

China's young reporters give up on journalism: 'You can't write what you want'

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Beijing's decision to expel the French journalist Ursula Gauthier in December has thrust the dispiriting situation facing foreign correspondents in China into the headlines. But Chinese journalists are facing far greater challenges – and many reporters are simply turning their back on the profession as a result.

David Bandurski, an expert on Chinese journalism from the University of Hong Kong, said an exodus was now under way from the country's newspapers as talented young journalists decided there was no future in the profession.

Experts say two key factors are driving the hollowing out of Chinese newsrooms. One is the increasingly bleak financial situation facing newspapers as they struggle to adapt to the digital age. The other is the ever greater constraints being placed by President Xi Jinping's increasingly authoritarian Communist party on what can and cannot be reported.

Since Xi became leader, Beijing has launched an all-out assault on freedom of expression, jailing journalists, bloggers and outspoken civil rights lawyers such as Pu Zhiqiang, who was recently convicted for sending seven sarcastic tweets.

In one of the most notorious cases a 70-year-old journalist, Gao Yu, was jailed for leaking state secrets after she allegedly passed an internal Communist party document to the foreign media.

Another journalist, Wang Xiaolu, a business reporter for one of China's top financial magazines, was arrested and forced to make a televised "confession" for writing a story about last year's stock market turmoil.

China fell one place in last year's Reporters Without Borders press freedom ranking and now occupies 176th position out of 180 countries.

Lin, who now works for a film company run by the billionaire Jack Ma's Alibaba group, denied politics were behind his decision to quit journalism, instead pointing to the dwindling readership and influence of Chinese newspapers. "Nowadays, nobody reads your stories," he said. "Nowadays, readers are all living inside their smartphones or inside WeChat."

But his frustration with censorship was evident in a blogpost in 2014 when he lashed out at the destruction of Southern Weekly, the once respected liberal broadsheet that he said had inspired him to become a journalist. "All these years, people like us have seen our articles killed and our voices silenced, and we've started to get used to it. We started to make compromises and to censor ourselves," Lin reportedly wrote at the time. "We've gone too far, as if we have forgotten why we had chosen this industry to begin with."

Despite such problems Lin, who resigned from his last journalism job in April 2014, said it was still possible to write worthwhile journalism in China. "It's just like a person has 10 fingers. There is one finger you can't use but the other nine all work. There is one story you can't write but there are still nine others you can."

Asked what the 10th finger was, Lin laughed. "It's the same for you," he replied. "I guess I don't need to say it out loud."

Other young journalists are far less optimistic. "Being a journalist has no meaning any more," said a thirtysomething editor from one of China's leading news organisations. "My greatest feeling is that in recent years the industry's freedoms have reached their lowest ebb in history."

Before the Xi Jinping era, editors at least had the autonomy to choose their own headlines, the journalist complained. Now newspapers and websites were forced to conform to a tedious monotony of praise for China's Communist leaders. "The top headline must [always] be about Xi Jinping and the second must be about [prime minister] Li Keqiang," the editor said. "If you read one website, you have read them all."

Bandurski, the author of a book on investigative reporting in China, said the Xi administration's growing intolerance of critical reporting was becoming clearer by the month.

In the past, Chinese newspapers endured six-month-long government crackdowns in silence but would emerge from those periods by publishing a powerful investigative report or exposé. "We are not seeing those kind of examples any more," the academic said. "We are seeing much more silence."

Newspapers or websites that still tried to push the boundaries found themselves slapped back into line. A recent investigation into the social and environmental cost of the Three Gorges Dam by Shanghai's *The Paper* was pulled off the internet after seven hours.

“The winter has turned into an ice age in terms of media,” Bandurski said. “For investigative reporting it has worsened steadily since 2005 and then of course the Olympics was a tough time. But since 2012 under Xi it has just gotten much, much worse.”

Lin, who has a three-year-old son, said he had no regrets over his decision to abandon an industry whose days were numbered. “Chinese media is a disaster now. Even if these talented people stayed, what could they do?” he said of the ongoing exodus of young reporters.

After more than a decade in the business, the editor, who declined to be named for fear of reprisals, said he was also on the verge of resigning. “Freedom is very important – it is the most important thing – but we don’t have it in China, especially in journalism,” he said.

“You can’t write what you want. You can’t interview who you want. And even if you do, you can’t publish it. Working in the Chinese media feels like you are wasting your life.”

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