

Singapore¹

MATTHEW CHEW & EDSON C. TANDOC JR.

INTRODUCTION

The news media in Singapore are closely regulated by the state through a complex system of legal frameworks that govern both traditional and online platforms. This regulatory environment has resulted in a culture of self-regulation among journalists, who have been socialized to understand the boundaries that cannot be crossed: Sensitive topics such as politics, race, and religion are approached with caution.

In recent years, the government has passed legislation against fake news, implementing the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) and the Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act (FICA), which empower authorities to issue correction orders or block accounts disseminating content deemed false or manipulative. During the data collection period in Singapore – from September 2023 to March 2024 – the government issued POFMA correction orders against several individuals, including members of opposition parties, over claims made on social media platforms such as TikTok. These claims concerned public housing and questions related to two ministers' rentals of state-owned bungalows. A correction order requires whoever published the falsehood to publish a correction notice alongside the original content.

While its anti-fake news laws have raised concerns about their impact on freedom of speech, and the city-state has consistently ranked low in international press freedom indices, Singapore has continued to attract international media and tech companies, many of which have established their regional headquarters in the small island-nation due to its political stability and low levels of corruption.

The main news media players form a duopoly, with SPH Media Trust (SMT), primarily funded by the state, publishing print newspapers of different languages, and the government-owned Mediacorp operating mainstream TV and radio stations. But with Singapore's digital infrastructure and high internet and smartphone penetration rates, social media use is high, and many get their news primarily from online sources, including from organizations outside Singapore. While news audiences trust traditional news media platforms more, alternative news brands are gaining traction, particularly among younger audiences who prefer video and bite-sized news content.

BACKGROUNDS OF JOURNALISTS

The sample of Singaporean journalists consists mostly of women (68.3%). The average age is 37.4 years (SD = 10.2; Median = 35) and most of them hold a bachelor's degree (75.6%), while 20.6% hold a master's degree and 0.6% have a doctorate. A small minority completed only high school (1.1%) or left university without completing a degree (2.2%). Most are trained in journalism through formal education or professional training (55.3%). Of these journalists that have had journalism training, 76.0% got it from their university and college education, 56.8% also honed their skills through journalism apprenticeships or cadetships, and 40.7% from short-term courses.

JOURNALISTS IN THE NEWSROOM

Journalists in Singapore are mostly experienced in their roles, with the average journalist staying on for 11.7 years in the field (SD = 9.2; Median = 9.0 years). Most of the respondents (56.1%) hold no management role, suggesting that a large segment focused on reportage rather than supervisory duties. The majority (72.3%) also work within a specific beat.

The average work week for a full-time journalist was 45.4 hours (SD = 7.7; Median = 45 hours). While their hours are slightly above the global average, they have employment stability, with an overwhelming 91.8% in full-time permanent contracts. While the majority derive their income exclusively from journalism, 13.6% have additional jobs outside of journalism. Furthermore, 44.0% of the respondents are members of a union. However, the demanding news landscape seems to contribute to high stress levels: A combined 55.4% of journalists report feeling stressed often (31.5%) or very often (23.9%) at work. When including those who were "sometimes" (29.9%) stressed, 85.3% experienced work-related stress.

Most respondents work for national or transnational organizations (88.5%) and for state-run media (70.5%). In terms of the background of their main employers, the most common are television-based newsrooms (29.3%), newspapers (26.1%), and news agencies (25.0%). Only 10.3% work for Internet-based employers and only 1.1% work for radio.

¹ Country sample does not fully align with WJS specifications regarding maximum margin of error (see WJS3 Methodology).

SAFETY AND WORK-RELATED CONCERNS

Singapore journalists encounter digital and reputational threats when producing the news but report not facing any physical risks. A large majority of journalists have never experienced arrests, detentions, physical attacks, sexual assault, stalking, or intimidation targeting their family. This indicates a relatively high level of physical safety for journalists in Singapore.

However, the profession takes a significant emotional and mental toll. "Concerned about emotional and mental well-being" emerged as the most pressing work-related issue, with nearly 60% of journalists agreeing with this statement. Facing demeaning or hateful comments, as well as having their work publicly discredited, has become increasingly common: Over 40% of respondents reported experiencing these at least sometimes.

Additionally, 22.8% of journalists reported experiencing surveillance sometimes, often or very often, raising concerns about being monitored in the course of their work. There is also notable concern about impunity: 35% of respondents strongly agreed that individuals who harm journalists in Singapore often go unpunished, indicating a desire for greater accountability and protection.

TABLE 1. EXPERIENCED THREATS

	N	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Demeaning or hateful speech directed at you	184	3.3%	6.0%	34.8%	31.0%	25.0%
Public discrediting of your work	184	4.9%	7.6%	29.3%	28.8%	29.3%
Surveillance	184	3.3%	5.4%	14.1%	23.4%	53.8%
Hacking or blocking of social media accounts or websites	183	0.5%	1.6%	6.0%	10.4%	81.4%
Arrests, detentions or imprisonment	184	0.0%	0.5%	0.5%	1.6%	97.3%
Legal actions against you because of your work	184	0.0%	1.6%	6.0%	8.7%	83.7%
Stalking	184	0.5%	1.1%	3.3%	6.5%	88.6%
Other threats or intimidations directed at you	184	1.6%	2.7%	9.8%	16.8%	69.0%
Sexual assault or sexual harassment	184	0.0%	1.6%	4.3%	8.2%	85.9%
Other physical attacks	184	0.0%	1.1%	0.0%	2.2%	96.7%
Others using your byline for fabricated or manipulated stories	184	1.1%	2.2%	6.0%	10.3%	80.4%
Others disseminating your personal information	184	2.2%	1.1%	9.2%	16.8%	70.7%
Workplace bullying	184	1.1%	5.4%	12.0%	10.9%	70.7%
Intimidation that targets family	183	0.0%	1.1%	1.6%	4.4%	92.9%

Question: "In the last five years, how often have you experienced any of the following actions related to your work as a journalist?"

TABLE 2. WORK-RELATED CONCERNS

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
Worried about losing job in journalism within the next 12 months	183	15.3%	2.24	1.08
Concerned about physical well-being	183	37.2%	2.77	1.26
Concerned about emotional and mental wellbeing	183	59.0%	3.40	1.26
Concerned that those who harm journalists in Singapore go unpunished	183	35.0%	2.90	1.22

Question: "Thinking about your work, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements." (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

JOURNALISTIC ROLES

Singaporean journalists identify with the roles of an educator and a public watchdog, producing pieces to combat disinformation. They tend to provide insights into current affairs and highlight societal issues. They view their function as an independent public service, aiming to inform the public through analysis and truthful reporting. Notably, Singaporean journalists do not see it as their responsibility to set the political agenda or spur on political participation.

TABLE 3. JOURNALISTIC ROLES

	N	Very/extremely important	Mean	SD
Be a detached observer	184	66.3%	3.76	1.05
Monitor and scrutinize those in power	184	49.5%	3.38	1.25
Shine a light on society's problems	184	83.7%	4.20	0.87
Motivate people to participate in politics	184	9.8%	2.11	1.12
Provide analysis of current affairs	184	78.8%	4.10	0.91
Let people express their views	184	59.2%	3.60	1.02
Provide information people need to form political opinion	184	53.3%	3.40	1.32
Advocate for social change	184	42.9%	3.14	1.23
Influence public opinion	184	26.6%	2.85	1.12
Set the political agenda	184	10.3%	1.93	1.09
Promote peace and tolerance	184	51.6%	3.38	1.21
Educate the audience	184	89.7%	4.39	0.70
Point toward possible solutions to society's problems	184	65.8%	3.67	1.09
Speak on behalf of the marginalized	184	56.5%	3.58	1.16
Support national development	184	38.6%	2.99	1.18
Support government policy	184	15.8%	2.40	1.12
Convey a positive image of political leaders	184	10.3%	1.82	1.11
Provide entertainment and relaxation	184	27.7%	2.82	1.16
Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience	184	46.7%	3.28	1.15
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	184	34.2%	2.89	1.24
Tell stories that emotionally move the audience	184	50.0%	3.47	1.13
Support efforts to protect public health	184	58.7%	3.53	1.17
Counteract disinformation	184	83.2%	4.30	0.86
Discuss future implications of current events	184	77.7%	4.04	0.93

Question: "Please tell me how important it is to do each of the following in your daily work." (Scale: 5 = Extremely important; 4 = Very important; 3 = Moderately important; 2 = Slightly important; 1 = Not at all important.)

JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGIES

A large majority reported that interpretation is essential to make sense of facts, suggesting that they see providing context and meaning as part of their role, rather than simply reporting raw information. They largely rejected the notion of absolute truth, indicating a preference for nuance in news stories and are aware that the truth can be shaped by those in power.

TABLE 4. JOURNALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGIES

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
Interpretation is necessary to make sense of facts	181	81.8%	4.01	0.76
Truth is inevitably shaped by those in power	181	60.2%	3.57	1.03
It is impossible for journalists to withhold their personal beliefs from reporting	181	30.9%	2.93	0.97
Things are either true or false, there is no in-between	181	12.2%	2.35	0.98
It is possible to represent objective reality in reporting	181	63.0%	3.59	0.91

Questions: "The following statements deal with beliefs related to how journalists know what they know. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree." / "Using the same scale, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with the following beliefs." (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

JOURNALISTIC ETHICS

Journalists in Singapore have a principled approach toward reporting the news and largely abide by professional norms. They shun sensationalism and deceptive practices, but some indicated that exceptional methods can be acceptable in select cases.

TABLE 5. ETHICAL ORIENTATIONS

	N	Agree/ strongly agree	Mean	SD
What is ethical for journalists should always be determined by professional standards regardless of situation and personal judgment	184	58.7%	3.55	1.07
What is ethical for journalists should be determined by professional standards unless extraordinary circumstances require disregarding them	184	69.0%	3.70	0.97
What is ethical for journalists should depend on each specific situation	184	43.5%	3.05	1.09
What is ethical for journalists should be a matter of personal judgment	184	11.4%	2.22	0.99

Question: "The following statements describe different responses journalists may have to ethical problems. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree." (Scale: 5 = Strongly agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neither agree nor disagree; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree.)

TABLE 6. JUSTIFICATION OF CONTROVERSIAL REPORTING METHODS

	N	Always justified	Justified on occasion
Claiming to be somebody else	184	0.0%	34.8%
Using hidden recording devices	184	1.1%	73.9%
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	184	1.6%	52.2%
Using the personal materials of powerful people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	184	4.9%	57.1%
Using the personal materials of ordinary people, such as documents and photos, without their permission	184	1.6%	44.0%
Paying people for confidential information	184	2.2%	37.0%
Accepting money from sources	184	0.0%	6.5%
Accepting a free product or service from sources	184	1.1%	38.6%
Producing content that mimics news stories but hides its promotional nature	184	1.1%	20.7%
Publishing or broadcasting stories with information that is not yet verified	184	0.0%	21.2%

Question: "Which of the following, if any, do you think may be always justified, or justified on occasion, and which would you not approve of under any circumstances?"

EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND MEDIA FREEDOM

The majority (50.3%) report having a great deal or complete freedom in deciding which aspects of a story should be emphasized, although a relatively smaller percentage (44.8%) say so about selecting news stories. Still, there is strong acknowledgment of the restrictions to the country's media freedom, echoing international perceptions about low levels of media freedom in Singapore.

TABLE 7. PERCEPTIONS OF EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND MEDIA FREEDOM

	N	A great deal/ complete freedom	Mean	SD
Freedom in selecting the news stories	183	44.8%	3.29	0.80
Freedom in deciding which aspects of a story should be emphasized	183	50.3%	3.46	0.69
Media freedom in Singapore	183	12.6%	2.71	0.71

(Scale: 5 = Complete freedom; 4 = A great deal of freedom; 3 = Some freedom; 2 = Little freedom; 1 = No freedom at all.)

EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

Singaporean journalists operate within a top-down editorial structure, where supervisors, senior editors, and editorial policies exert the strongest influence on news production (see Table 8). While economic pressures on newsrooms are increasing, journalists appear insulated from commercial considerations such as advertising and profit expectations, allowing them to maintain a commitment to journalistic ethics. Their reliance on institutional infrastructure for access to information and resources may explain the subtle influence of external forces like government censorship and officials, even if they are not overt or direct.

TABLE 8. EDITORIAL INFLUENCES

	N	Very/extremely influential	Mean	SD
Peers on the news staff	178	23.0%	2.69	1.06
Editorial supervisors and higher editors	183	74.3%	4.04	0.92
The business managers of the news organization	160	28.1%	2.68	1.24
The owners of the news organization	168	36.9%	2.93	1.28
Editorial policy	182	69.8%	3.86	0.93
Advertising considerations	147	12.2%	1.99	1.10
Profit expectations	153	12.4%	2.10	1.14
Audience research and data	179	43.0%	3.24	1.13
Availability of news-gathering resources	179	62.0%	3.69	0.92
Time limits	182	57.1%	3.64	1.00
Journalism ethics	183	66.7%	3.84	0.93
Self-censorship	177	19.8%	2.63	1.07
Personal values and beliefs	176	40.9%	3.21	1.07
Colleagues in other media	168	11.9%	2.19	1.08
Friends, acquaintances and family	154	6.5%	1.89	0.94
Feedback from the audience	174	32.2%	3.02	0.99
Competing news organizations	176	33.0%	3.02	1.13
Media laws and regulation	179	46.9%	3.40	1.09
Access to information	179	65.9%	3.75	0.97
Government censorship	170	31.2%	2.88	1.23
Government officials	168	28.0%	2.79	1.14
Politicians	160	20.6%	2.61	1.18
Business people	165	13.3%	2.24	1.06
Public relations	172	11.0%	2.24	0.97
Relationships with news sources	173	34.1%	3.03	1.09
Police	130	15.4%	2.25	1.22
Issue advocacy groups	157	7.0%	2.11	0.91
Scientists or health experts	129	29.3%	1.88	1.01
Religious groups and institutions	97	7.8%	1.80	1.16
Military	81	12.4%	1.46	0.92
Para-military groups, militias and similar groups	81	6.2%	1.40	0.83
Organized crime and criminal groups	81	4.9%	1.32	0.86
Terrorist groups	140	6.2%	2.79	1.17

Question: "Here is a list of potential sources of influence. Please tell me how much influence each of the following has on your work as a journalist." (Scale: 5 = Extremely influential; 4 = Very influential; 3 = Moderately influential; 2 = Slightly influential; 1 = Not at all influential.)