

# Power Dynamics Between Southeast Asian Journalists and the Western Media

Thursday 7 March 2024, by [THIÊN Hương](#) (Date first published: 14 February 2024).

**Women local journalists from Southeast Asia share their experiences in working with Western media, such as unpaid labour, biased reporting, and ignorance of local practices. With unbalanced power dynamics between male Western editors and women Southeast Asian journalists, these problems remain swept under the rug.**

**This feature is part of our [Media Freedom Voices](#) series.**

There has been a growing trend of collaboration between local journalists from the region and their Western counterparts on the sidelines for the last few years. Some work as a freelancer, some as a part-time or full-time employee. Since the problem of [underpaid journalists](#) remains in [most Southeast Asian](#) countries, collaboration with Western media is seen as a chance to improve income. It also offers several advantages, such as improving the ability to work in English, expanding international networks and knowledge sharing, as well as enhancing one's professional profile.

However, Southeast Asian journalists face challenges working with Western newsrooms, mainly from Europe and North America. Interviewed journalists from Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam find it hard to address and raise this issue due to the power imbalance between them and people from Western newsrooms. There is also a lack of space to bring this issue to the newsroom's table, especially since most of them work as freelance or contract employees. For privacy reasons, only their first names are used for this article.

## **Biased Reporting**

As Southeast Asia's media freedom has been [increasingly restricted](#), not to mention reeling from the pandemic, it is increasingly harder to publish on challenging topics while making money.

Vietnam is a case in point. [Censorship and self-censorship](#) have been ratcheted up, making it hard for journalists to venture out and cover challenging topics. As a result, some journalists have tried to publish in international outlets to have more editorial freedom. Lan Anh is one of them.

Lan Anh is a 23-year-old state-affiliated journalist who moonlights as a contributor to some regional outlets in Southeast Asia. She sees it as an opportunity for a better income and to report sensitive topics, which she cannot do in the national media due to censorship.

Yet, her first working experience with a British journalist based in Singapore in mid-2023 did not come to fruition.

Through a connection, she was involved in a project as a contributor. Lan Anh recalls there was no room for her to contribute or challenge her editor's opinion, though she appreciated different perspectives.

“They only wanted me to interview certain people because they have certain angles already,” says Lan Anh.

The problem was that some of her editor’s decisions could endanger Lan Anh’s safety as a field journalist in Vietnam.

For example, her editor asked her to make news about what happened in Vietnam based on a report from an international non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Thailand. Lan Anh proposed adding other voices from Vietnam’s authorities, even if they still need to check the accuracy. The editor dismissed her concerns.

“In an article, if I only cited information from an international NGO without having any voice from the state, I would be in trouble,” Lan Anh says.

In Vietnam, news from non-state sources or international organisations that contradict Party discourses would be considered as “fake news”. Journalists who report in opposition to Party discourses may face harassment, intimidation, or imprisonment.

Her editor also did not provide a strong argument for why having an international NGO as their main source is more important than a domestic one. Lan Anh decided to withdraw from the project and did not get a payment or byline for all her reporting and interviewing.

In general, the mediascape is still [dominated by Western journalism](#). The very concept of journalism, along with reporting techniques and media perspectives, still predominantly reflects Western media perspectives. Even when Western media hire a local journalist to report on Southeast Asia, most of the time, people in the newsroom—particularly editors and mostly Westerners—have more control over what to publish and how to frame each piece of news.

Local journalists in Southeast Asia barely have bargaining power in the production process. It often led to [biased publications](#).

Another factor of biased publication of Southeast Asia is Parachute Journalism. Parachute journalism is a practice where a media, mostly Western media, sends foreign journalists to report on what is happening in other places, including Southeast Asia.

“The term evokes a vivid image: An out-of-towner arrives by air, perhaps without much preparation or knowledge. Upon landing, he or she does their best to manage local language, currency, transportation, and communication, all while likely nursing jetlag,” wrote Kevin D. Grant in [Nieman Lab](#).

“The parachute journalist might rely on a ‘fixer’—a local journalist with knowledge and connections who may not receive any credit on the final product. Or the visiting reporter might go it alone, inevitably missing critical context and possibly key facts.”

The practice remains despite many efforts to challenge it, whether from [journalists](#) or the media.

Somphone, a journalist in Laos, had the experience of facing these “parachute” journalists when there was a breaking news story in Laos.

“When Lao activist [Anousa Luangsuphom](#) was shot, many Western journalists contacted me via LinkedIn,” says Somphone.

Upon a quick check, she realised that none of them had ever covered a story on Laos.

“They just asked me for sources,” says Somphone, wondering why many foreign journalists only contacted her when a controversial issue occurred.

Sutawan Chanprasert, Director of Digital Reach, a Bangkok-based NGO on digital challenges in Southeast Asia, explains international actors, often fail to understand the context of Southeast Asia. As a result, they propose activities or projects based on the so-called “global perspective”, which does not necessarily reflect Southeast Asian realities. Chanprasert says,

“These activities and projects often do not address the issues that require attention in the local context, but instead fulfil the agenda of the international organisations based on what they think the global issue really is.”

### **Lack of Knowledge and Familiarity with Local Practices**

Many Western media workers who are working with Southeast Asian journalists have little knowledge of local practices. However, based on several interviews, they tend to push local journalists to work on their way instead of listening to local journalists.

Usually, a stringer is a journalist who provides information or contributes a report on a freelance basis. Some Western media are using stringer to help them cover reports in Southeast Asia. Some give the freelancer the byline, some do not.

Another challenge Southeast Asia journalists often face is a complicated bureaucratic barrier to interviewing official sources.

Rebecca\*, a 29-year-old Singaporean journalist, recounts her experience with different Western editors when she was freelancing. One of her Western editors told her to get a comment from government officials and agencies.

“In Singapore, the government will entertain requests from the media, so making a request is not the issue,” Rebecca says.

The challenge was her editor pushed her to obtain the comment as soon as possible. It was almost impossible to get it soon because she was a freelancer with a limited relationship with officials, unlike full-time journalists who regularly meet and build relationships with government officials.

“The issue is expecting comments within a day or two when the typical lead time is two weeks or more in the absence of a long-standing relationship.”

Like Rebecca, a senior hard news Indonesian Journalist, Dewi also had an experience when her European bosses were unfamiliar with the local formalities.

“When I had to interview Indonesian government authorities (exclusively), they usually required us to send them an official letter from the media company stating that we wanted to interview them,” she says.

As an Indonesian local journalist, she is familiar with administrative requirements, but her editor finds the process complicated. “My editor, at first, thought that it was such a hassle and did not understand that this is just how it works in my country,” says Dewi.

It took Dewi some time to make him aware of that, yet things are looking up. “He now offered to write the letter,” she says.

In another country, like Cambodia, getting statements from several local authorities through email or personal message is almost impossible.

Heang, a Cambodian Journalist, recalls her failure to negotiate with her editor to cover the expenses for her field trips to get statements from local authorities.

“The editor expected me to interview state officials remotely,” says Heang. “However, in Cambodia, state officials do not entertain these requests via email or even phone. You have to go there in person to interview them.”

Heang said that the editor did not accommodate this, which resulted in Heang changing the whole angle of the story.

### **Cheap and Unpaid Labour**

Some Western media or media workers treat local journalists in Southeast Asia as cheap or even free labour. Some do it openly, some do it manipulatively.

Ploy Wasinee, a TV journalist based in Bangkok, remembers when an Italian radio journalist asked to interview her on the Milk Tea Alliance—a youth-centred online democracy and human rights movement consisting mainly of netizens from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Thailand, and Myanmar (Burma) starting in 2020.

The Italian reporter wished to quote her but did not seem keen to interview Ploy directly. The reporter instead sent Ploy a list of questions via a messaging app, which she had to spend time responding to in English in text. During the interview, Ploy realised the journalist did not want to interview her.

“She asked me who exactly were the leaders of the Milk Tea movement, but this movement was largely unorganised,” says Ploy. “She did not seem to be content with my responses and kept asking me if I could give her some names of those leading the movement.”

Ploy thinks the journalist only wanted names and an answer based on her entrenched beliefs. On several other occasions, Western journalists only contacted Ploy to get sources and contacts. One of them did it regularly and treated her as an “unpaid fixer”.

“I do not mind sharing my sources, but making connections and having sources is a journalist’s responsibility. In order to gain connections, I have had to make efforts,” says Ploy.

Ploy sees many Western journalists take their local journalist connection for granted. “They are better paid than I am, and their organisations have resources. Those news outlets should hire a fixer,” she says.

In another event, Ploy was a Thai-English interpreter at a workshop organised by a German media outlet based in Thailand. Instead of getting paid well, they saw her labour as “volunteer work” and treated her with a meal and a drink afterwards.

Some Western media also do not provide their Southeast Asia workers with the same benefits as they give to their Western workers.

Sira, a Bangkok-based staff journalist, interned at a major French media outlet based in Bangkok for four months in 2021 without getting paid. While it is normal for Thai companies not to pay interns, she knew that the French outlet could not do so in their own country. Sira says,

“If I understood correctly, many Southeast Asian interns who worked for them did not get paid either.”

French law [dictates](#) that companies have to pay full-time interns if they work for at least two months. Yet Sira had no choice but to accept working full-time unpaid.

Yet most of the time, Southeast Asian freelancers stay silent despite frustration with the situation. The situation is more complicated for freelancers because they do not have the same protection as full-time workers. Even when they are working full-time, it is still hard to advocate their equal rights in the newsroom.

The status quo still protects Western media workers while leaving Southeast Asia media workers struggling to raise their voices due to the lack of protection of their labour rights and space to discuss it.

“I wanted to speak up, but it is hard. I still want to continue working for them because they pay better (than national media),” says Alina.

### **What’s Next?**

Some organisations advocate journalists’ rights in Southeast Asia, including [AJI Indonesia](#), Association Journalist Timor Leste (ATJL), Cambodian Journalists Alliance Association ([CamboJA](#)), Centre for Independent Journalism ([CIJ](#)), Gerakan Media Merdeka Malaysia ([GeramM](#)), National Union of Journalists of the Philippines ([NUJP](#)), and [Prachatai](#). You can read more about journalists’ rights from their publications, as well as support and donate.

If you are interested in learning more about media and journalists’ rights in Southeast Asia, you can read our recent research, [Endangering Media](#). You can also read some of our publications under the [Media Freedom projects](#).

*\*pseudonym is used for privacy reasons.*

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