



Survey reveals worrying trend of confidence decline in press freedom

Both the public and journalists believe that press freedom has deteriorated in 2015, a recent Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA) survey reveals. The Hong Kong Press Freedom Index drops 1.4 points to 47.7 for the general public and 0.7 points to 38.2 for journalists, showing a decline in two consecutive years.

HKJA Chairperson, Sham Yee-lan worries the all time low rating of press freedom index shows the press freedom, which is a pillar of Hong Kong's success, has been eroded at its roots, even worse, the fundamentals of the rights the general public is enjoying are also at stake.

She points out that journalists being more sensitive to changes in the media industry tend to give a lower rating to press freedom than the general public. The more significant drop in rating by the general public hints the damages caused to press freedom is so obvious that even the general public is aware of the problem.

The first Hong Kong Press Freedom Index recorded the situation of Hong Kong in the year 2013. It is compiled through a scientific research method designed by a group of academics. There are two groups of target respondents: the general public and journalists. For the 2015 index, a total of 1,021 Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong residents aged 18 and above were interviewed by the Public Opinion Programme of the University of Hong Kong between January 14 and 19, 2016. HKJA distributed questionnaires to journalists between January 6 and 16 February, 2016. 446 completed questionnaires were returned.

Both the general public and journalists say over the past year, press freedom had deteriorated. A total of 54% of public respondents believed that press freedom had worsened, 34% believed there had been no change. The figures for journalist respondents are more worrying. A total of 85% believe that press freedom has worsened and just 1% believe that press freedom has improved in the past year.

Differing perceptions between the general public and journalists are observed in how they rate other areas in press freedom. While the general public give an average rate of 6.1, journalist respondents rate it much lower at 5.1 only. It is also found that journalist respondents are more dissatisfied than the general public with

press freedom. With 0 being very dissatisfied and 10 being very satisfied, the average rate for the general public is 5.8, a bit lower than last year, for journalists it is 4.4.

Furthermore, while both the general public and journalists believe that self-censorship in Hong Kong becomes more common, journalists regard the problem more serious. With 0 being very common and 10 being not at all common, the average rate for journalists is 2.9 while it is 4.2 for the general public. Both journalists and the general public believe that the news media has the greatest worries about criticizing the central government in Beijing.

That existing laws are insufficient to allow journalists to obtain the information they needed for reporting also renders undesirable effects on press freedom. With 10 being very adequate and 0 being very inadequate, the average rate for the public is 5.7 and for journalists 4.4, further 0.1 and 0.2 down from 2014 respectively. To counter the deterioration in press freedom, Sham Yee-lan calls for the government to introduce a Freedom to Information Act at the soonest.

On violence against journalists, both the general public and journalist respondents believe that compared with 2014, incidents involving extralegal intimidation or physical violence when reporting are tend to less common. With 10 being very common and 0 being not at all common, the average rate for 2015 for the general public is 4.6 and for journalists 4.9.

Though this year survey reveals a declining confidence in press freedom, both the general public and journalists believe that the effectiveness of the watchdog role played by the Hong Kong media has not worsen further. The average rate for the general public and journalists both maintains at 6.3 as in the year 2014 (with 10 being very effective).

Sham Yee-lan concludes whereas the survey finds the watchdog role of the media is still effective, without sufficient protection by law, journalists are fighting an uphill battle. She said the split of the community causing intolerance to different viewpoints, the Government releases information with improper timing or channels, worsening of self censorship, all add undesirable effect to press freedom. She urges the Government to take a lead to safeguard press freedom which is one of the rights guaranteed by the Basic Law and it is the responsibility of the Government to uphold press freedom and freedom of speech.

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- Ms. Mak Yin Ting (Former Chairperson, HKJA)
- Ms. Eva Tsang (Convenor of Press Freedom Sub-committee, HKJA)
- Dr. Clement So (Professor, School of Journalism & Communication, CUHK)
- Prof. Lisa Leung (Associate Professor, Department of Cultural Studies, Lingnan University)
- Dr. Robert Chung (Director, Public Opinion Programme, HKU)

For further enquiries, please call 25910692.

Hong Kong Journalists Association

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