

Covering Xi Jinping's China: Post-event Report

How can the world's foreign correspondents help us understand an ever more powerful China if the administration of President Xi Jinping restricts their movements, cuts them off from talking to ordinary Chinese citizens, and expels a growing number of reporters?

And how do the reporters themselves get around these obstacles to still get to the bottom of the story?

Diligence, creativity, and anguish are among the answers that were openly shared by two of the most globally influential journalists covering China—Jamil Anderlini, the Asia Editor of *Financial Times*, and Adrienne Carter, the Asia Editor of *The New York Times*—in a Zoom conference September 30 held by the Fletcher School's Edward R. Murrow Center for a Digital World at Tufts University.

“Undoubtedly it is getting worse,” Anderlini said in response to questions from center director Edward Schumacher-Matos. “I’ve reported from North Korea and it does feel like it is getting more and more like that. It is not there yet, but it does feel like it is heading in that direction.”

Anderlini is a dean amongst the foreign journalists covering China, while Carter brought the insights of a veteran journalist who arrived a year ago. Both were speaking from Hong Kong, where they are now tenuously based. They oversee reporting teams of several dozen journalists and researchers in Beijing, Hong Kong, Taiwan and, for the Times, the newest base to watch on China, South Korea.

China ranks 177th out of 180 countries in the 2020 World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders. Under the Communist Party's control over domestic state and privately-owned media, China is followed only by North Korea, Turkmenistan, and Eritrea in the ranking. Foreign reporters working in China encounter more and more obstacles in the field as Xi's administration cuts back on visas for foreign journalists and decreases access to coverage.

Carter came face to face with China's restrictive media regulations earlier this year when the government told the American reporters working for the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Wall Street Journal* whose visas expire in 2020 to halt reporting and hand in their press cards within 10 days.

She described a press freedom that has “deteriorated incredibly rapidly.”

“I feel like we have dealt with about five years of crisis in about twelve months,” she added. “From the protests, to the virus, to in March we had seven of our journalists expelled as part of the tit for tat between Washington and Beijing, [to] in July [the imposing of] the National Security Law over Hong Kong.”

The two cited the effects of restrictions in a near-Orwellian regime. Some reporters have been followed by up to seven police officers as they do interviews in the streets. Access to certain

stories such as in Xinjiang have been restricted altogether. Average Chinese civilians no longer speak freely to reporters, they say. And of course, reporters have been expelled from the country entirely, dramatically reducing the size of the foreign press corps on the ground.

According to Carter, of the 22 reporters the *New York Times* has covering China, only one on the mainland is a full foreign correspondent. The *Times* has a team of lower level researchers there. However, they are employees of the Chinese government, under the government's rules, which limits their usefulness.

Last year, *Financial Times* had nine foreign correspondents covering China from the mainland. Today there are only four left, Anderlini said.

The Chinese government's reluctance to issue new visas is one of the reasons that the *Times* is moving part of its China team to South Korea.

Oddly, Covid-19 has been a blessing of sorts. News organizations worldwide have had to learn how to do more reporting remotely. By leaning heavily on social media and local reports, Anderlini and Carter said that their teams were able to get most of the pandemic story. As for covering the government and policy, they rely heavily on documents, public records, and published speeches, they said. Nonetheless, they said, the diminished on-the-ground presence is palpable.

"It makes us all worse off to see many fewer people from the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and other news organizations," Anderlini said. "That is bad for journalism. I think it is bad for China. I think it is bad for the world and the world's understanding of China... I think it is just terrible. I hope that China stops expelling foreign journalists."

The event, "Covering Xi Jinping's China: A Conversation With New York Times and Financial Times Correspondents," came the morning after the first 2020 Presidential debate between President Donald Trump and Vice President Joe Biden. When asked about how a Biden presidency might impact journalism in China, Anderlini recalled a trip by Biden to China when he was vice president.

"About eight years ago, [when New York Times journalists were] being threatened with expulsion from China, then Vice President Biden came to Beijing and he met with a very small group of journalists. He took it very, very seriously," Anderlini recounted. The vice president raised the possibility of expelling Chinese journalists from the United States as a reciprocal measure, he said. But as he weighed the pros and cons in the meeting, he decided against the idea was self-defeating and contrary to American values.

The Trump administration has since gone in the other direction and expelled some Chinese reporters in the U.S. who work for China's state-owned media.

Indisputably, the future of press freedom in China is bleak, Carter and Anderlini said. Xi Jinping has moved to consolidate his power, omit political term limits, and move towards a tight-lipped media environment.

When asked if they could imagine a time when American news organizations have *no* press corps in China, Carter replied emphatically, “I hope that is never the case... I will keep as many reporters on the ground as I possibly can... We operate in Cairo, we operate in Russia, we operate in incredibly difficult environments for foreign media,” Carter said. “We will be where the big stories are whether it is difficult or not.”

“Foreign media were the last independent voices,” said Anderlini. “Without the *New York Times* and *Financial Times* and others, it is a black box.”