

LCQ18: Ascertaining the identity of journalists during public events

Following is a question by the Hon Elizabeth Quat and a written reply by the Secretary for Home Affairs, Mr Lau Kong-wah, in the Legislative Council today (January 8):

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Question:

At present, there is no official organisation in Hong Kong responsible for issuing press cards centrally. Various media organisations or associations issue press cards on their own, making it difficult for people to ascertain whether the cardholders are journalists. It has been reported that some people wearing press cards acted illegally (such as obstructing the Police's law enforcement operations, and even attempting to rescue persons who were being arrested by police officers) during the public meetings and processions held in recent months. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it knows the total number of press cards issued by various media organisations or associations in each of the past three years, with a breakdown by name of organisation or association;

(2) whether it knows the mechanism adopted by various media organisations or associations for issuing press cards, including the professional requirements to be met and the ethical standards to be complied with by the applicants, as well as the related disciplinary mechanism;

(3) of the measures (such as holding discussions on news covering arrangements with the media organisations or associations that issue press cards) put in place to prevent demonstrators from concealing their identity during public meetings and processions by disguising themselves as journalists, so as to wait for an opportunity to act illegally; and

(4) given that online news media (online media) are currently not subject to regulation, and anyone can claim themselves to be citizen journalists or journalists from certain online media, whether the Government will introduce legislation to give a definition of bona fide online media workers, to prevent demonstrators from concealing their identity during public meetings and processions by disguising themselves as online media workers, so as to wait for an opportunity to act illegally?

Reply:

President,

Generally speaking, mass news media organisations include printed newspapers, news magazines and news agencies registered under the

Registration of Local Newspapers Ordinance (Cap 268) as well as their affiliated or associated online platforms, radio organisations licensed under the Telecommunications Ordinance (Cap 106) and commercial television broadcasters licensed under the Broadcasting Ordinance (Cap 562).

Having consulted the Commerce and Economic Development Bureau (CEDB), the Security Bureau and the Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau, a consolidated reply to Hon Elizabeth Quat's question is provided as follows:

(1) and (2) According to the CEDB, the numbers of press cards newly issued by Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) in the past three years are tabulated below:

| Year | Number |
|------|--------|
| 2017 | 154 |
| 2018 | 123 |
| 2019 | 126 |

All RTHK reporters are required to strictly observe government regulations and departmental instructions as well as RTHK's Producers' Guidelines. Related disciplinary cases will be dealt with in accordance with the prevailing mechanism.

The Government does not possess the information related to the issuance of press identification by media organisations other than RTHK.

(3) Since early June last year, there have been over 1 200 demonstrations staged in Hong Kong, many of which ended up in illegal acts of serious violence, including criminal damage, arson, hurling of petrol bombs, etc. There has also been a case in which a person mingled himself with reporters and the crowd and slashed a police officer's neck at short distance, gravely wounding the officer. The personal safety of police officers on duty is under enormous threat. During their operations, the Police have from time to time encountered instances of reporter "impersonation", including fake reporter identification being seized, self-proclaimed reporters found to be not employed by the media organisations they claimed, people wearing outfits similar to those of reporters and immediate departure upon being questioned about reporter credentials. In the past, persons suspected of "impersonating" reporters engaged in acts inconsistent with the duties of reporters, and even attempted to obstruct police enforcement, participate in illegal and violent acts, snatch suspects from police officers, etc.

The Police have all along been respecting the media's work and, where operations are not affected, facilitating reporters as far as possible. However, persons suspected of "impersonating" reporters have obstructed police enforcement, disrupted order at the scene and disturbed the work of genuine professional reporters. To cope with the situation, the Police have formulated guidelines for their officers to ascertain the identity of

reporters with the credentials issued by media organisations. While covering public order events, reporters should bring along their reporter or company credentials for easy identification by police officers at the scene. They should also pay attention to and follow police instructions, and maintain appropriate distance with police officers. This will prevent obstruction of police enforcement operations and prevent personal injury.

The Police believe that genuine professional reporters would not engage in illegal acts while covering events, and hope that reporters would identify and discern whether people around them are genuinely reporting, thus avoiding acts with ulterior motives by people disguising as reporters.

(4) Press freedom is Hong Kong's core value protected by the Basic Law and is the fundamental right enjoyed by the people of Hong Kong. The Government is firmly committed to safeguarding and respecting press freedom, and providing a suitable environment in which the media could exert its function as the fourth estate.

The Chief Executive mentioned at the media session on October 19, 2019 that the Government respects the freedom of press and has no intention to screen media practitioners' qualifications for reporting. As always, the Government will continue to firmly safeguard press freedom, facilitate media reporting and uphold the core value of Hong Kong.