

**HONG KONG JOURNALISTS ASSOCIATION**  
**香港記者協會**

**PRESS RELEASE**

Journalists want more public involvement in the debate over media ethics, according to a Hong Kong Journalists Association survey.

A poll of HKJA members showed that 77% believed ethics are worse or much worse than 12 months ago. However, the respondents comprehensively rejected a press council and media ethics laws. Only 20% supported a press council with the powers to fine media outlets, and just 7% supported laws on media ethics.

HKJA chair Liu Kin-ming said: "Although some members support legislation, a far greater number want to try other solutions." Based on strong support from members, the HKJA is attempting to set up a new organisation which could lobby for better ethics, offer education, and handle public complaints. This Media Ethics Forum would have no government involvement at all.

However, participation is invited from any person or individual in society who wants to improve media ethics. Mr Liu said: "This survey shows that most journalists welcome reader pressure. They welcome well-informed criticism and know this helps improve standards."

As a further move towards promoting ethics, today the HKJA publishes an analysis showing worrying trends drawn from past cases dealt with by its ethics committee.

Members of the public are reminded that the HKJA accepts complaints in writing that media organisations have broken the HKJA's code of ethics, and will investigate them to the best of its ability. According to the survey of journalists, sensational or disgusting photographs were the most serious ethics issue, with 47% of respondents expressing concern. Too much sex (43%) and exaggerated reports (41%) were cited as the next most serious areas of concern.

The HKJA conducted a survey in the light of rising concern about media ethics and to find out what measures journalists themselves felt would be most effective. A total of 69% of members asked the HKJA to take a higher profile in ethics matters. The HKJA will follow its members' wishes in this regard.

The survey was sent to all 660 HKJA members in late October. It was planned before the controversy over the Chan Kin-hong case. There were 178 responses, representing a 27 per cent response rate.

**Contact Details: Mr. Liu Kin-ming, HKJA chair, 2591-0692**

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**MEDIA ETHICS - THE WAY FORWARD**

Totals of forms received before Nov 13 deadline : 178

**1) How do you think media ethics now compare against 12 months ago?**

- 39% (69) Worse
- 38% (67) Much worse
- 21% (37) The same
- 1.5% (3) No opinion/no answer
- 0.5% (1) Much better
- 0.5% (1) Slightly better

**2) Which type of media outlet causes you most concern?**

- 72% (128) Newspapers
  - 27% (49) TV
  - 23% (41) Magazines
  - 16% (29) All media outlets
  - 6% (11) Radio
  - 4% (7) Internet
  - 2% (4) No strong opinion
- (Some respondents chose more than one)

**3) If you believe the media have an ethics problem, which areas concern you most?**

- 47% (84) Sensational or disgusting photographs
- 43% (77) Too much sex
- 41% (73) Exaggerated reports
- 39% (70) Too much “infotainment”
- 28% (50) Inaccuracy
- 22% (39) Articles which are completely invented
- 21% (37) Glorification of triads
- 20% (35) Invasion of privacy
- 18% (32) Deceptive or unfair news-gathering techniques
- 15% (26) Too much violence
- 15% (26) Poor literary standards or use of foul language
- 13% (23) Trivial or shallow reporting
- 9% (16) Discrimination (for instance against women, the disabled, or ethnic minorities)
- 7% (12) Others
- 6% (10) Too much criticism or unwillingness to criticise the Government
- 2% (3) Not listening to ordinary people
- 2% (3) Bias towards or against a particular political party

(Respondents could choose more than one)

**4) If you believe ethical standards have fallen, why do you believe this?**

- 46% (82) Competition
  - 42% (74) Commercial pressure
  - 21% (38) Reader pressure
  - 16% (28) Lack of training
  - 7% (12) Others
  - 2% (4) World-wide trend
  - 0.5% (1) Political pressure
- (Some respondents chose more than one)

At the moment the HKJA's main work is done by the ethics committee, which comprises three journalists from the Executive Committee and which accepts complaints from the public, investigates them, and publishes its findings in HKJA publications.

**5) Do you think the HKJA should do more on ethical issues?**

- 90% (160) Yes
- 2% (4) No
- 8% (14) No opinion/no answer

**6) If you think more should be done on ethical issues, which measures would you support?**

- 69% (122) Be more vocal to comment on ethical issues of public concern
  - 42% (75) Publish openly ethics committee findings
  - 37% (66) Lobby editors and proprietors
  - 24% (42) Increase the profile of its current HKJA ethics committee
  - 20% (36) Run training courses
  - 20% (36) Run seminars
  - 20% (35) Strengthen the existing HKJA code of conduct
  - 20% (35) Urge the government to set up a Press Council with powers to fine newspapers
  - 15% (27) Draw up voluntary codes of practice
  - 13% (24) Threaten to expel unethical members
  - 7% (13) Demand laws be passed on media ethics
- (Respondents could choose more than one)

Some members have suggested that the HKJA should help set up a Hong Kong Media Ethics Forum, a new pressure group with no government involvement, to do ethics work.

This would be a separate organisation from the HKJA, with involvement from people outside the media (teachers, social workers etc), which could lobby for better ethics, offer education, and handle public complaints. It would publish its findings and take a high profile.

**7) Do you think such a body could help improve media ethics?**

- 63% (112) Yes
- 21% (38) No
- 16% (28) No opinion/no answer

**8) Do you think the HKJA should help set up such a body?**

- 64% (114) Yes
- 17% (31) No
- 19% (33) No opinion/no answer

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**MEDIA ETHICS: THE HKJA MECHANISM**

The question of journalistic ethics has come under discussion more often in recent years. As the media industry in Hong Kong is highly diversified, the Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA) is in favour of encouraging media organisations and groups representing media interests to create mechanisms to handle ethical issues. The HKJA is already doing this, by accepting public complaints about alleged ethics violations.

The association's three-member ethics committee of senior journalists from the executive committee, which is in turn elected by the members, considers whether a breach of ethics has occurred, based on its 11-section code of ethics. The committee also considers, without waiting for a complaint, issues which the union considers to be of importance to the profession.

The HKJA's mechanism of receiving and adjudicating on complaints is unique because it is the only channel in Hong Kong by which members of the public can lodge complaints on media ethics. Having said that, our system is often considered to be highly "passive", given a shortage of resources.

Despite these drawbacks, we maintain that the existence of such a mechanism is necessary to maintain higher professional and ethical standards in our industry and develop a better sense of public accountability, irrespective of the actual effect of the judgement.

The HKJA plans to publish all the complaints it receives, subject to consent from complainants. The aim is not to embarrass any media outlet. Indeed we discourage any attempt to analyse these complaints to find which outlets are more ethical than others.

However, we hope to give guidance to both readers and professionals on what senior journalists consider acceptable and unacceptable in media ethics, and encourage debate. Previously, they were published only for our members - now we will make them available to the general public on a regular basis.

So what lessons can we draw from our experiences over the past three years? Of the 30 complaints received, nearly half of those that were substantiated were related to claims of inaccurate or misleading reporting in which the media were alleged to have intruded into the complainants' privacy.

Other allegations of particular significance include:

\* Cases that involved the obtaining of news material by means which were not straight forward. Sometimes photographs were taken with a hidden camera or videotaping was done without prior consent. Complainants were also unhappy about the use of "undercover" reporting techniques by journalists when the journalists approached their targets. Sometimes reporters made agreements to keep certain information confidential and then broke the agreement.

Section 5 of the HKJA's code of ethics is vital in considering such complaints. It reads: "A journalist shall obtain information, photographs and illustrations only by straight forward means. The use of other means can be justified only by over-riding considerations of the public interest. The journalist is entitled to exercise a personal conscientious objection to the use of such means."

In some cases, we have come to the conclusion in considering these complaints, that over-riding public interest considerations were not involved. The sharp increase in ethics complaints involving the use of means which are not straight forward is a worrying trend. While urging individual journalists to exercise their discretion in deciding whether to use such means, we believe it is also the duty of media organisations to make sure that the material they use is obtained in a conventional manner by their staff.

\* Allegations that publications printed disgusting or obscene pictures, as well as photographs of victims of indecent assault and rape. A sensational element has emerged in the form of garish front-page spreads, at times portraying pictures of bloody victims of crimes, traffic accidents and suicides. The HKJA's ethics committee has given consideration to this trend, and has drawn up guidelines on the use of photographs. The union calls for sensitivity in dealing with such events, with the aim of striking a balance between the presentation of facts and the public interest.

The HKJA code of ethics states that "(s)ubject to justification by over-riding considerations of the public interest, a journalist shall do nothing which entails intrusion into private grief and distress." Publication of photos of crime or suicide victims often involve such intrusion, in situations where the public interest is in no way involved.

\* Complaints about the way publications handle suicide attempts. In 1993, the HKJA studied the issue of whether media coverage contributed to a spate of student suicides. The union sought views and guidelines from overseas journalists, and then issued its own document on the issue. The union concluded that a total ban on coverage was not appropriate in Hong Kong. However, it encouraged self-restraint through low-key coverage of suicide news. It also encouraged media organizations to focus on underlying suicide trends, instead of individual cases. The HKJA approach was well-received by the media. This year we restated our position to the media.

\* Another discouraging trend is that media organisations sometimes decline to provide information for HKJA investigations. Some organisations even refuse to reply at all. Under such circumstances, given the one-sided nature of evidence available, the HKJA has at times found it very difficult to come to a definite conclusion. We note that the media complain loudly if the government and large companies refuse to answer questions. Yet media organisations, despite their great influence on society, often refuse to abide by the same standards.

\* There have been calls for the HKJA to be more active in dealing with ethical issues. Questions have also been raised about whether a press council should be established. A recent survey of HKJA members showed strong opposition. We believe that it is better to take a decentralised approach, through the application of a code of ethics and the drawing up of related documents on specific ethical issues, for example election coverage.

Recently, we have shortlisted a number of new actions after consultation with our members. One idea is to set up a media monitoring forum - a separate organisation from the HKJA, with involvement from people outside the media (for example, teachers and social workers). Such a body could lobby for better ethical standards, offer education and handle public complaints. It would serve as an additional channel for the public to be heard.

Ethics Committee  
November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1998

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**NEWS COVERAGE OF STUDENT SUICIDES**

1. The recent spate of student suicides has caused serious concern in Hong Kong. Media studies in overseas countries have pointed out that coverage of such cases creates a so-called "copy-cat" effect, prompting more young people to choose suicide as a way to solve their problems. However, academics are not unanimous on this point. Some studies argue that there has been no significant correlation between the reporting of individual cases and the actual number of suicides over a given period. In Hong Kong, no such study has been carried out, which makes it difficult to verify whether local coverage of student suicides has created a "copy-cat" effect.

2. The Hong Kong Journalists Association has compared the way overseas news organisations cover student suicides. In the United States and Canada, journalists have agreed generally among themselves not to report individual cases. Instead, they focus on general suicide trends and the reasons for such trends. However, they have agreed to report suicides which involve a celebrity or which have a significant effect on the public. In many other countries, such as United Kingdom and Australia, there are no specific rules on the reporting of individual cases, except that news organisations normally exercise a certain degree of self-restraint and try to avoid creating any "copy-cat" effect.

3. The HKJA believes that self-restraint should be exercised in an extremely cautious manner. There should be strong public interest reasons for such an approach, especially at a time when many people are worried that press freedom is under threat in the run-up to 1997.

4. The HKJA believes that a total ban on the coverage of individual student suicides is not appropriate in Hong Kong. However, journalists should seek to strike a balance between the need to report news and the danger of creating a "copy-cat" effect.

5. In dealing with ordinary student suicides, the HKJA recommends that the press should follow the principles stated below, unless overriding public interest is involved:

(i) The media should respect the privacy of students and their family members, and try to avoid giving a false impression that suicide is a way to become famous. The use of a victim's full name and photo is therefore discouraged.

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- (ii) Journalists should adopt a low-key approach in handling suicide news. They should consider placing such stories on the inside pages of newspapers, and in less prominent positions in radio and television news bulletins.
  - (iii) They should avoid a detailed description of the suicide method.
  - (iv) Since there are many complicated reasons for suicides, journalists should avoid simplicity and blaming any party for a particular case. Of greater importance, the media should devote more space to coverage of suicide trends and ways to remedy problems related to such trends.
  - (v) When reporting individual cases, newspapers should consider publishing information about organisations which may prevent suicides. These include the Samaritans, relevant government departments and other voluntary agencies.
6. Besides taking a cautious approach in covering student suicides, the media are encouraged to provide more articles or programmes which are suitable for youngsters.

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## The Ethics of News Photographs

As a representative of the journalistic profession, the Hong Kong Journalists Association understands the importance of reporting facts in an objective manner. However, we note a recent trend to publish news photographs, which appear to over-emphasise violence and vulgarity. These pictures may reflect news incidents in a vivid manner, but they are also liable to provoke negative reactions and controversy, including complaints from journalists and members of the public.

Examples include graphic, often bloody photographs of victims of crimes, traffic accidents, suicides and rapes.

Such photographs might provide “objective” images, but they may also place excessive emphasis on the bloody and violent side of an incident. In some cases, the shooting and acquisition of photographs might contradict the journalistic ethics of news coverage.

We understand that journalists work in a high-pressure and competitive environment. However, journalists should always observe journalistic ethics and the public interest. Certain photographs are genuine portrayals of events, but they can make people feel uncomfortable or even entail intrusion into private grief and distress. It is therefore necessary to strike a balance between the presentation of facts and public interest.

We believe press photographers should exercise sensitivity when taking pictures at the scene of a crime or tragedy. This involves refraining from intruding into the private grief of individuals, harassing unwilling victims or witnesses, or tampering with evidence at the scene of a crime or suicide.

At the same time, editors and news executives responsible for selecting and placing photographs should exercise restraint. In particular, they should not deliberately choose photographs aimed at attracting attention in a sensational manner.

We advise journalists to consider the following points in considering whether to publish photographs of a violent or vulgar nature.

1. Whether there is an overwhelming social or historical reason for publication, and this overrides its potentially objectionable nature.
2. Whether it is necessary and appropriate to include the photograph, if it depicts a violent scene.
3. Whether the photograph serves as important evidence or clarifies doubts about a particular news report.

We have no intention of interfering in the editorial independence of individual news organisations. Our worry is that over-emphasis on violence and vulgarity may become an increasing trend in our profession, and this may affect the public perception of the journalistic profession.

We sincerely hope that all media organisations will consider the public interest in their choice of photographs, while at the same time taking into consideration the public’s right to know and the profession’s ethical standards.

22<sup>nd</sup> November, 1998