have now more 'flexibility when it comes to*

*organisational models and editorial expectations’ and four declared to have developed new language skills.*

## **(2) How do local and expat journalists influence each other?**

*There is a lot of discussion in mixed newsrooms of the studied region, especially on the topics such as editorial judgment, journalism ideals, relationship between journalists and government officials and the role of a journalist. In the same time, there is little mutual influence between Asian media practitioners and expats and little impact of the latter on local media systems. However, Western media professionals can influence individual colleagues and, when given authority, could change the way particular newsrooms are ran.*

## **(3) How and in which areas can these experiences be used to improve the global practice of journalism and beyond?**

*The interviewees said their expertise could be used mainly in four areas: analysis of their respective host regions, foreign reporting, creating better content aimed at Asian audiences and analysis of local media markets. They said they could improve Western practice of journalism in foreign reporting, awareness of political consequences of reporting, protecting sources, using new technologies, recognition of more journalistic roles and audiences’ needs and improving work culture. Many of their skills could be used globally. These would be: flexibility, explanatory reporting, understanding Asian audiences and regional cultures, increased cultural sensitivity and prowess in accessing local sources.*

## **Media landscape**

As both the formal and informal interviews have shown, expats are often hired for their journalistic, editorial and language skills, and sometimes even for their foreign look – as some Asian managers find it prestigious to have diverse teams.

Even if one uses English in a professional capacity, basic knowledge of local languages remains important as it shows potential sources the journalist's commitment.

The media landscape drawn from the interviews seems to be a problematic one. Censorship is widespread throughout the studied region and both local and expat media workers have to deal with it. For example, vast majority (73.3%) of the interviewees directly experienced censorship, and the majority said they were forced to avoid some topics. Some individuals also mentioned limiting journalists' choice of stories by their companies' partners and sponsors. Although self-censorship is present, it doesn't seem to be prevailing.

Almost all the responders (93%) see press freedom in their host countries as at best problematic. They point out that local official sources are not very accessible whereas powerful individuals often have the tools to influence press coverage related to them. As many as 40% of the interviewees said they have been threatened, attacked or harassed in connection with their work.

Each and every country covered in this study has a long history of suppressing media through regulations and harassment. For both local employees and foreign correspondents, the ability of reporting on a particular story often depends on the current political situation. Official (government) sources are often less than easily accessible although in some countries, like Indonesia, it is possible to get directly and informally in touch with high-ranked officials. China is very strict when it comes to permissions for recording. However being an outsider can be advantageous; foreigners sometimes enjoy extra respect, interest and access. In addition to that, holding foreign citizenship usually makes expat journalists feel safer than their local counterparts.

But it can still get dangerous, as shown in numerous cases of foreign writers, filmmakers, reporters and media managers who got jailed, harassed or deported by Asian states.

Self censorship happens both among foreign correspondents and expat media employees, yet for different reasons. Some foreign correspondents see it as a strategy: it is better to do other important stories before the one that will likely put one in danger or result in deportation and ban from the host country. Those living locally often have personal commitments in the places they work from, which might discourage them from taking the risk. Westerners working in Asian newsrooms noted that what their managers often value is harmony and writing safe stories (described by one reporter as “not going against the grain”). They might circumnavigate certain topics, well aware what is not allowed to appear on air or get published. In some outlets, local governments and religion were off limits. An overwhelming majority of the interviewees said political consequences of reporting are taken into consideration in their host countries more than they are in Western newsrooms.

This could be perhaps correlated with Asian journalist cultures tendency to prioritize collective needs and social harmony over frank, straightforward reporting (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995, Christians et al 2009, Muchtar and Hanitzsch 2013).

## **Everyday challenges**

The cultural differences tended to be more difficult to overcome than political pressures and the interviewees were unlikely to change journalism principles or influence media systems in their host countries. Foreigners hailing from the West mentioned (1) **general cultural issues** and those related specifically to (2) **work culture** as the biggest challenges to deal with in Asian companies. The first includes differing communication and leadership styles, habits and problem solving strategies. The latter consists of command chain, hierarchies within the organisation and decision making process among others.

Other challenges present in the responses (in the order of importance):

**(3) journalism cultures** (differing role models of journalists, editorial expectations, choice of stories)

**(4) infrastructural** (roads, mobile connectivity, Internet issues, financial services etc.)

**(5) legal** (differing legal frameworks, for example regarding access to public information)

**(6) political** (censorship, politically motivated or influenced editorial decisions, web access restrictions)

It is significant that legal and political problems (censorship and difficulty with obtaining public information included) are seen as easier to deal with than culture-related obstacles.

### **Journalistic roles and cultures**

In different cultures, journalists and media are assigned various, sometimes contradictory roles. There are large differences between Eastern and Western journalistic cultures as well as among the studied countries themselves. There is more disagreement than agreement when it comes to what journalism is about. For example, it is not entirely clear whether journalists should provide their audiences with analysis, advocate for socially disadvantaged, explain political decisions of their governments, mediate and reduce tensions in their societies, report things ‘as they are’, adhering to strict neutrality or advocate for social change. It isn’t always obvious that journalists should show their stories from two sides. Yet, some similarities have been identified. For example, educating the public seems to be recognised as an important role in all of the studied countries. Curating (defined as ‘identifying and organising information in the way available for users’) is recognised and relatively highly valued in all of them. Supporting political leadership by

conveying its positive image is relatively highly valued everywhere, but – on the other hand – monitoring political leadership seems to be recognised as an important role of the media by almost everyone.

### **Lack of influence**

The impact that foreigners make on Asian newsrooms seems to be extremely limited. The expatriates said they have been generally free to express opinions in their workplaces, their colleagues were interested in their views and superiors willing to use their expertise and knowledge. None of the interviewees complained about lack of autonomy in the workplace. Yet, majority of the responders did not feel they had significantly influenced the work culture or values of their organisations or colleagues nor this had happened the other way round. Whether cultural differences, political realities, local media systems or other factors are to be blamed remains unclear.

Despite the low mutual influence, there seems to be a lot of discussion going on in the newsrooms, especially regarding editorial judgment, journalism ideals, relationship between journalists and government officials and the role of a journalist. Westerners might still be able to impact individual colleagues and provide particular newsrooms with skills and fresh approach to work.

Instead of driving massive change in newsrooms, it might forge more understanding between Asian journalists and the new arrivals from the West, especially regarding values.

### **New skills and their usability**

Western newcomers to Asian news organisations develop unique practical knowledge, skills and expertise, such as country-specific methods of approaching sources and local contacts. They know exactly the *modus operandi* of Asian

newsrooms, editorial preferences, political pressures and their audiences. They are also aware of the roles of journalism out of their own cultural circles and even beyond democracy.

The interviewed media practitioners feel they:

- (1) better understand their host societies
- (2) have increased cultural sensitivity
- (3) better understand their regions and current affairs
- (4) learned how to access local sources
- (5) gained experience in multicultural environment
- (6) understand the roles that journalists play beyond liberal democracy
- (7) better understand their Asian audiences

Six interviewees said they have now more ‘flexibility when it comes to organisational models and editorial expectations’ and four declared to have developed new language skills.

It seems that their newly gained experience could be more useful back home than their Western training has been in Asia. The interviewees had no doubt that what they have learned has practical implications for Western media and other institutions, especially in four areas (in order of importance):

- (1) analysis of their respective host regions
- (2) foreign reporting
- (3) creating better content aimed at Asian audiences
- (4) local media market analysis

There are some areas in which these journalists said they could now improve Western practice of this craft. These are mainly (in order of importance):

- (1) foreign reporting

- (2) awareness of political consequences of reporting
- (3) protecting sources
- (4) use of new technologies
- (5) recognition of more journalistic roles and audiences' needs
- (6) improving work culture

Among the skills they have learned that could be of use worldwide, they listed flexibility, explanatory reporting, understanding Asian audiences and regional cultures, increased cultural sensitivity and accessing local sources.

Serving as “translators of cultures”, these journalists can improve reporting on their respective regions and international journalism in their home countries. As members of foreign desks, they could set the agenda, especially if their home countries lack reporters specialising in Asia. They could foster more conscious reporting, with news people better aware of the potential consequences of their stories and spread know-how regarding source protection. They could help to deliver journalistic and intercultural training and provide insights to governments, companies, institutions, academia, media etc. 80% of those interviewed doubt that the number of foreign media professionals in their respective host countries will grow. Hence they are likely to remain rare assets with very uncommon set of skills and knowledge.

## CHAPTER 1: A PROFILE OF AN INTERVIEWEE



Majority of those interviewed in the course of this study were **aged 25-44** (80%), two were between 18 and 24 years old and one was in the age group of 45-54. Majority were **male** (~67%), one third were female. All the responders **held foreign passports** (i.e. other than their host country), with majority being American and British. They have been working as journalists anywhere between **1 and 18 years**, with experience in Asia between **several months and 7 years**. 60% had worked as journalists before joining a news organisation in Asia, usually for 1 to 6 years, in one case for 12 years.

The interviewees represent **all the seniority levels** in their host organisations:

- **top level manager** – for example editor-in-chief, CEO, managing director
- **senior manager** – for example editor, executive producer
- **journalist level** – for example ground reporter, desk journalist, subeditor
- **intern** – (in this study, they were both aspiring journalists with previous interning and freelance experience)

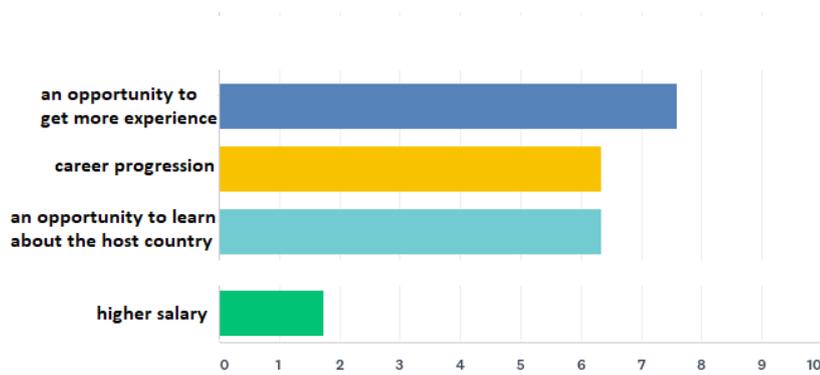
Vast majority have worked for Asian news organisations that cover current events and politics (among others). Only in case of Singapore, the interviewees' companies covered technology.

Their top motivations to take positions in Asia were:

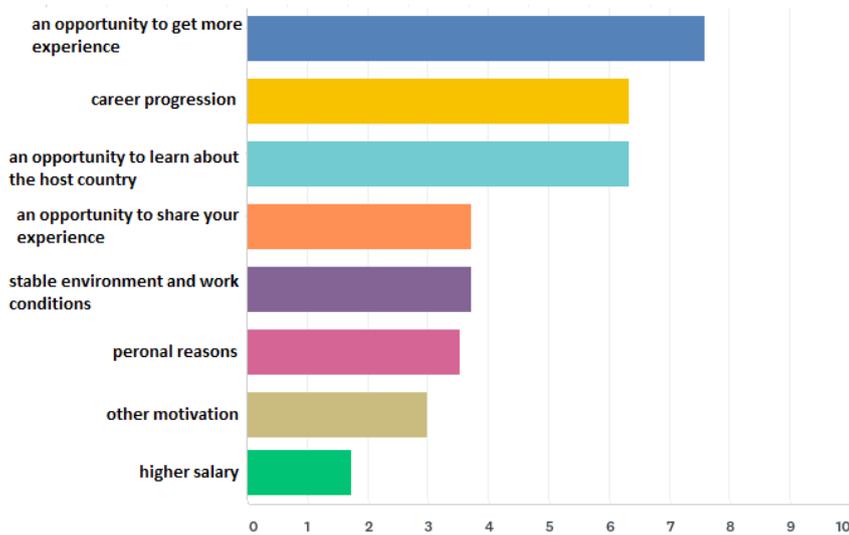
- (1) an opportunity to get more experience
- (2) career progression, opportunity to learn about the host country

Higher salary was the bottom motivation (only 2 interviewees).

Q8 What were your main motivations to start working in an Asian media organisation? Please give the order of priority.



Q8 What were your main motivations to start working in an Asian media organisation? Please give the order of priority.



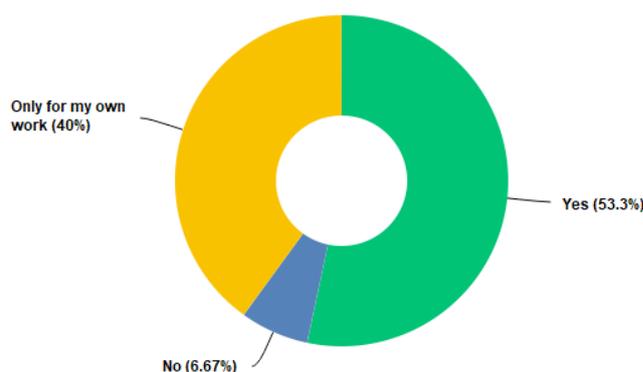
Some interviewees cited other reasons. What these could be? Expatriates revealed this in follow-up interviews:

*“I had always wanted to work in another part of the world. In my early twenties, I did a lot of work about South America. I’ve got tired of that but still knew I want to do something abroad. I didn’t know much about Myanmar by then but Southeast Asia had an interesting scope of inquiry” – Editor (25-34), Myanmar*

*“I married in Sri Lanka and we had an extended break there. My wife was teaching yoga, I was looking for some interesting opportunities and found [my host company] on Twitter. They reported on Muslim community burning a woman and did it with balance, I was impressed and approached them” – Reporter (25-34), Sri Lanka*

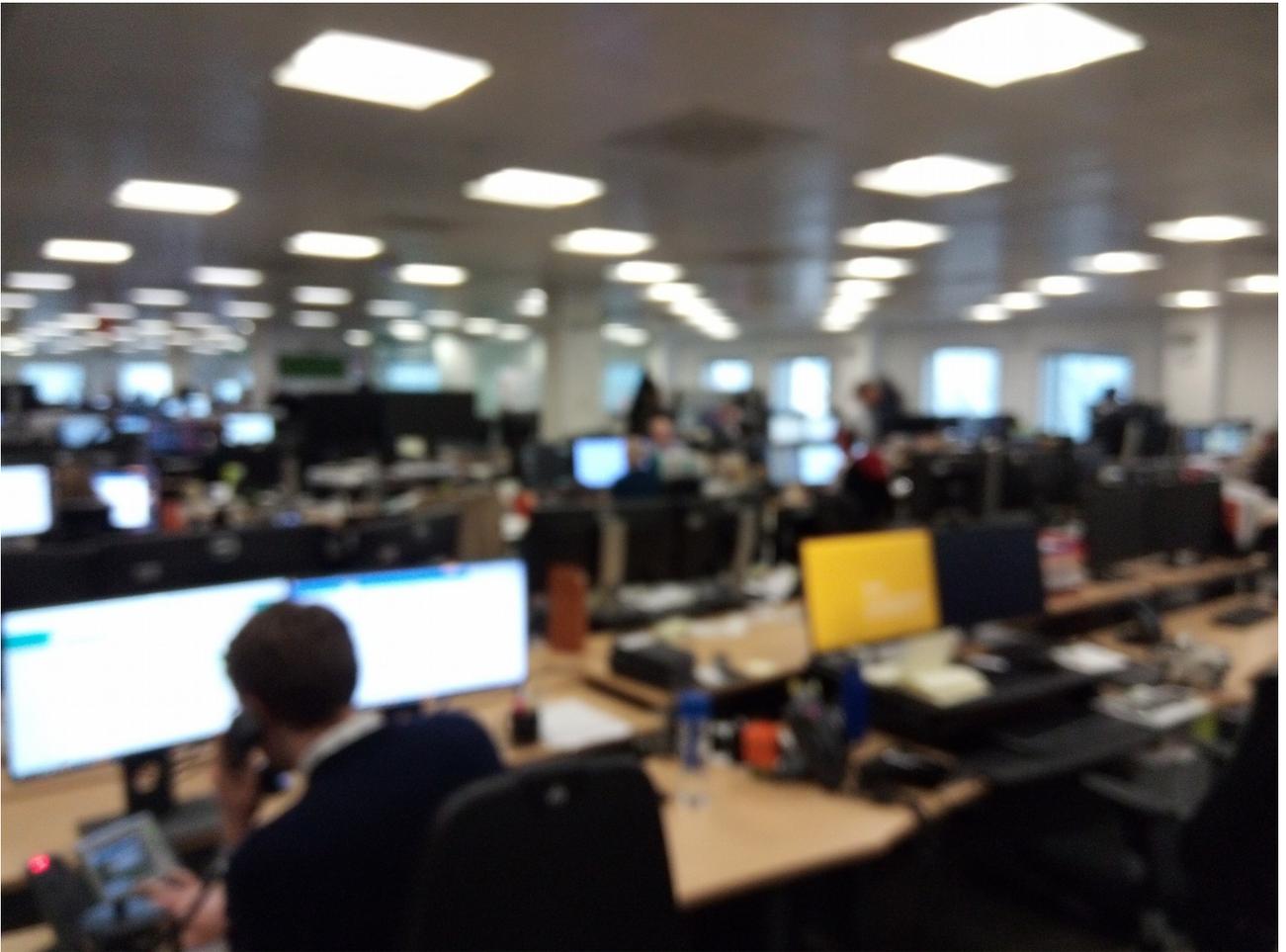
Almost every single interviewee felt morally responsible for the news coverage done by their host newsrooms and just over a half (53%) care about whole the coverage rather than just their own work.

Q70 Did you ever feel morally responsible for coverage by the Asian news organisations you worked for?



As shown in the further part of this report, the interviewed journalists have true insights into their respective newsrooms. Their views seem to be nuanced and unbiased that allows them to see the complexity of the environment they operate in.

## CHAPTER 2: THE MEDIASCAPE THEY OPERATE IN



Many of the new arrivals are not ready for the heavy influence on the press by outside players and various constraints imposed on journalists in Asia. It is clearly



shown by the place that the countries of citizenship of our interviewees occupied in the World Press Freedom Index (2018).<sup>10</sup>

USA **45**

UK **40**

Canada **18**

Ireland **16**

Germany **15**

Portugal **14**

New Zealand **8**<sup>11</sup>

In most of the host countries, the interviewed expat journalists regarded press freedom as at least problematic (93%). 40% said it was suppressed, two (in Singapore and Sri Lanka) described it as ‘non-existent’.

The World Press Freedom Index again provides some context.

Singapore **151**

Malaysia **145**

<sup>10</sup> I am referring to the 2018 edition of the Index rather than the one released in the following year as the interviews have been conducted before the publication of the latter.

<sup>11</sup> Out of 180 countries.

Thailand **140**  
Myanmar **137**  
Philippines **133**  
Sri Lanka **131**

Source: World Press Freedom Index,  
2018



So do many expatriates:

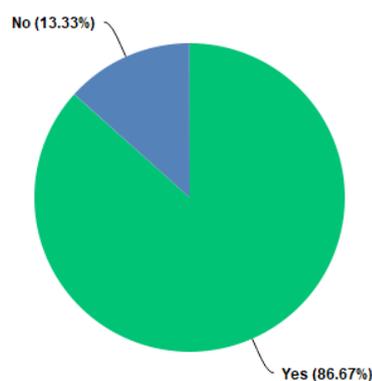
*„Traditional media in Singapore is often called >>the world's largest public memo service<< because it simply passes along whatever the government would like to present. Most of the biggest controversies that affect Singapore are broken by media in places like Hong Kong, Malaysia and in social media, at which point local media will be forced to write about it. However, Mediacorp and Singapore Press Holdings almost never break negative stories about Singapore”*  
– **Editor (25-34), Singapore**

According to Reporters Without Borders, media in the city-state in 2018 were more suppressed than those in Russia (rank 148th), Morocco (135) and the United Arab Emirates (128), yet the situation for Singaporean news people was slightly better than the one in Turkey (157).

An overwhelming majority stated that political consequences of reporting were taken into consideration in their host countries more than in Western newsrooms. This could be correlated with Asian journalist cultures' tendency to prioritise collective needs and social harmony over frank, straightforward reporting (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995, Christians et al 2009, Muchtar and Hanitzsch 2013).<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> See the literature review on p. 7.

Q34 Are political consequences of reporting taken into consideration in your host media organisation more than in Western newsrooms?



**A reporter who has worked in Sri Lanka understands the reasons quite well.**

‘The country is so fragile. Very little things can cause a mob frenzy, people throwing stones at buildings. Saying the wrong thing can lead to a great damage,’ he said during a follow-up interview.

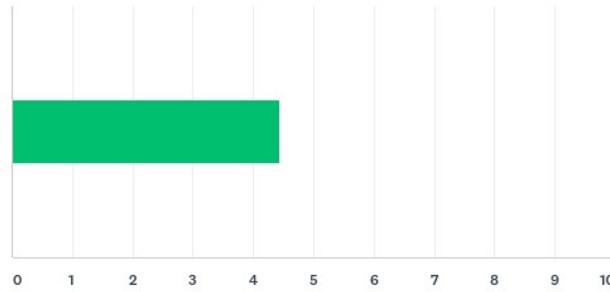
Perceptions on whether media freedom is currently increasing or decreasing greatly differ between the countries. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) said in April 2019 that among the six countries, Malaysia and Sri Lanka have made the largest progress in becoming more journalism-friendly. Between 2013 and 2019, the situation has improved also in Myanmar and the Philippines and has nowhere gone dramatically worse, although Thailand and Singapore have dropped in the RSF index compared to 2013.<sup>13 14</sup>

When it comes to government sources, those in the countries covered in this study seem not to be very accessible (4/10 on average), while willingness of public figures to speak directly to journalists differs from country to country.

<sup>13</sup> <https://rsf.org/en/thailand>

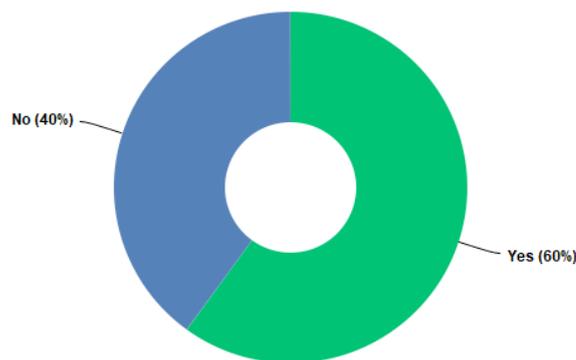
<sup>14</sup> <https://rsf.org/en/singapore>

Q54 How accessible are local official sources in your host country?

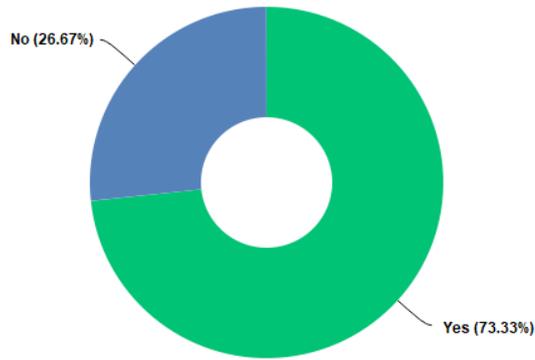


According to the interviewed journalists, standing out as an outsider might, in some cases, help to get access to sources (around 60%), but the main upside of holding a foreign passport is the sense of security that it gives – **73% of the interviewees said that they feel safer because of their foreign citizenship.**

Q56 Did the fact that you stood out as an outsider ever help you to get better access to sources than your local colleagues?

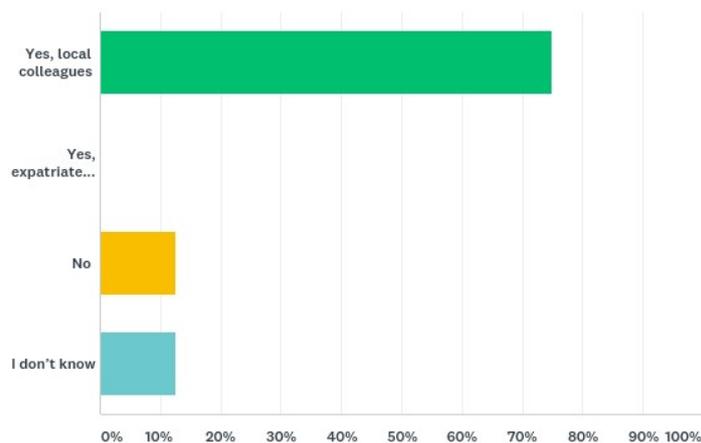


Q73 Did you feel safer than local journalists because of your foreign citizenship?



The reason behind this might be the frequent prosecution and harassment of local journalists by the authorities, pointed out by many of the interviewed media practitioners. This does not happen to expatriates to the same extent.

Q71 Have your colleagues in your host country been prosecuted?



Indeed, locals face much greater dangers. Sri Lankan media, for example, have seen assassinations<sup>15</sup>, forced disappearances<sup>16</sup>, harassment<sup>17</sup> and news persons fleeing

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1870440,00.html>

<sup>16</sup> <https://rsf.org/en/news/cartoonist-kidnapped-two-months-ago-still-missing>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/they-will-kill-you-you-dirty-fucking-shit-journalist-you-are-pigs-who-eat-shit-gota-threatened-again>

abroad.<sup>18 19</sup> In the Philippines, massive numbers of reporters have been shot.<sup>20 21 22 23</sup> Since 2000, as many as 73 of them have been murdered there, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists,<sup>24</sup> which makes the Philippines the most deadly place for mediafolk among the studied countries. Meanwhile, less vulnerable Filipino figures are facing prolonged judicial harassment.<sup>25</sup> Top politicians in Singapore sue and sometimes jail bloggers and journalists, in some cases foreign.<sup>26 27 28</sup> The rulers of Myanmar have been intimidating news people, fought them with lawsuits, arrest warrants and imprisonment.<sup>29 30 31</sup> Reporters in Thailand not only self-censor, limited by draconian lèse majesté law, but are also routinely spied on<sup>32</sup>, detained and, in some cases, driven to flee.<sup>33</sup> Malaysia, that banned several websites seen as anti-government (i.e. Sarawak Report, Malaysiakini, Free Malaysia Today) and used sedition charges against those who publicly opposed the ruling coalition<sup>34</sup>, is perhaps the only country in the region where the climate for journalism is currently improving, as a result of the opposition's victory in the 2018 general elections.

This is the environment both expat journalists in Asian media and correspondents of Western outlets are forced to get used to. The latter usually get away with critical reporting but often have to be extra cautious and use tricks to avoid being eavesdropped on.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2018/01/sri-lankan-editor-fled-after-attempt-on-life/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2019/06/project-exile-editor-escaped-sri-lanka-after-husbands-murder/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://cpj.org/2019/08/american-journalist-shot-critically-wounded-in-phi.php>

<sup>21</sup> <https://cpj.org/2019/07/radio-anchor-eduardo-dizon-shot-and-killed-in-the-.php>

<sup>22</sup> <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/72395/isabela-banker-journalist-shot-dead>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/media/greenslade/2012/may/10/journalist-safety-philippines>

<sup>24</sup> <https://cpj.org/data/killed/asia/philippines> {ACCESSED: 1.08.2019}

<sup>25</sup> <https://cpj.org/2019/07/cyber-libel-trial-opens-against-philippine-journal.php>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2011/05/british-author-alan-shadrake-jailed-in-singapore/>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2014/05/singapore-blogger-removes-posts-threat-prime-minister/>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2015/07/salil-tripathi-as-singapore-turns-50-is-it-at-the-cusp-becoming-different/>

<sup>29</sup> <https://cpj.org/blog/2019/07/myanmar-press-freedom-restricted-laws-conflict.php>

<sup>30</sup> <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/05/06/asia/reuters-journalists-myanmar-freed-intl/>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2011/02/myanmar-times-editor-detained/>

<sup>32</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2016/10/the-truth-about-thailands-social-media-surveillance/>

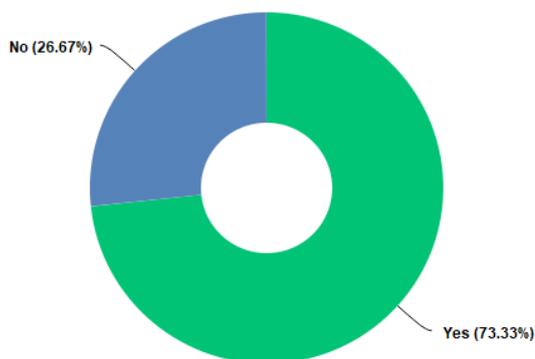
<sup>33</sup> <https://rsf.org/en/thailand> [Accessed 15 June 2019]

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2018/07/malaysian-cartoonist-zunar-cleared-of-sedition-charges>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2012/08/fergal-keane-reporting-burma>

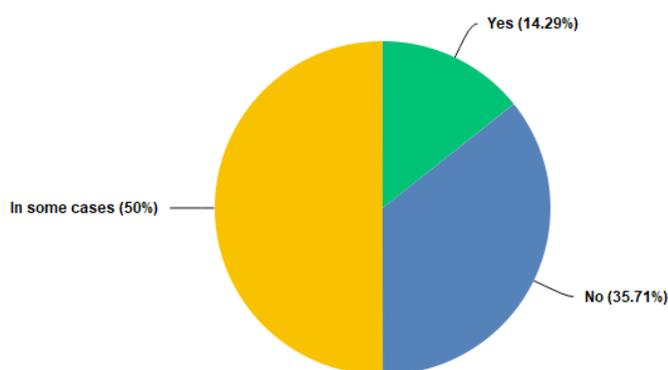
Free speech suppression in the studied countries is, according to expatriates, widespread. Over 50% of the responders said they personally experienced web censorship.

Q57 Did you personally come across any form of censorship during work in your host country?



Powerful individuals often have the tools to influence coverage related to them.

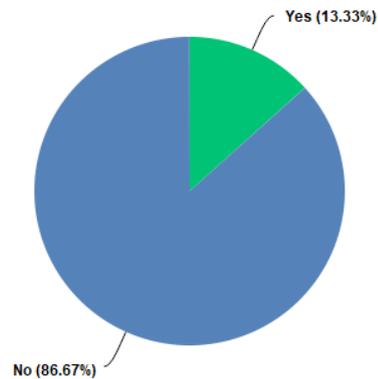
Q65 When you interviewed political or business leaders, were you expected to consult your questions with the interviewees or press officers?



While consulting questions ahead of interviews seems to happen often, only in rare cases interviewees were entitled to change their answers before they got published – however it was not the rule anywhere (Q66).

In addition to that, expatriate journalists were sometimes, although rarely, offered benefits for doing or not doing a story.

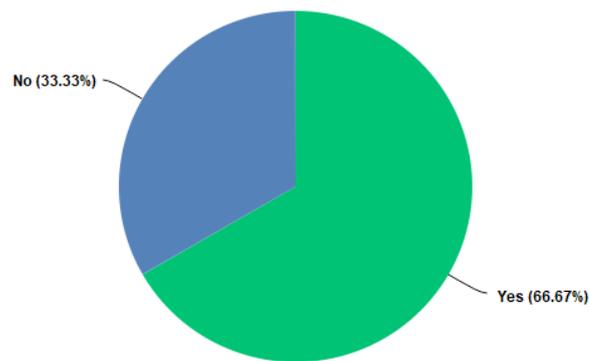
Q69 While you were working for the media organisation in your host country, did anyone ever offer you benefits for doing or not doing a story?



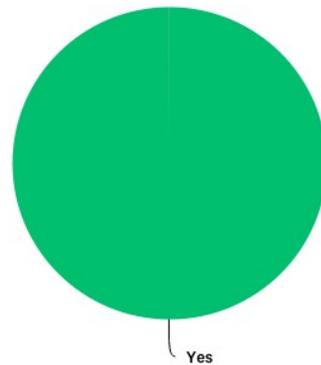
Free speech suppression is not limited to purely political influence. Some journalists said their organisations' business partners have been influencing the coverage. 'A national telecom became our sponsor and so we became compromised. They directly told us what we can and what we cannot write about. At some point, half of our content was sponsored and our company made it normal,' said a journalist who eventually quit his host company.

The interviewed news people pointed out that there was a technological gap between the Asian media they have worked for and newsrooms in their home countries.

Q78 Is there a gap in technology between the media in your home country and your host country?



Q79 Is there a gap in professional skills between the media in your home country and your host country?

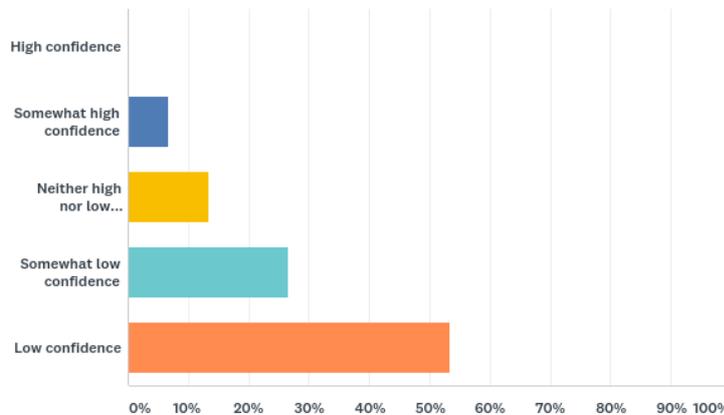


Everyone said that that there was a gap between the professional skills of their South and Southeast Asian and Western colleagues.

*„They don't provide the same interactive experience online. Local websites are often text-focused, there is little video and no immersive experience. Also the quality of equipment used by local TV teams is lower than in the West, due to financial reasons. Many journalists have background in opposition activism, so biases are involved” - **Editor (25-34), Myanmar***

**Finally, 80% of those taking part in the survey, do not believe that media market for foreigners will expand in their host countries.** Only one said they have somewhat high confidence that this will happen.

Q11 How much confidence do you have that the media market for foreigners will expand in your host country (i.e. more expatriates will get hired)?



It might mean that Western expat journalists with work experience in Asia will remain a **rare asset with very uncommon sets of skills and precious knowledge.**

## CHAPTER 3: ROLE MODELS AND VALUES IN HOST NEWSROOMS



In different cultures, journalists and media are assigned various, sometimes contradictory roles. In the part of my research regarding the influence of local journalistic cultures on expat newsmen, I used classifications developed by Hanitzsch (2018) and Weaver and Willnat (2012). I based some of my questions on the study of journalist ethical orientations by Plaisance, Skewes and Hanitzsch (2012).

In our study, 60% of responders found the **differences** between journalistic role models in their home countries and in their host newsrooms **fairly or very large**. They have been asked how much particular journalistic roles were valued in their host newsrooms.

#### **Four general trends / patterns have been identified:**

(1) **Educating the public is recognised** as an important role everywhere

(2) **Curating** (journalists identify, organise, and repackage information into deliverable packages and make it available for their users) **is recognised and relatively highly valued everywhere** (2-4); almost 53% said it is ‘much’ or ‘extremely’ valued in their newsrooms

(3) **Supporting political leadership** (by conveying positive image of it) **is relatively highly valued in most of the countries** (0-4); 53% said it is ‘much’ or ‘extremely’ valued in their organisations

(4) **Monitoring political leadership is recognised** as a valuable role of the media almost by everyone; 86% said the watchdog role is at least somewhat valued

However, there are more differences than similarities when it comes to journalistic roles. Not everywhere media are expected to perform certain tasks. Disparities between countries are particularly significant in areas like:

- (1) **Providing analysis** – should journalists do it?
- (2) **Advocating for socially disadvantaged** – are news people expected to help them?
- (3) **Explaining political decisions of the government** – is being government mouthpiece what journalism is for?
- (4) **Mediation and reducing social tensions** – should media care about it?
- (5) **Disseminating information (reporting things ‘as they are’ and adhering to strict neutrality)** - should newsrooms do it this way?
- (6) **Advocating for social change** – is this reporters’ job, too?

Expatriate journalists’ observations show that news organisations in the six studied countries differ (to a lesser extent) also in their views on other journalistic roles and values: impartiality, promoting harmony, storytelling (explanatory journalism), promoting journalists’ own ideals and values, being a government adversary or government watchdog, mobilising the audience.

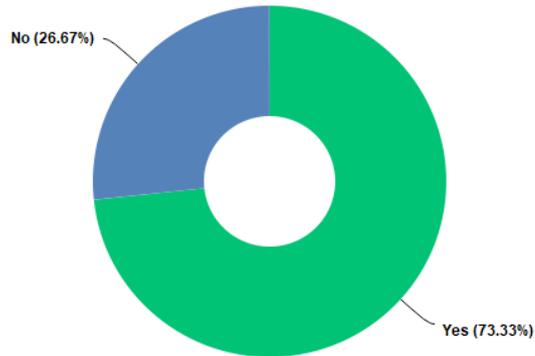
There are roles that in some countries are particularly far-reaching. In Thailand for example, **promoting monarchy** is considered an important value while in the Philippines and Myanmar **providing entertainment** is thought of as vital.

**In some places, looking at news stories from both the sides wasn’t obvious.**<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> It is important to point out here that some of the interviewees’ news organisations have been created or financed and supervised by Western entities and so are obliged to maintain core values of liberal journalism. Had they lacked this connections, they would have followed Western principles to a lesser extent.

Q68 Was telling both sides of a story a rule in your host organisation?



*„In Myanmar, there is a need of a certain level of propaganda, especially regarding Muslims. Accuracy of reports could be stretched to fit certain narrative. Reports of violence against Muslims are often downplayed” - **Editor (24-34), Myanmar***

## **CHAPTER 4: CHALLENGES IN DAILY WORK**

The interviewees have been asked to categorise the main challenges that they have faced in the course of their daily work. The top two turned out to be:

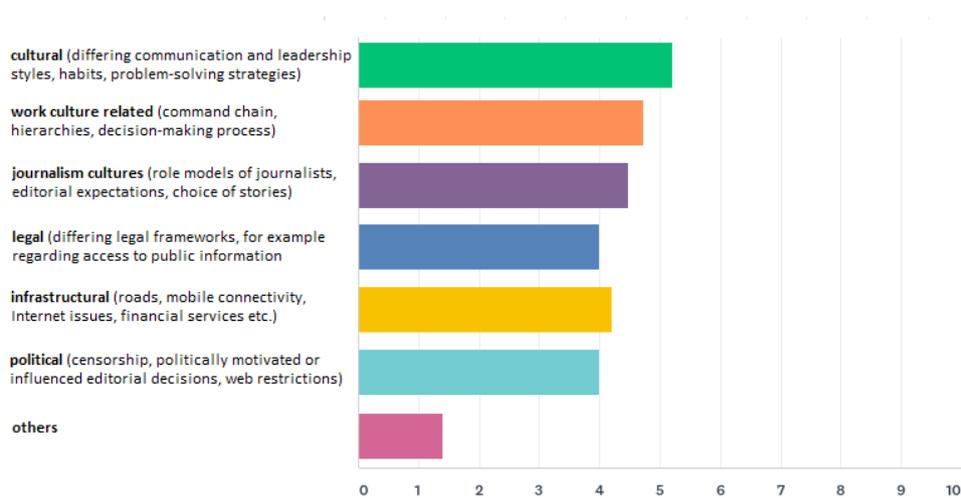
- (1) **cultural** (differing communication and leadership styles, habits, problem-solving strategies)
- (2) **work culture** (command chain, hierarchies, decision making process)

Still, all the challenges listed below were present in the responses (in the order of importance):

- **journalism cultures** (differing role models of journalists, editorial expectations, choice of stories)
- **infrastructural** (roads, mobile connectivity, Internet issues, financial services etc.)
- **legal** (differing legal frameworks, for example regarding access to public information)
- **political** (censorship, politically motivated or influenced editorial decisions, web access restrictions)

It is significant that legal and political problems (censorship and difficulty with obtaining public information included) are seen as less important challenges than culture-related obstacles. The size of the sample is not large enough to draw any definite conclusion, however such responses are hardly surprising to any outsider who has ever worked in Asia.

Q50 How would you categorize the main challenges in daily editorial and reporting work that you faced?



*„Dealing with the organisational culture and work habits of government agencies and businesses was a problem”*  
– **Senior manager (45-54), Philippines**

*„Navigating hierarchies was tricky – in Western newsroom pitching stories is valued; at [our newsroom] it happened much less, and could be subversive. You are expected to take the stories editors assign”* – **Reporter (25-34), Sri Lanka**

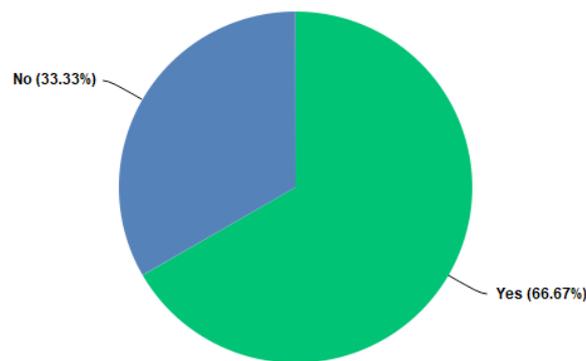
The same reporter added that what he believed to be an interesting story, would sometimes be ‘instantly poo-pooed as not possible without much more debate. For example transgender community or people with disabilities’.

For a senior editor in the Philippines, the Filipino journalistic culture seems to be ‘a spillover from the general culture’ where people are very obedient to elders and leaders. ‘One of my frustrations as an editor was that reporters would not challenge any government spokesman, just record what they say. There would be no follow-up, no second source, they ended up doing PR for various agencies. Trying to change this

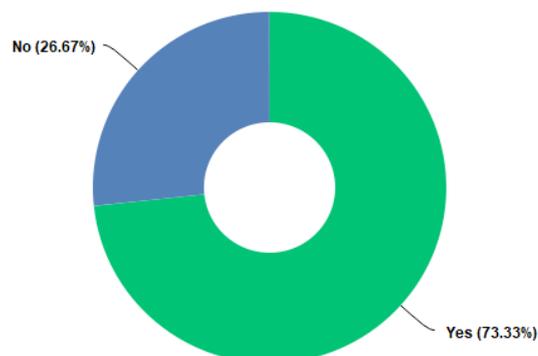
was like beating my head against the brick wall. We had to do extra work and additional reporting from the desk,' he said and complained that he never had a reporter coming to him with a story.

The abovementioned widespread censorship could be treated as another major impediment, so as the frequent **prosecution of local media professionals**. Vast majority of interviewees directly experienced free speech suppression, most of them said they had to avoid some topics in their coverage.

Q58 Did you have to avoid certain topics?



Q57 Did you personally come across any form of censorship during work in your host country?

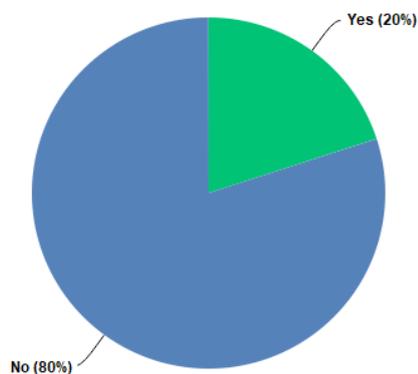


*„Several stories were either removed from the site following publication or killed before publishing by senior editors at our parent paper for fear of offending the military or royal family. We had to be extra careful with editing those types of stories including photo choices and juxtaposition. Also at least 3 colleagues were harassed and intimidated by military (including a travel ban) and another colleague was threatened with legal action by the police” – Journalist (35-44), Thailand*

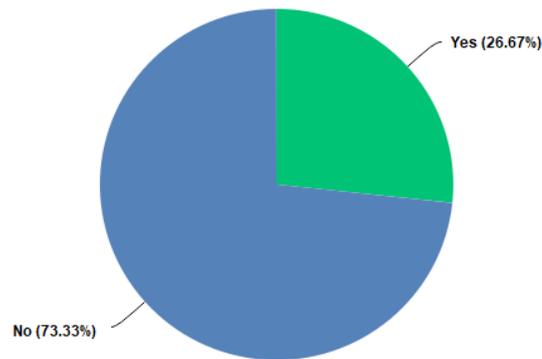
*„We had lots of journalists in jail for reporting on military abuses and alleged state secrets. I was very cautious when reporting on militant Buddhist monks. Foreigners can be jailed for offending Buddhism, so, writing up, I kept my criticism personal and was careful not to say anything that could be seen as defaming the Buddha” – Editor (25-34), Myanmar*

In these difficult circumstances, **self-censorship happens sometimes but doesn't seem to be prevailing.**

Q60 Did you ever refrain from covering an issue because you knew it won't be accepted by editors?



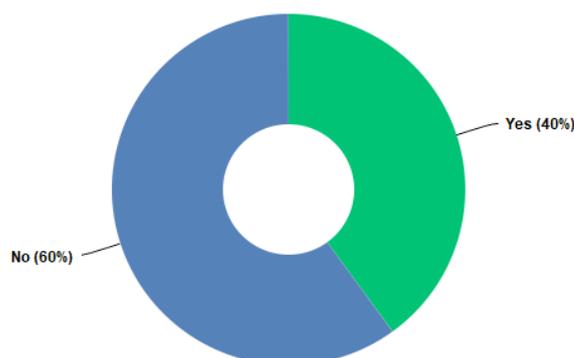
Q61 Did you ever have to leave out certain facts or the other side of the story in your coverage because you knew it won't be allowed to report on them?



Senior editor in the Philippines had policemen ordering him to delete pictures he had taken of a street fight. More serious cases of intimidation included a person from the presidential communication office who told him to 'back off' as he tried to report stories on money laundering and extensive Chinese investment. On both the occasions, people with connections to top politicians were involved and the editor's boss, who happened to be a special adviser to the president, suggested him to 'let it go'. Journalists working for international media outlets based in Sri Lanka and Malaysia said religion and government were often taboos.

As many as **40% of the interviewees** declared they have been **harassed** while on duty.

Q72 Have you ever been physically or verbally threatened, attacked or harassed in connection with your work as a journalist in your host country?



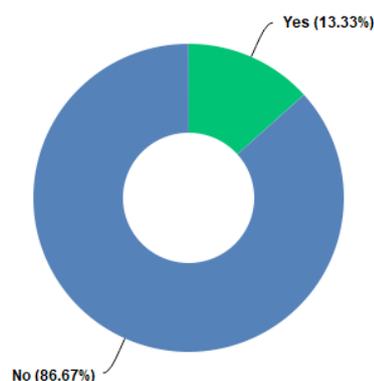
A reporter in Malaysia has agreed to share one such story. ‘I worked at a local news network at the height of the 1MDB [corruption] scandal under the previous administration. There’s a newsroom person that would oversee all content that went out. I was told several times to stay away from that topic, or face action. It was never mean or confrontational, you just knew that you couldn’t put anything of that nature into a report, and if you did, it wouldn’t air, and you would probably have issues with management. I reacted by toeing the line, considering where I was, and avoided that matter. The real threat wasn’t in actual threats, but the indirect ones that imposed self-censorship. You just regulated yourself’.

*“From being followed, monitored, and harassed by military intelligence to having private companies tell their employees to photograph, record and follow my every move while reporting, intimidation through surveillance is a common tactic in Myanmar. Such tactics make it nearly impossible to properly research, photograph and report stories”.*

**– Photojournalist (25-34), Myanmar**

On a few occasions, expat journalists suffered from being stigmatised in the West for working in Asian news organisations but it does not seem to be a major problem.

Q80 Have you ever felt stigmatised for working for an Asian media organisation?



## CHAPTER 5: INTERACTIONS WITHIN NEWSROOMS



What might surprise some journalism scholars, the influence of the responders in their host newsrooms was at best extremely limited. The majority did not feel they have had significant influence on the working culture or values of their organisations (5/10) or colleagues (3/10). They also said they had low influence of their working habits, and values. As one reporter put it, foreign journalists come with their values and ambitions that are different from those of indigenous populations and they eventually lose some of these ambitions. ‘You realise you need to know when to pick your own battles. [My outlet] had liberal perspective but it was very cautious where to put it. For example analysing politics was off limits. That would mean risking unwanted interference from the government,’ said the former reporter in Sri Lanka.

This lack of influence is even more surprising given the fact that interviewed expatriates said they have been generally free to express their opinions, their colleagues were interested in their views and superiors willing to use their expertise and knowledge. None of the interviewees complained about lack of autonomy in the workplace (see charts below). Whether cultural differences, political realities, local media systems or other factors are to be blamed remains unclear.

Those in positions of power, however, were more likely to influence the locals:

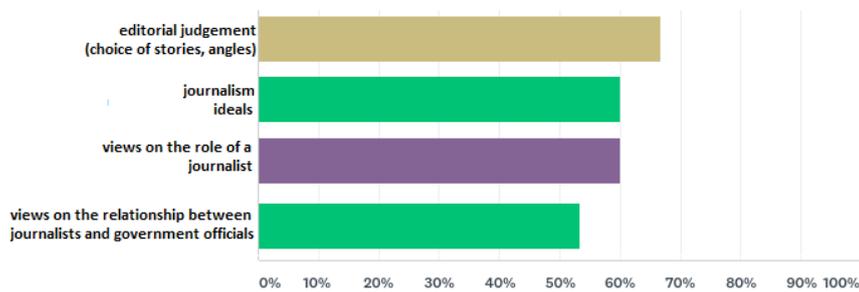
***„As head of small autonomous team in larger organisation, I have shown reporters they can tell the truth and be somewhat fearless” – Top manager (35-44) Thailand***

**Nevertheless, lots of discussion seems to be taking place in these newsrooms;** the top areas of interaction are:

- (1) editorial judgment
- (2) journalism ideals,
- (3) relationship between journalists and government officials, the role of a journalist,

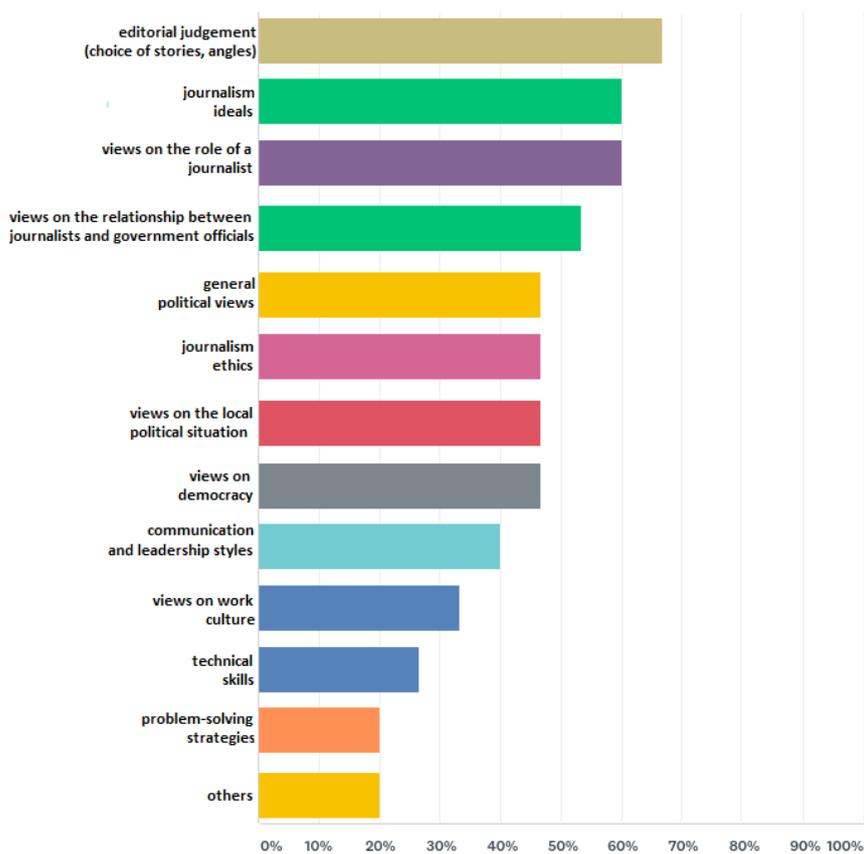
The abovementioned areas have been indicated by over 50% of the interviewed journalists. They also mentioned: journalism ethics, general political views, views on democracy and local political situation.

Q43 In what areas have you and your local counterparts influenced each other the most?  
Please tick when applicable or give as many examples as possible.



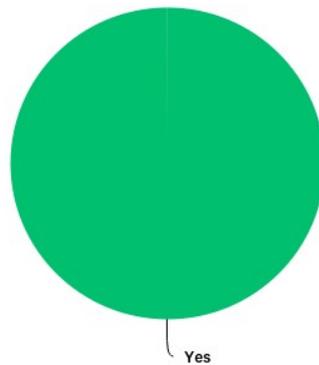
Instead of driving massive change in newsrooms, these discussions might forge more understanding between Asian journalists and the new arrivals from the West, especially regarding values.

Q43 In what areas have you and your local counterparts influenced each other the most?  
Please tick when applicable or give as many examples as possible.

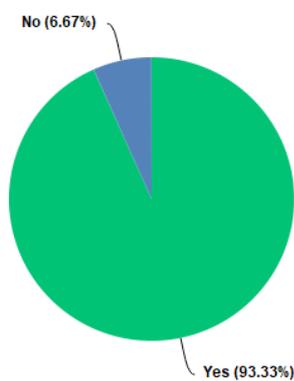


As mentioned before, expatriate journalists feel that they have been allowed to express opinions, their colleagues were interested in their views and superiors generally willing to use their expertise and knowledge.

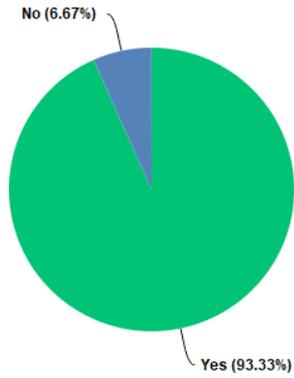
Q44 During your employment in your most recent Asian news organisation, were you able to express your opinions?



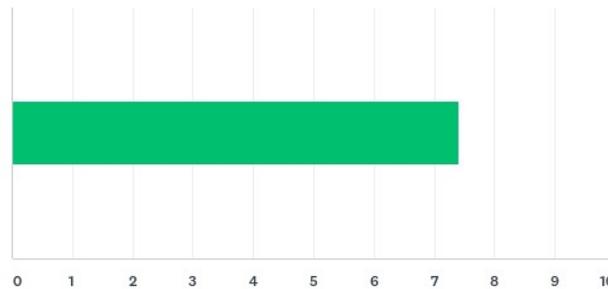
Q45 Were your employers interested in your opinions?



Q46 Were your colleagues interested in your opinions?

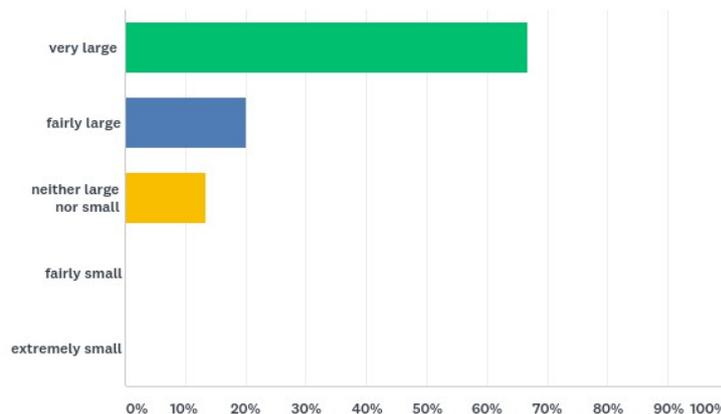


Q49 To what extent do you feel your superiors were willing to use your expertise and knowledge?

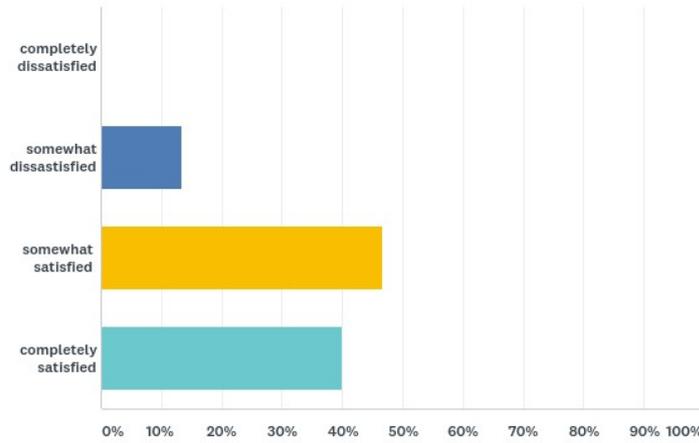


None of the interviewees complained about lack of autonomy.

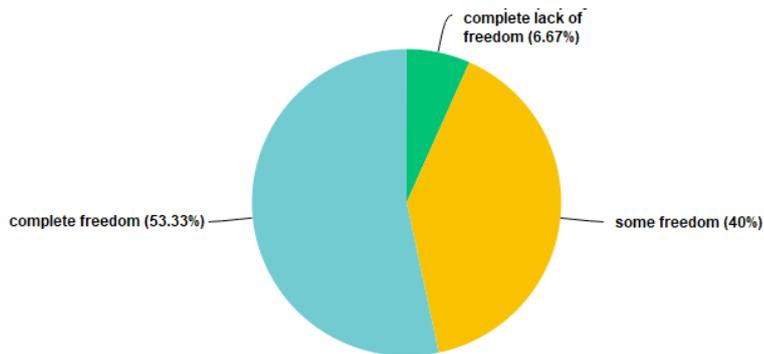
Q48 How would you describe the amount of autonomy you were given?



Q62 How would you describe your job autonomy satisfaction?



Q63 Did you have freedom of selecting your stories, angles and sources?



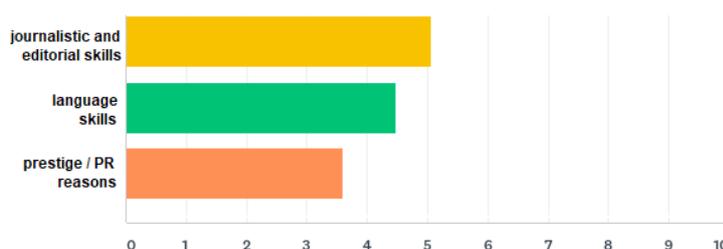
## CHAPTER 6: SKILLS AND IMPLICATIONS



## (I) New skills, expertise and how they can be utilised

The interviewees said they were mostly hired by Asian news organisations for their journalistic, editorial and language skills, and because of the prestige and PR reasons (for example because it looks better to have foreign team members).

Q36 What were the main skills or qualities you have been hired for by your host organisation?

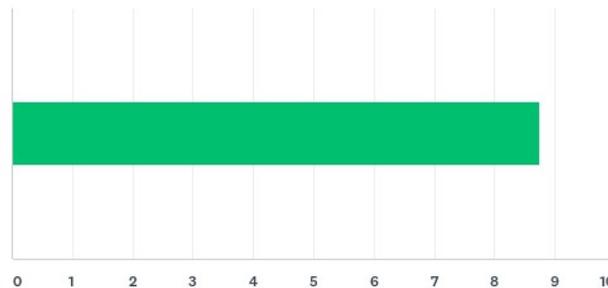


All the interviewed journalists said **they have learned a lot** during their time in Asian newsrooms. They pointed out that these stints helped them to **better understand the host societies** and regions and acquire knowledge on the **current affairs**. They have developed **increased cultural sensitivity** and the skill of accessing **local sources** effectively.

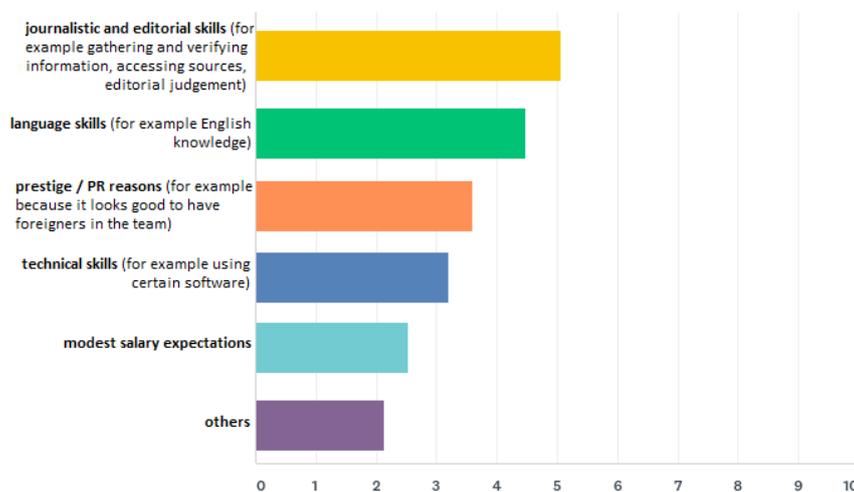
They think their expertise could be used for **analysis of the host regions** and **foreign reporting**. It is the latter that they feel they could improve in Western journalism the most. They also think of sensitising Western journalists on **consequences of reporting** as important. In some cases, they claimed that their experience could be utilised for improving the use of new technologies in Western media.

The responders think all their newly acquired skills could be of use elsewhere in the world, particularly: flexibility, explanatory reporting, understanding Asian audiences and regional cultures, increased cultural sensibility and accessing local sources.

Q74 How much did you learn during your time in your host newsroom?



Q36 What were the main skills or qualities you have been hired for by your host organisation?

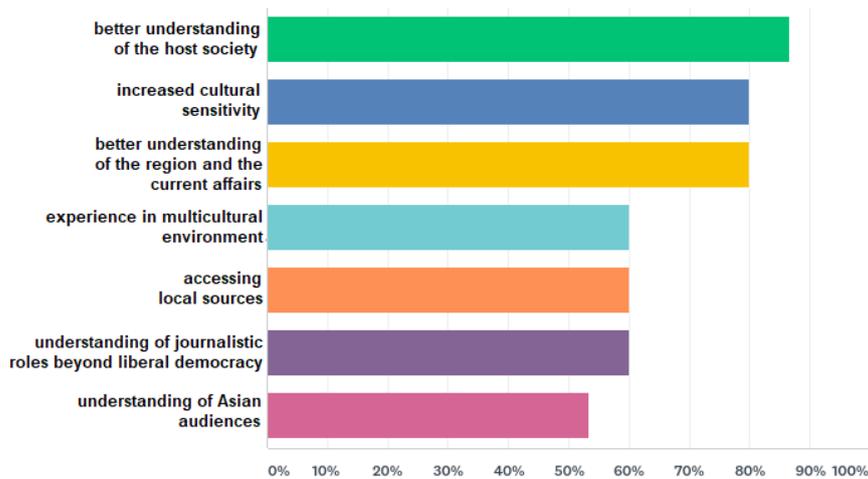


### Top skills learned were:

- (1) **better understanding of the host society (86.6%)**
- (2) **increased cultural sensitivity, better understanding of the region and current affairs (80%)**
- (3) **accessing local sources, experience in a multicultural environment, understanding of the roles that journalists play beyond liberal democracy (60%)**

#### (4) understanding of Asian audiences (53%)

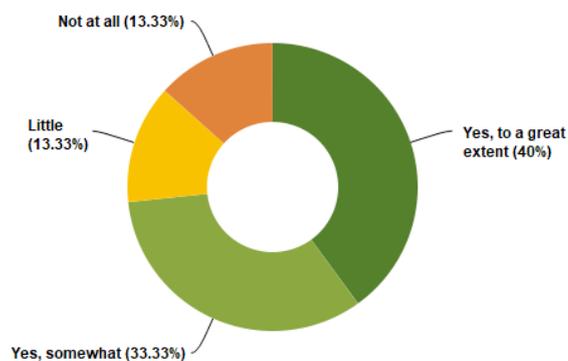
Q75 Tick or name at least 3 new skills learnt or knowledge gained while working for Asian organisation(s) that you wouldn't have had the chance to learn in your home country



Six interviewees said they now have more 'flexibility when it comes to organisational models and editorial expectations' and four said they have developed new language skills.

When asked directly, majority said they can now better understand their host countries' audiences and communicate with them more effectively.

Q77 Has your experience in Asia helped you to better understand the needs of your host country's audiences and to communicate with them more effectively?

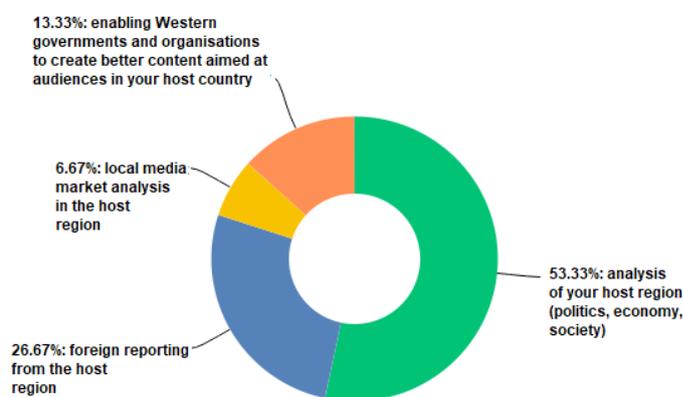


Many expat media professionals found that working in these environments, often

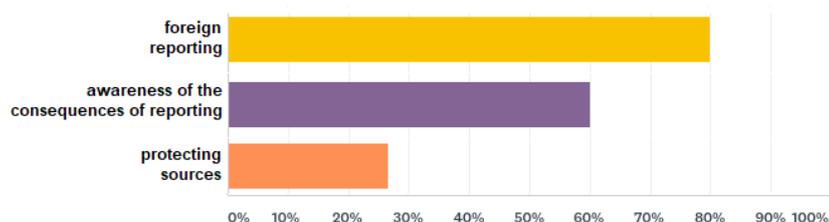
hostile for traditional journalism, have equipped them with knowledge, that could be utilised to improve the global practice of the craft. They think the expertise gained could be potentially used to:

- (1) analysis of the host regions
- (2) foreign reporting
- (3) enabling Western governments and organisations to create better content aimed at audiences in their host country
- (4) local media market analysis

Q81 Do you think the expertise you have acquired working as an expatriate journalist could be best utilised to:



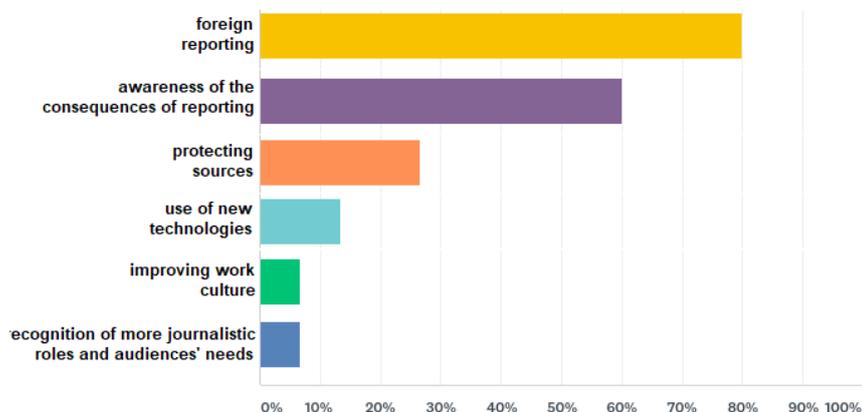
Q82 Could your journalistic experience in Asian news organisations help to improve Western journalism? If so, in which areas?



Areas in which the interviewees said they could improve Western journalism include:

- (1) foreign reporting
- (2) awareness of political consequences of reporting
- (3) protecting sources

Q82 Could your journalistic experience in Asian news organisations help to improve Western journalism? If so, in which areas?



Even though improvements in work culture were generally not seen as something that could be brought from Asian newsrooms, one male journalist pointed out:

*„Several working mothers were able to bring in toddlers or young kids on some occasions when a sitter wasn't available. This didn't disturb our environment and could help bring in more women to the workplace. I can't imagine this happening in Britain!” – Journalist (35-44), Thailand*

## (II) The study implications

While Western journalists in Asian press are unlikely to change journalism principles in their host countries or influence media systems in independent Asian states, they still might impact individual colleagues, provide their chosen newsrooms with certain skills and fresh approach to work. Having said that, their Asian skills and expertise could be much more precious back home than their Western training has been in Asia.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>37</sup>As this study has shown, expatriates in Asian newsrooms have barely any influence on editorial decisions and therefore limited impact on audiences, so their capital is their knowledge and it seems to be more useful in the West

Expats' familiarity with their host regions on many levels (including cultural, political and organisational) could eventually create better reporting on these regions and, more broadly, better international journalism back home. It could also lead to more conscious reporting, with news people more aware of potential consequences of their stories. To a lesser extent it could spread know-how regarding source protection.

But usability is not limited just to the realm of the media. Apart from foreign desks in expats' home countries, public diplomacy, government security services, academia and NGOs are among the sectors that could benefit from these professionals' expertise and sometimes even influence. For example, those who rise to prominence and belong well-known in Asia, could become effective ambassadors of their own culture, help to spread it and facilitate international cooperation.

This study shows great diversity of journalistic cultures, values and moral codes. The recent literature suggests that Asian cultures, including those in journalism are less comprehensible for Westerners than previously hoped and vice versa. There is little common values, little mutual influence and little deep understanding. Therefore 'translators of cultures' – as Polish reporter and writer Ryszard Kapuściński liked to think of himself (Strączek ed., 2003)<sup>38</sup> – are more needed than ever. Culturally conscious Western workers of Eastern newsrooms win practical knowledge, skills and contacts. Not only they can serve as bridges between cultures. They might become innovators, discovering new paths and asking questions no-one else is able to pose. If journalism is to question the current order, they will inevitably question more.

There is little doubt that making editorial offices more culturally diverse will lead to more creativity and more questioning (which might be in the interest of some news organisations). Perhaps both cultural freshers and old timers are needed in a

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than it is in Asia.

<sup>38</sup> '(...) I would describe my profession as the one of a translator. But translating not from one language into another – rather from one culture into another. As early as 1912, Bronisław Malinowski pointed out that the world of cultures is not a hierarchical world (at the time, it was a blasphemy for all apologists of Eurocentrism), that there are no higher and lower cultures, they are all equal, just simply – different. This is even more true nowadays, in our diverse, multicultural world. The world in which, in the same time, cultures are increasingly intertwined and interpenetrating. The challenge is to create between them not a relationship of dependence and submission, but one of understanding and partnership' (Strączek ed. 2003, P. 13).

functional, effective team. But outsiders can only be an addition, never a majority, they can suggest, never school, come up with new ideas, never force them. Above all, they must accept and embrace differences. In this new, interconnected world more compromises and more cooperation will be needed.

### **(IIa) Next steps**

The results of this study could be practically used in several ways not only in the media industry, but also in academia, government agencies and NGOs:

- \* They could help to create a set of guidelines for expat journalists planning to work abroad to enhance their experience and magnify their impact
- \* They could be useful for organisations that deliver journalistic and intercultural training
- \* Both Asian and Western media managers might find them handy while building and running their teams
- \* Beyond news organisations, also diplomats, members of governmental agencies, consultancies and multinational businesses might use this study to add to their understanding of Asian media
- \* As a first-of-its-kind work, this paper could serve as an exploratory piece that might inspire academics to pursue larger research projects on expat journalism

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## APPENDIX

### Western journalism in Asia: informal interviews

Apart from asking questions in a formalised way, I have also spoken informally with many Western media professionals in the largest continent: foreign correspondents and expat journalists in Asian news organisations, including those who had turned into scholars. Their experience goes beyond the geographical area covered in this study and stretches throughout South, Southeast and East Asia; they have worked, among others, in places such as Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia and Pakistan.

The following excerpts and recurring themes show the broader context of this project and can serve as an inspiration for future research.

#### **EXPATS ARE HIRED FOR LANGUAGE SKILLS**

Journalists with foreign passports, especially producers and editors, seem to often get hired by Asian media primarily for their language skills. In case of China, modest salary expectations has been also mentioned as an important factor, as Chinese outlets still reportedly pay less than, for instance, Al Jazeera and RT television networks. Another factor is related to public relations: some managers believe it looks good to have foreigners in a team, interviewees said. „Sometimes, [Western] 22-year olds become hosts of shows because they look good and speak English,” said a correspondent who has been closely monitoring Chinese television. According to him, older media professionals were previously hired as trainers but they are not looked for anymore.

*„You are either a face or an English polishing machine!”*,

the correspondent summed up. While motivations to stay are numerous, those familiar with Chinese newsrooms admit there is a high turnover when it comes to Western employees.

#### **LOCAL LANGUAGES ARE IMPORTANT**

While most of the interviewees use English in a professional capacity, many

find it important to learn the basics of the languages of their host countries. A journalist who has worked in India, Myanmar, Thailand and Cambodia said:

*„You can go in for working in South and Southeast Asia without speaking Hindi, Khmer or Sinhalese but that helps. Showing off language skills shows your sources that you are really committed”*

His colleague put it this way: „Westerners are very respected in Asia and when you know two words [in a local language] it helps tremendously, the effort is appreciated”.

## **POLICIES ARE VOLATILE, OFFICIAL SOURCES OFTEN UNAVAILABLE**

Each and every country covered in this study has a long history of suppressing media. For example Sri Lanka used harsh emergency regulations to curb press freedom, reporters faced forced disappearances and death, Myanmar’s censorship board, the Press Scrutiny and Registration Department, ceased to exist only in 2012 while media in Singapore are still heavily regulated by the Info-communications Media Development Authority (IMDA).

Many of those who have worked in the East pointed out that often, the ability of reporting stories there – both in the case of international and local media – depends on the current political situation.

*„In Thailand, a story you could report on Monday, could not be reported on Wednesday anymore,”*

said one foreign correspondent. There are places, particularly China, where editorial stance regarding certain countries directly reflects the diplomatic relationships. For example, travel shows showcasing their (i.e. USA, Taiwan etc.) positive sides could be done only when political relations were good, reporters said. If they suddenly got worse, it could happen that someone decided overnight that the story or the episode of a TV series gets cancelled. **„My boss received a call from his boss saying someone on the upper level decided that we’re not doing this anymore. It usually happened several steps above us,”** a former Chinese TV presenter said.

Government sources are often less than easily accessible. „Thailand is pain in the ass,” another foreign correspondent did not hesitate to say. „You ask them questions and they tell you to send a letter. But, you say, you’re on a deadline and the government has just introduced new policies. So eventually, they ask you for the list of questions, but it takes them a month to reply”. However, reporters’ experience differs from country to country. „In Indonesia, you can get a [mobile] phone number of a minister or an army general. You ask if they have a moment and they might say yes or tell you to call their assistant, but generally, they are willing to talk. Under Suharto things were much more formal than they are now,” said a correspondent in Jakarta.

Many mentioned that Western ideas often do not fit local editorial policies and it gets difficult to convince Asian managers to the certain topics and angles, even for those holding senior positions. This researcher has been told about a Seoul newspaper editor who struggled to pursue controversial stories.

Journalists who have worked in China mentioned the large number of permissions needed to work in the field and added that everything needs to be orchestrated, even in case of recording people on streets. **„In Beijing, you just don’t go against the rules”**, a field reporter concluded.

## **BEING AN OUTSIDER CAN BE ADVANTAGEOUS**

Sometimes, Western journalists have easier access to sources than their local counterparts. „[In India], they treat you better because you simply look different. You are easy to spot, people know that you’re in the town. Being a Westerner gives you some extra respect, access and interest of people, who are more willing to talk to you” - a journalist covering India and Pakistan said. „In India or Sri Lanka, if you ask a traffic cop on the side of the road a few questions, he will be happy to talk”, he added. Many reporters said that even in the most harsh places, the fact of being Western can provide some extra protection, although this protection is not always enough to avoid harassment.

## **SELF-CENSORSHIP IS COMMON**

In some cases, interviewees seem to see various forms of self-censorship as practical – simply in order to be able to continue journalistic work. A foreign correspondent in Pakistan said:

*„You restrict yourself and get very conscious about what you write. You might do other stories first and save up for later the one that’s going to get you kicked out from the country”*

Others are even more limited. „There were some explosive stories I haven’t touched. Partially because they required some digging. Another reason is that my wife is a local and we have a young child. **Throwing us out from here would turn our life upside down!** Of course I report truth, but some strategy is needed,” admitted another international correspondent. Western employees of Chinese media, in turn, self-censor because they simply know what is not going to get published anyway. For example, one recalled, you could not say Taipei was a capital and Taiwan was a country. As an editor and former reporter who has lived in China for more than twenty years put it: **„If you want to be a journalist in a Western sense and work in China, sometimes you have to abandon this dream.”**

## **WORK CULTURE DIFFERENCES CAN BE FRUSTRATING**

Journalists with work experience in China have drawn a picture of newsrooms of Beijing and Shanghai populated by an extremely obedient workforce that never gives their opinion or argues with their seniors. Describing the atmosphere in one such a newsroom, a former employee said:

*„You do your work and keep your head low. People’s aspirations aren’t that important. The organisation needs to be harmonious, so everyone knows their place”*

Another person who has worked in several Chinese media claimed that in most of them, teams were governed by fear and their colleagues always felt they might get fired if they don’t follow editorial directions. **„People were terrified to make a mistake,”** the journalist affirmed.

„[In *The Bangkok Post*], Westerners are only backpacking editors and have no say at all (...). It is very rare that a Westerner gets a senior position in South and Southeast Asia,” said a person familiar with the regional market.

Those few foreigners who manage teams sometimes get frustrated with different journalistic cultures that apply in their new countries. „Some local

journalists who reported to me were refusing to tell the other side of the story,” said an editor who has worked for a publication in Southeast Asia.

Western media workers who have done stints in Chinese outlets stress that the choice of stories is very different from their home countries. Reporters tend to circumnavigate topics thought of as ‘dangerous’ and the news is not meant to change the world, as one of them pointed out:

***„We had to make sure that the message doesn’t go against the grain. Stories must be safe. You don’t hunt down or highlight certain aspects”***

For example, it is unlikely to hear on a Chinese history show about workers who died building the Great Wall of China.

The impact that foreigners make on Asian newsrooms seems to be extremely limited. „It is the foreigners who are the guests and have to adjust. Many are surprised how valid, from their point of view, opinions get rejected. It’s like banging one’s head against the wall without necessarily knowing why”, said a media professional who has worked in China for decades.

## **BUILDING RAPPORT IS CRUCIAL**

Informal relations seem to be highly valued in Pakistan, as one reporter learned: „Pakistan can be restrictive for information. But a bottle of whiskey or another small present (*‘bakshish’*) for an official, accepting invites for speeches and parties and being seen around helps very much”.

Some interviewees noticed that in China, for conducting the work smoothly, building a proper relationship (*guanxi*) with sources is essential. „When we went filming in the field, the first thing was to meet a local tourism board for a dinner so that they get to know us. Companies often fail in China because they don’t perform *guanxi* properly, with the right people”, said a journalist who produced a TV travel documentary.

In some places, making informal connections turned out to bring more immediate perks than in the West. „In many Western countries, channels of government information are extremely formalised and tightly controlled. You get to talk mostly with media relations people and work very hard to develop your sources.

In Southeast Asia, information flow is generally less rigid and informal channels are more useful to get an interview”, one of the interviewees stated.

## **IT CAN GET DANGEROUS**

The case of Alan Shadrake, a British author jailed in Singapore in 2011, is remembered by expats working in the city-state (many of them hired in lifestyle and technological media), as much as the one of the local blogger Roy Ngerng who has been effectively forced into exile in 2016. Even though Lee Hsien Loong’s government uses defamation suits against its critics, some of the news folk have good opinion about the way it deals with the media. „You can say different things about Singapore’s PAP party, but they are very helpful in getting to talk to people and have nothing to hide,” a Southeast Asian correspondent said.

There are several other cases of foreign media people being prosecuted in South and Southeast Asia that are widely discussed among expats. Australian filmmaker James Ricketson was sentenced to six years in prison for alleged ‘espionage’ in Cambodia, but eventually pardoned. Ross Dunkley, co-founder of *The Myanmar Times*, had been arrested on several occasions and eventually sentenced by Burmese court for 13 years on drugs charges. In 2018, two Reuters reporters, Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, were jailed in Myanmar for 7 years under the colonial-era Official Secrets Act and released – under international pressure – in 2019.

A Western correspondent reporting from Myanmar said: „Special branch agents followed me in 2010. I would see them everyday in restaurants where I ate and other places I visited. Part of my job was to get rid of them: I walked through crowded markets, changed taxis multiple times and only then had my meetings. One time, when I wasn’t there, they came to look for me at my hotel. Of course, I was there on a tourist visa because I wouldn’t get any other”.