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George, C, Zeng, Y [orcid.org/0000-0003-1379-7840](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1379-7840) and Mazumdar, S (2021) Navigating conflicts of interest: Ethical policies of 12 exemplary Asian media organisations. *Journalism*, 22 (6). pp. 1279-1295. ISSN 1464-8849

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884919832188>

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Navigating conflicts of interest:  
Ethical policies of 12 exemplary Asian media organisations

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## **Abstract**

While research into non-Western media systems and professional norms are growth areas in journalism studies, little is known about the policies of news organisations beyond a few celebrated global brands. This exploratory study is situated in that gap. It examines 12 reputable media organisations in seven territories – China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Philippines and Taiwan. Through interviews with top-level editors and executives, the study analyses their stated policies with regard to commercial conflicts of interest. In particular, how they deal with pressures from owners and advertisers who want favourable news coverage and how they respond to the demand for commercial deals that blur the boundaries between editorial and advertising. The study responds to recent calls in media ethics scholarship for critical-empiricist research on the ‘possible’ world, focusing on actually existing exemplars rather than abstract ideals. The 12 organisations have adopted a range of responses to these pressures. In general, most have policies aimed at preserving their editorial integrity even as they become more accommodating to the market. Our interviewees point to the importance of organisational culture, more than written policies, in maintaining professionalism: most of the organisations were founded by journalist-publishers whose ethos continues to exert a strong influence. While these organisations have lessons for others, it may be unrealistic to expect their culture of journalistic independence to diffuse beyond a small set of principled media outlets.

## **Keywords**

Asia, conflict of interest, journalism, journalistic independence, media ethics

Journalists' ability to perform their professional roles has been assessed mainly in relation to their freedom from government control. However, commercial factors also pose significant impediments. Critical scholarship has long recognised the market as a major threat to democratic communication (Baker, 2006; McChesney, 1999). From a liberal perspective, the social responsibility tradition has tried to contain the damage that commercial forces can cause to journalism's public interest mission (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947). In countries with strong state control, such as China, marketization has resulted in a new set of obstacles to professional journalism (Zhao, 2008). In societies with little or no direct government censorship, such as Indonesia (Tapsell, 2015) and India (Saeed, 2015), commercial forces are the main threat to independent journalism. As news media's traditional business model weakens and profit margins shrink, there is more pressure to follow market signals rather than the public interest.

This article reports on an exploratory study of how leading news organisations in Asia frame their responses to potential commercial conflicts of interest. In particular, we want to understand how editors of respected outlets try to deal with pressures from advertisers at a time when the balance of corporate power has been shifting away from editorial departments towards marketing arms. First, what are the organisations' policies for handling pressures from newsmakers that also happen to be advertisers, and that may use their advertising budgets as carrots and sticks to try to influence editorial coverage? Second, what are their policies towards commercial deals that blur the lines between editorial and advertising, such as 'native' advertising and sponsored events? Third, how are norms of editorial independence developed, communicated and reinforced within the organisations?

Our chosen research questions address gaps in the literature. One has already been noted above: far more is known about political control than about commercial pressures. Second, although journalism studies have been generating rich new data about rank-and-file journalists' attitudes around the world, there has not been a commensurate increase in knowledge about organisation leaders' policies and norms. Organisational settings and priorities represent major influences on journalists' ethical conduct, affecting their practices in myriad, mundane ways. In their 17-country study, Hanitzsch et al. (2010) found that journalists perceive organisational factors to be bigger influences on their work than political and economic ones. In Indonesia, Hanitzsch and Hidayat (2012) found that internal factors such as procedures, standards and conventions were seen as having a greater influence on

journalists' work than media laws or ownership. The under-coverage of rural poverty by Indian media can be traced to both advertisers' interest in urban consumers and budget-strapped broadcast journalists reporting news from sites that are within driving distance (Rao, 2008). In Singapore, journalists said that newsroom learning, senior colleagues and the example of respected news organisations shaped their ideas about ethics more than their upbringing or their religion (Hao and George, 2012).

Third, studies on journalism ethics have tended to focus, on one hand, on critiquing bad practices and, on the other, articulating standards based on moral philosophy. Both lines of inquiry are necessary, but have the unintended effect of casting media ethicists as fault-finding preachers. Therefore, some scholars suggest that instead of always contrasting what generally is the case with what should be in an ideal world, media critique should also present a picture of what media can be. Rinke (2017), for example, has called for critical-empiricist research on the 'possible' world. Plaisance (2014), similarly, recommends an 'exemplar' approach to exploring excellence in media, focusing on actually existing practice. Our study is very much in that spirit. The chosen organisations are by no means perfect, but this perhaps makes them more relatable and thus, we hope, more powerful examples of excellent professional practice.

### **The study**

Our study covers 12 media organisations in seven Asian territories: the People's Republic of China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippines and Taiwan (see Table 1). Media systems that enjoy higher levels of media freedom are overrepresented, since they tend to be more hospitable to professional autonomy. We made it a point to include China simply because so little is known about how media organisations there deal with economic conflicts of interests. For each territory, we consulted experts such as media academics and practitioners to identify organisations that have a strong reputation for taking professional standards seriously, even if not the largest or most profitable. In most countries, there was a clear consensus on which organisations we should study. In India, few would disagree that our two eventual choices qualify, though there are a handful of other organisations that would have been equally suitable. Our first choices in China (Caixin) and Taiwan (Commonwealth) declined to be interviewed. Eight of the final 12 organisations are print newspaper or magazine brands; four are online-only outlets. No television or radio companies were recommended to the list. This is not too surprising, as Asia lacks strong independent public

service broadcasters that can claim a tradition of nurturing high-quality professional journalism.

We obtained face-to-face interviews in the course of 2016–2018 with senior editors and, in some cases, publishers and marketing chiefs. This enabled us to find out about the organisations' policies from the men and women directly responsible for setting and implementing them. Obviously, the positions articulated by organisations' leaders may differ from how they are actually run. We consulted informed critics such as media scholars, competitors and former employees to get a more unvarnished picture of each organisation's performance, including any recent ethical scandals. Findings have been moderated accordingly. For example, claims by news executives that were contradicted by credible evidence from other sources are not reported.

### **Managing conflicts of interest**

The dilemmas explored in this study concern conflicts of interest, which Borden and Pritchard (2001) define as 'situations in which there is reason to worry that the independent judgment and performance of journalists as journalists may be compromised by interests that lie outside their journalistic role' (p. 88), which in turn can be defined normatively as threatening to the public interest (Christians and Nordenstreng, 2004). In commercial media, the need to cater to advertisers constitutes one of the main threats to journalism's public service mission.

#### *Direct advertiser pressure*

A core principle of professional journalism is that its practitioners should remain independent from those they cover (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001). Since advertisers are simultaneously current or potential newsmakers, news organisations' dependence on advertising revenue carries an obvious risk of conflict of interest. Pressure from advertisers is considered one of the main non-professional influences on news production (Coddington, 2015; Shoemaker and Reese, 2013; Soley and Craig, 1992). The purist solution is to abstain from accepting advertising. Only one organisation in our set has opted for this route: Taiwan's non-profit start-up, The Reporter. It is donation-driven and requires larger contributions to be vetted independently to ensure that they do not compromise its integrity. The financial viability of this approach remains in doubt.

Business and financial media often have the strictest rules on conflict of interest, as their clientele are particularly sensitive to any hint that coverage is biased by commercial considerations. Taiwan's *Business Weekly* has strong policies to avoid any perception of conflict of interest: it will not accept advertising from firms that it is likely to write about. This policy can be financially costly. *Business Weekly* was one of the only Taiwan publications that the organisers of the 2010 Shanghai Expo chose as advertising vehicles. Editors said they turned down its 52-week contract because they anticipated writing stories about this major event. Another case of a publication taking financially costly steps to avoid the perception of conflict of interest was at *Kompas*. When the country's largest cement company lodged a complaint with the Indonesian Press Council claiming unethical reporting, the editor instructed the marketing department to reject any advertising from the company. Getting ad revenue from the newsmaker in the midst of that dispute would 'give the wrong signal', the editor said. 'I wanted them to understand we cannot be dictated to'.

Another example of a publication that will turn away potentially compromising ad revenue is *Tempo*. It will not allow companies to use paid advertising to secure their right of reply. The principle behind this is that a newsmaker's right of reply should be a matter of editorial discretion; if a newsmaker can justify why a reply is required, it should not have to pay for it, lest the publication be seen as profiting from deficiencies in its original story. In one case, an executive made a mistake of allowing such an ad to run. When editors realised this, *Tempo* refused to accept payment for the ad.

A more conventional response is to strengthen the 'church-state' separation between the advertising and editorial departments of the media organisation. Some editors acknowledged that norms have shifted: gone are the days when the wall between editorial and marketing departments was so sacrosanct that it would have been scandalous for the editor to receive a phone call from their ad marketing colleagues or for ad sales staff to be even seen in the newsroom. Now, editors attend operational meetings with marketing and circulation heads. 'There's more interaction, but not interference', said *Anandabazar Patrika* editor Anirban Chattopadhyay. Or, as *Kompas* editor Budiman Tanuredjo put it, the 'firewall' has been replaced with a 'glass wall' allowing communication between departments. *Tempo* editor Arif Zulkifli acknowledged that the marketing department can sometimes contribute sound ideas. He gave the example of 'Hidden Paradise', a package about lesser known destinations in Indonesia. The idea came from the marketing department, which knew it would be attractive to advertisers. The editorial team felt that it made a suitable year-end feature. 'During the vacation time, we need something else other than scandals', Arif noted.

The issue sold out. ‘Independence is good, but we don’t need to see business as the enemy’, he said.

Although the wall is no longer as impenetrable as before, several of the organisations’ executives said that communication between editorial and marketing is strictly restricted to top echelons of the newsroom. What used to be the job of the owner – mediating between conflicting editorial and marketing goals – is now a shared responsibility among senior executives on both sides, but it is not delegated further down. Thus, at *The Telegraph*, ABP group’s English daily, the marketing department is not allowed to contact any journalist below the level of the editor or his deputy. The same principle applies at *Beijing News*. ‘The pressure won’t be passed down to reporters’, said Zhu Xuedong, its deputy chief editor. Similarly, the managing editor of *Rappler*, veteran journalist Glenda Gloria, described herself as the human firewall between editorial and marketing: she takes responsibility for making judgement calls about potential commercial conflicts of interest. Her editorial team is required to think only about the journalism.

A few acknowledged that advertisers could not be treated like any other newsmaker. ‘It is difficult to completely ignore the advertiser’, said Liu Yonggang, editor-in-chief of Shanghai’s *The Paper*. Dai Zigeng, publisher of *Beijing News*, was similarly candid that advertiser pressure posed a ‘dilemma’. For example, if a newsmaker points out that a news report has left out a significant detail, editors might be more amenable to running a follow-up story if that newsmaker was an advertiser. One news organisation admitted that it would very occasionally, in the interest of building goodwill with an advertiser, agree to run a brief that it might not otherwise have.

While many of the editors interviewed feel journalists can no longer afford to react self-righteously to requests from their marketing departments, and some admit to making compromises that they consider relatively harmless, all insisted that they continued to protect the essence of editorial integrity. They claimed that they did not buckle under pressures that would corrupt their missions to put the public first or harm their organisation’s reputation for independence. Most were able to cite specific instances when their organisations stood up to advertiser pressure. At the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, one bank withdrew its advertising for a while after the paper broke a story about a scam involving a bank employee. When a major advertiser, one of China’s Internet giants, tried to get *Beijing News* to quash an investigative report involving the company, the publisher told the journalists to carry on. Anandabazar Patrika lost all advertising from the state government of West Bengal after it supported the chief minister’s rival in the last elections. This has not tempered the newspaper’s approach,



because it believes its audience counts on its role as an independent critic. *Dawn* has lost all advertising from several major advertisers that its journalists angered, including all enterprises owned by Pakistan's defence forces.

Several interviewees pointed out that their outlet's reputation for independence was a core part of its brand value. Thus, Dawn Media Group's marketing chief, Ali Hasan Naqvi, said his department's job was to create an 'enabling environment' for editorial. Maria Ressa, founder and chief executive of *Rappler*, points out that the outlet's reputation for credibility and quality allows it to charge premium advertising rates. Therefore, undermining independence by pandering to advertisers would be against not only the journalists' professional values but also the company's commercial interests. Several editors said they could rely on their marketing departments to help educate irate advertisers about their editorial policies. Advertisers are reminded that it is to their advantage to associate themselves with a high-quality, credible brand, which would only be the case if the audience trusted the journalistic integrity of its editorial content.

At the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, chief marketing officer Charmaine Bautista-Pamintuan said that editors nowadays often warn the marketing department when a negative report about an advertiser is about to be published, so that marketing can prepare the ground. Advertisers may ask for a report not to be printed but will be told that this is not in the marketing department's control. Firm editorial policies are important, even for marketing. 'Advertisers want our credibility to rub off on their brand', she notes.

### *Hybrid promotional formats*

Advertisers have never been content with traditional display advertising and have always been keen to explore alternative formats to promote their brands, products and services. This demand for so-called 'native advertising' and 'sponsored content' has grown, along with advertisers' bargaining power in their relationship with news media. The new look and feel of online platforms, as well as their interactive possibilities, have also disrupted established conventions about the kind of advertising that reputable news organisations should and should not allow. New ethical norms are being created through practice. The decisions being made today by the most respected news organisations are likely to have a major impact on what other organisations and audiences consider acceptable practice.

The most extreme form of hybrid product is 'paid news' – or what Americans call 'pay for play' – where positive news coverage, even in elections, is a commodity that is sold

to corporations and political parties without the audience's knowledge. This notorious practice has been exposed in various parts of Asia, including India (Thakurta and Reddy, 2010) and China (Tsetsura, 2015). In India, a damning Press Council report was suppressed by media owners; it took the Election Commission to discipline the politicians concerned for malpractices in election campaign expenditure reporting (Thakurta, 2011). Not surprisingly, though, the media organisations included in our study have not been accused of this practice, even by their critics.

However, other than the ad-free *The Reporter*, all of them have been expanding the range of opportunities offered to advertisers. One development that newspaper veterans rue is the use of more intrusive formats, such as wraparound ads covering their front pages. Editors at the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* and *Anandabazar Patrika* said their publications would not have accepted such requests in better times. But it should be noted that such ads are considered objectionable because they cheapen the publication's look and irritate readers – not because they are inherently deceptive or because they divert editorial resources away from journalism and towards marketing. They are typically highly visual and look like nothing other than an advertisement.

More questionable are formats that blur the distinction between journalism produced solely with the public interest in mind and content created for paying clients. The latter fall in two broad categories. First, there is native advertising, advertorials, and sponsored or branded content (there is no universally accepted taxonomy, either within journalism or marketing studies or within the media industries). These forms of content are integrated into outlet's main product. Second, there are events organised by the outlet in partnership with other companies, such as conferences, conventions and fairs. These are a still-small but growing component of many media companies' portfolio of activities. Both of these categories, which we collectively call hybrid promotional formats, raise at least two ethical issues. One is that their promotional purpose is at least partially disguised, such that the content is perceived as having been created for the good of the reader or viewer. To varying degrees, they constitute a kind of 'stealth marketing' (Goodman, 2006). If news media companies give in too easily to the temptation to blur the distinction between journalism and promotion, editorial integrity will suffer and the public will grow more distrustful of journalism (Carlson, 2015; Couldry and Turow, 2014; Levi, 2015; Nebenzhal and Jaffe, 1998; Piety, 2016). The second concern relates to resource allocation within the news organisation. These hybrid formats benefit from journalistic sensibilities and craft skills. It is journalists' experience and expertise in identifying interesting and relevant story angles that give sponsored content or events the

kind of appeal and authenticity that they would usually lack if left up to marketing and advertising agencies. There is therefore a strong temptation to make use of newsroom staff for these revenue-generating commercial projects, at the expense of purely editorial work. We asked the media organisations in our study about their policies related to both of these issues.

In general, the organisations studied apply a combination of disclosure (through labelling and distinct design) and containment (ghettoising hybrid formats in ‘lighter’ sections such as lifestyle) to keep advertising and promotional content separate from their journalism. In China, disclosure is required by the state. A 2015 law strictly regulates native advertising, requiring all commercial content carried on news media platforms to be prominently labelled as ‘advertisement’ (*guang gao*). *The Paper* and *Beijing News* follow this practice. The other organisations in the study also label all paid content. The print publications also use design features such as different fonts and borders to distinguish them from the editorial content. Research tells us, of course, that not all readers and viewers are conscious of the difference between editorial and hybrid advertising, even when the latter is labelled. Wojdyski and Evans (2016), for example, found through experiments that labels have very limited success in helping readers to recognise native advertisements. Hoofnagle and Meleshinsky’s (2015) survey study echoes the finding that labelling is insufficient to help news consumers to distinguish it from regular editorial content. We may need to think of disclosure through labelling and design as a ‘strategic ritual’ in the sense that Tuchman (1972) used the term: more about going through the motions in order to avoid liability for misleading the public, rather than because these steps actually achieve their stated aims.

The limitations of disclosure make the additional step of containment especially important. None of the newspapers studied allow hybrid formats on their front pages or main news sections that report on politics. They and the magazines regard hybrid formats as more suitable for the entertainment, arts, sports and lifestyle sections. There is thus an implied hierarchy, with the editorial integrity of public affairs reporting seen as sacrosanct, while more liberties can be taken with sections that are not directly related to journalism’s role in democratic discourse. *Rappler* places its sponsored content in a separate section with its own menu button, ‘BrandRap’. In *Beijing News*, native advertising is carried in its D section, for industry information. Large media groups also have the option of creating more advertiser-friendly vehicles even as they maintain traditional standards for their flagship titles. This is an explicit strategy of the Philippines’ Inquirer group, which has created an online channel co-branded with Globe Telecom, as well as a custom publishing arm for content marketers. It is

also the approach taken by *Malaysiakini*. Its marketing chief Chia Ting Ting believes *Malaysiakini*'s editorial department should not dilute its identity as an independent media, as that would jeopardise its subscription base. Instead, it has spun off a separate company, FG Media, to create branded content and other sponsored products. 'We don't want editorial to change, so the business team must change', she says.

Some editors have come around to accepting partnership deals with corporations as a way to boost their capacity to handle a special project. For example, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* was able to send five journalists to the United States for 3 weeks to report on the 2015 boxing match between Floyd Mayweather and local hero Manny Pacquiao, which was a major event for Filipinos. 'The advertisers allowed us to pour resources that differentiated our coverage,' said news editor Jun Egracia.

In all the organisations studied, generating commercial content is the responsibility of the advertising or marketing department, which has its own writers. This is in line with news organisations such as *The New York Times* and *Financial Times*, which have content marketing teams separate from their editorial staff. However, *Beijing News* sometimes assigns journalists to write advertorials, to take advantage of their beat knowledge. At *Anandabazar Patrika*, editorial staff commissioned to write hybrid content must be paid extra for the work, out of the marketing department's budget. But its sister publication, *The Telegraph*, does not allow its journalists to be engaged in this way. Editor R. Rajagopal explained, 'They would have to write positive stories and this creates an integrity problem. It's a conflict of interest.' The practice is also prohibited by *Rappler*, where Ressa and Gloria believe that it would get confusing for their journalists if they had to switch between working for the public and working for advertisers.

Aside from native advertising, the other increasingly common marketing activity that news media outlets engage in is organising events of various kinds. At their worst, cobranded events can be a backdoor route to providing commercial partners publicity in the form of news stories: the event is given prominent coverage beyond what their news value merits. As with hybrid content, our 12 organisations' policies towards events were not a binary yes or no. They recognised the value of events, while remaining wary of the risk that partnerships would compromise their editorial integrity. They resolve this tension in different ways. All of them, though, said that they would not give these events more coverage than they were due.

In some cases, the events are driven by their news value and the outlet's broader social aims, and not partners' publicity goals. *Rappler* has organised seminars on issues such as hunger and corruption. It also runs the Social Good Summit in partnership with the United

Nations Development Programme, showcasing the work of social innovators. These are events that *Rappler* would want to cover even if it was not the organiser, the editors said. Attesting to their newsworthiness, they also attract coverage by competing news organisations.

The *Philippine Daily Inquirer* organises the Inquirer Conversations series of forums, for which partners may help cover venue and other costs in return for deals from the marketing department. But the sponsors have no role in shaping the content of the forum. *Business Weekly* organises a series of Editor Talks, sponsored by the insurance company Prudential. The editorial department is not obligated to report on these and generally do not do so, the editors said. In the same category of socially driven projects are literary events organised by *Anandabazar Patrikia* and *Beijing News*. The Indian newspaper runs a major annual event promoting Bengali literature, while the Chinese paper organises a literature award sponsored by an online company. In Kolkata, *The Telegraph* organises the Telegraph National Debate, which is covered by its political desk. Although sponsors may be involved, such events can be thought of as part of the news organisation's own outreach, to help build its brand and connect with its audience.

*Kompas* has turned increasingly to events (or 'off-print activities') as a response to declining advertising revenue. Events offer alternative outlets for advertisers who may not be attracted to conventional formats. However, editor Budiman Tanuredjo says these activities need to be justifiable on the grounds of the organisation's own core values, such that *Kompas* would proceed with them even if no sponsors are found. Examples are an under-14 soccer league that it started without external sponsorship. In line with founder Jakob Oetama's call to know the country deeply, *Kompas* has also organised a bicycle expedition spanning the vast archipelago, and Southeast Asia's longest ultramarathon, of 320 kilometres.

At the other end of the spectrum are events driven by the advertising department outside of the outlet's news agenda, designed to help advertisers engage with an audience on the back of the news outlet's brand. For such cases, the outlets we studied said they treated these events as non-editorial activities. The Chinese online outlet *The Paper* carries news about such co-branded events on a separate 'promo' channel.

### *Independence as organisational culture*

Since they were selected on account of their reputation for high journalistic standards, it is not surprising that all our interviewees subscribed to the norm of professional independence. How this shared norm is institutionalised varies. All the organisations studied

acknowledged being under serious financial pressures that might result in dilution of their public service focus. Overall, though, compared with the general state of the news media in Asia and worldwide, the selected organisations are highly regarded precisely because they have a much higher than average commitment to the ideal of independent public interest journalism. In this section, we consider how these values are communicated and implemented within the organisation.

When asked how editorial independence was maintained, our interviewees generally did not cite detailed written guidelines or contractual agreements (in most cases, none exists) but an organisational ‘culture’ or ‘DNA’. This observation resonates with research on ethical discourse within journalism as a community of practice (García-Avilés, 2014; Meltzer and Martik, 2017). The organisations’ editorial values are communicated through formal in-house training programmes as well as on the job through a process of assimilation. Of course, many news organisations pay lip service to their editorial values or apply them selectively: values are cited to impose discipline among the rank and file, but not to hold bosses to account when they make controversial decisions. This is why *Tempo*’s move to flatten newsroom hierarchies and encourage collective leadership is especially interesting. Founding editor Goenawan Mohamad instituted a custom of top editors refraining from chairing the main editorial meeting where story line-ups are decided. That responsibility was handed to junior editors. The system continues to this day: more than 30 junior editors, some with as little as 3 years’ experience, chair the meetings. This radically democratises decision making, making it harder for the chief editor to make unprofessional judgement calls behind closed doors when faced with conflicts of interest. *Malaysiakini* operates with a similar ethos. Editorial decisions are discussed in an email group that includes the entire newsroom of 60 staff, from chief editor to rookie reporters. Reporters are encouraged to challenge editors’ decisions, said chief editor Steven Gan.

‘I tell them, I expect you to go out every day and ask tough questions of the most powerful men and women in the country. When you come back to the office, you have to do the same. I spend much of my time trying to explain things to them,’ Gan said.

One way that standards are crystallised and communicated internally is through stories about how the organisation resisted external pressures in the past. In most of the organisations studied, the editors were able to cite on demand specific cases where editorial integrity had been severely tested and emerged intact. For example, Inquirer.net John Nery related how Joseph Estrada while president (1998–2001) had called for a boycott of the

*Philippine Daily Inquirer*. Although the boycott affected profits, which meant reduced payouts for employees, the board of directors continued to support the editors' critical reporting on the president. Such company folklore may be more powerful than abstract written guidelines in expressing corporate values. They communicate what Plaisance (2014) has called crucibles of experience: trials through which exemplars make meaning and thus contribute to the moral ecology.

We also found exemplars drawing inspiration from other news organisations that they consider to be members of the same community of practice or to whose standards they aspire. For example, *The Hindu's* Readers Editor office was inspired by Britain's *The Guardian*. A more surprising discovery, which does not seem to have received attention in the journalism studies literature, is how the spirit of exemplary media organisations can live on after they die. One such title in Taiwan was *The World (Ren Jian)*, a quality magazine in the 1980s specialising in independent investigative stories during the Kuomintang's repressive 'White Terror' period. Although it lasted only 4 years, it influenced a generation of media professionals on the island (Apo, 2016). At *Business Weekly*, deputy chief editor Liu Peixiu cited *The World* as a key influence on her choice of career.

Another important Taiwanese title was *Independence Daily News*, considered the territory's most trusted media outlet in the 1980s and 1990s (Yang, 2001). When it was to be sold in 1994, its staff marched onto the street, demanding that the new management sign a guarantee of editorial independence. The journalists did not get what they wanted but their pressure resulted in the formation of the Association of Journalists of Taiwan to protect professional independence.

Furthermore, the idea of demanding written commitments on editorial independence caught on. Several other newsrooms pressed for similar agreements with owners and managers (Tu, 2004). At present, two news organisations in Taiwan, public broadcaster PTS and *Apple Daily*, have formulated a 'Newsroom Cannon' with owners, marking 'an important step forward in journalistic autonomy in Taiwan' (Lin, 2013). *The Reporter* is another inheritor of the legacy of *Independent Daily News*. It has a 'Three No' policy: the donors do not own *The Reporter*; they do not intervene with editorial decisions; and they do not withdraw their donations. *The Reporter* does not accept any donation from any political party or politician, and large donations require approval by a Review Committee made up of three media ethics scholars and experts.

In China, *The Paper* is a digital-born outlet but claims the legacy of *Oriental Morning Post*, a print newspaper published by the same state-owned parent company, Shanghai United

Media Group, from 2003–2016. The *Oriental Morning Post* was conceived as China's *New York Times* (Chen, 2013) and was lauded for its in-depth reporting and culture sections. It played a leading role in exposing China's most serious food safety scandal in decades, involving contaminated baby milk powder. Despite the edict to stay away from negative stories in the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, *Oriental Morning Post* went ahead with its report. The newspaper was closed when the management decided to focus on online media, and most of the editorial team and management were transferred to *The Paper*. Although *The Paper* brands itself as a new, young digital medium, its staff still refer to the *Oriental Morning Post* when explaining their values. The premises' corridors are lined with framed page ones of the *Post*. Thus, the reputation of the dead newspaper serves as a strategic resource for the website.

In negative terms, editorial independence is about not giving in to commercial pressures; in positive terms, it is about staying focussed on the public interest. Several of our organisations talked about how they tried to boost the latter side of the equation. *The Hindu* has invested significantly in this with its Readers Editor office. At *Business Weekly*, reader feedback is reported to editors every Friday. At regular workshops, staff reflect on editorial mistakes, including those pointed out by readers. *Anandabazar Patrika* solicits reader feedback more actively. It organises a dozen or more Readers Meet events every year in different parts of West Bengal 'to understand the mind of the reader', as news editor Hirak Banerjee put it. He has personally been involved in more than 250 such sessions in his 22 years with the paper. The forums are attended not only by editors but also by representatives from the marketing and circulation departments. This helps ensure that non-editorial executives also get to hear from the public and not just from advertisers.

### **Transferability of journalistic ideologies**

If the organisations we have studied are indeed 'exemplary', one concluding question to address is to what extent their example can be followed by others. Several scholars have discussed the notion of journalistic ideology as a set of shareable professional values (Deuze, 2005; Schlesinger, 1978; Schudson, 2001; Soloski, 1990; Zelizer, 2004). In the preceding section, we observed that the ethos of independent journalism is indeed being passed on from one generation to the next. Our study carries the implicit hope that best practices can diffuse across space and not just over time. However, there may be severe limitations on such diffusion.



Van Ginneken (1998) has noted that journalists' socialisation can happen at three levels: cultural, professional and organisational. Exemplary practices would be easier to diffuse from one organisation to another if there are favourable norms within the surrounding culture and profession. But this is not necessarily the case. Zhu Xuedong of *Beijing News* notes that the professional culture and media environment of China are not mature, which makes the vision of the leader of an organisation very important in setting its agenda. The commitment to original, high-quality stories that he sees at *Beijing News* is rare in China, he says.

In many other cases, the outlets were founded by journalist-publishers that set the tone for public service journalism and editorial independence right from the start. Several interviewees also referred to the origins of the outlet and the values of its founders. The *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, for example, had roots in the mosquito-press – the term used to describe the alternative, oppositional media during the years of Martial Law (1972–1981) under President Ferdinand Marcos. Launched as a cooperative owned by its journalists, it was able to extract guarantees of editorial independence from the Prieto family that eventually purchased it. Perhaps the strongest, if perverse, compliment that can be paid to publishers is when they themselves become targets of forces opposed to independent journalism. The *Philippine Daily Inquirer* has recently become a victim of such attention, with potentially devastating results. Its family owners came under intense attack by President Rodrigo Duterte. The family was openly threatened with investigations into alleged tax evasion related to its other businesses. In July 2017, the family succumbed, accepting a takeover bid by businessman Ramon Ang, who is close to Duterte (Tomacruz, 2017).

India's *Anandabazar Patrika* and *The Hindu* are family-owned businesses, and had a tradition of family members serving as chief editors of the papers. Newspapers ruled by the whims of family owners can of course be idiosyncratic in any direction. But if the family stakes its reputation and social capital on a news organisation, one possible outcome is that it develops strong non-pecuniary interests in protecting editorial integrity and professionalism (Ellis, 2014). When he double-hatted as the editor from 1983 to 2016, Aweek Sarkar, one of the family owners of *Anandabazar Patrika*, was credited with protecting the newsroom from commercial pressures. Corporate-owned news organisations may lack similar commitment.

*Tempo* and *Malaysiakini* emerged from the world of progressive activism as much as from professional journalism. *Tempo*'s ownership structure is designed to minimise corporate conflicts of interest. The Jaya group, a property developer, owns around 25 per cent of the company. However, a 38 per cent controlling interest is held by two foundations, one

belonging to its former journalists and the other to its current employees. Another 21 per cent is held by Graffiti Pers, the publishing company set up by Goenawan. In the Philippines, the journalist-founders have a controlling 30 per cent interest in *Rappler*. None of its main stakeholders are major corporations. *The Reporter* in Taiwan was founded by two veteran journalists as a non-profit foundation, with the backing of a major donor. Not one of our 12 outlets started life in the more commercially oriented corporate sector or as a government propaganda mouthpiece. If there are recent examples of such media that subsequently reformed into exemplary practitioners of public service journalism, they are not in our sample. This raises the sobering question of whether such reform is even possible.

Aside from sympathetic owners, another potential supporter of professional values is an audience that demands high-quality journalism. Several of our interviewees said that they could count on their readership to act as watchdogs against conflicts of interest. At *The Paper*, editor in chief Liu Yonggang reads reader feedback on his smartphone throughout the day. ‘If we blur the lines, readers would leave harsh comments’, he said. However, our 12 organisations’ readers may not be typical news consumers. In many cases, they are more educated, media literate and progressive elites who value independent news and commentary. These also tend to be the more upmarket audiences valued by advertisers. Market dynamics have helped even a communist party outlet like *The Paper* stiffen its professional spine. It wants to draw the most lucrative advertising – luxury brands, cars and real estate – which means having to satisfy a more discerning, high-quality readership.

We can think of these exemplary media, therefore, as benefitting from a virtuous circle: their professionalism is incentivised by both sides of the business, readers and advertisers. In that sense, they face less of a dilemma than the typical media organization catering to the mass market. As in the United States (Prior, 2007; Sunstein, 2017), publics in Asia and elsewhere may not actively seek out high-quality journalism, or any news for that matter, relying instead on more incidental learning to keep up with current affairs. Most commercial news organisations may therefore have little incentive to raise editorial quality at the expense of the pecuniary interests of owners and advertisers. Accordingly, our interviewees noted that advertisers tend to point out that competing news outlets were more accommodating to them. There is pressure to join the race to the bottom.

The newsroom policies described in this article are attempts to push back against these pressures. These news outlets hope to protect their editorial independence by defining and articulating – to colleagues, commercial partners and the public at large – the no-go areas in their business relationships. By their own admission, the boundaries keep shifting, with

editorial priorities losing ground to financial ones. In ecological terms, we may need to think of outlets devoted to journalism in the public interest as species that are endemic to small islands within a society's mediascape. Their professional norms may have universal normative relevance, but their survival is under constant threat. Their own habitats are shrinking, and it would be naïve to expect their DNA to be replicated to the extent that they become the typical form of journalism found in any society.

### **Author's note**

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### **Funding**

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship and/ or publication of this article: The authors received Research Grants Council support from the University Grants Committee of Hong Kong for the research reported in this article.

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