

An Australian foreign correspondent in China: in conversation with Kirsty Needham

Speaker: Kirsty Needham, former China correspondent, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*

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James Laurenceson:

Okay, ladies and gentlemen, let's make a start. Good evening, everyone. Before we begin tonight, on behalf of all those present, I'd like to pay my respects to the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, upon whose lands [the University of Technology Sydney (UTS)]' City campus now stands. I would like to pay our respect to elders, past, present, emerging; recognising them as the traditional custodians of knowledge of this land. My name is James Laurenceson, I'm the director of UTS' Australia-China Relations Institute [ACRI]. UTS set up ACRI in 2014, to be a nonpartisan independent research institute focused exclusively on studying the relationship between Australia and China.

So we're not a China studies centre of the type that exists in other universities, but we're focused 100 percent on the bilateral relationship. It's my pleasure to take up the appointment as ACRI director earlier this year. ACRI's strategy - our mission - is very, very simple. It's simply to inform the Australia-China relationship through research, dialogue and events; bringing facts and evidence grounded in scholarly rigor to the discussion. We don't advocate for a particular approach, that's not our job. One of the great benefits of being at a university is that intellectual freedom is literally written into the employment contract of every staff member here.

It's not our job to advocate for a particular approach to managing the relationship, or telling the Australian government what they should be doing. I encourage all of my staff to speak their mind in their area of expertise. More generally, what we try to do is bring facts and evidence to the discussion so that stakeholders, decision makers and those members of the general public with an interest in Australia-China relations can be better informed themselves. Welcome to the second event for this year. Two weeks ago we had one of your colleagues, Glenda Korporaal, who herself has just returned from China as the correspondent for *The Australian* newspaper. I'd particularly like to welcome tonight any Chinese students we have in the lecture theatre. I'm very conscious - welcome, welcome - I'm very conscious that you folks are in a tough situation at the moment, even if you yourself are in Australia. The coronavirus situation that's unfolded in China means that inevitably you've got friends and family who are in a very, very difficult situation, so we thank you for joining us tonight. We're very glad that you are able to join us.

We're continuing with a bit of a journalism theme tonight. As I said, we had Glenda a couple of weeks ago, but tonight we have with us Kirsty Needham. Kirsty is a very experienced journalist of 23 years, I believe Kirsty, with *The Sydney Morning Herald*, with a variety of backgrounds. But I guess the main reason we've got Kirsty here with us tonight is because she has literally just returned from a three year stint as the China correspondent for *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*. So will you join with me now in welcoming Kirsty to this event tonight. And Kirsty, I'm happy to acknowledge your *Sydney Morning Herald* affiliation, but I've also just got to squeeze in that Kirsty's also an UTS alumna.

Kirsty Needham:

That's right.

James Laurenceson:

So a double welcome to you for that. I'm an economist so I don't have a lot of direct connections with the UTS journalism school, but I'm getting the impression that the university is a bit of a star performer in this area. Many of you would know Monica Attard, who's the head of the School of Journalism. She's a practitioner herself, a former Russia correspondent, I believe. Wanning Sun is a professor we have here, my view is Australia's leading academic researcher and commentator on media issues in the Australia-China relationship. We also have Peter Manning who's a former executive producer at Four Corners. And he's an adjunct professor of journalism in our journalism school as well.

So tonight we're here to talk about being an Australian foreign correspondent in China. And in the process of doing that we might reflect a bit more broadly on the role of media in covering the Australia-China relationship. So I'll kick it off. Kirsty, I'd just encourage you to take the conversation wherever you would like it to go. Certainly the plan is for us to have plenty of time for questions and answers with the audience - I'm sure that's why many of you are here tonight. Kirsty, let's kick things off. Sorry, one other quick point, I don't want to forget this. We'll hear a lot of Kirsty's views tonight in conversation, but when you go home tonight, if you want a bit more, I'd really encourage you to read an article Kirsty wrote last month. Here's the title, if you want to jot it down. It's called 'The long arm of authoritarian China reached into my seven-year-old's bedroom'. If that doesn't get your interest, I don't know what [will]. It's a fabulous article Kirsty wrote last month, so I'd encourage you to read that. All right. Kirsty, first question for you, most people in this room would know you, they would have seen your name, read your stories as the China correspondent for *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* from 2017 to 2019. But actually, your connection with China goes back a long way. This is your second stint, at least your second stint. In 2004, if I'm not mistaken, you had spent some time at the *China Daily*. The *China Daily* is a state owned media outlet, as most media outlets are in China. You wrote a book about your experience in 2007, called *A Season in Red*. Now, when I scanned your book, there was one story that you recounted, which I found pretty funny and it was this one: you said when you were applying for your visa, your job description originally started off as a journalist, and then the visa you were issued with by the Chinese embassy in Australia, if I understand correctly, described you in this way - it described you not as a journalist, but as a 'foreign expert English language polisher'. That's quite a shift in job description. So kind of start off by asking, can you describe for us all your earlier experience with China? Take that wherever you'd like to go.

Kirsty Needham:

That's right. I worked at the *China Daily* in 2004, which was just after the SARS outbreak. I only mentioned that because we're in a similar situation now with coronavirus. I was over there on an Australian government funded fellowship, and the idea was that you would help build the relationship between Australia and China, by bringing a Chinese journalist to Australia and she would spend some time with the ABC. That's what happened, and then I was selected. I'd been studying Chinese for about five years at that stage as a young journalist from an Australian newspaper, and I would go and spend some time at a Chinese newspaper. But that didn't really happen and that's because at that stage in 2004, there were still heavy restrictions on foreigners being involved in China's media. So to get my visa, I was put into the position of the 'foreign expert English language polisher'.

James Laurenceson:

I'm sure you were fabulous, by the way.

Kirsty Needham:

I was okay at it, but that's a classic role of foreign journalists coming in. And because *China Daily* was an English language paper, the foreign experts were drawn from all around the world and they had a really essential role of getting the paper out each day, in polishing up the English sub editing, I guess you might call it. But it had extra restrictions on it, so when we arrived we were given a book with the rules on Tibet, Falun Gong, Taiwan, Tiananmen, quite sensitive issues within the Chinese media system that perhaps a foreigner wouldn't understand. There's also a lot of scrutiny of the work, so a subeditor in an Australian newspaper would quickly do their things and the paper would rush to deadline. But everything the foreigners touched in the copy was checked at a higher up level. There was a real, I guess, suspicion.

James Laurenceson:

In case you were causing trouble.

Kirsty Needham:

In case you were causing trouble, and suspicion of foreign influence. But I want to take you back even further. I found this out last year when I was doing some research on the anniversary of the Australia China Council. In my research I actually found out that *China Daily* was founded by journalists from *The Age* newspaper and an Australian government grant working with *People's Daily*. So the first ever 'foreign expert English language polisher', was an old *Age* journalist in 1980.

James Laurenceson:

24 years before.

Kirsty Needham:

Yeah, pretty amazing history. The Australian government funded some *People's Daily* journalists to come to *The Age* offices in Melbourne, to train in Western journalism methods. And then *The Age* journalist went back to the *People's Daily* compound and helped set up *China Daily* with new typesetting machines, that were paid for by the Australian *Age* newspaper and the Australian government. But it didn't last that long, I think it lasted only about a year. I think that that incident and I guess the way my journalism media exchange worked out in 2004, showed the real differences in the two media systems. The Western media system and Western ideas of journalism really don't mesh with what they would call a Marxist journalism system. There's a lot more control of the message and control of information, but interesting experience anyway.

James Laurenceson:

Yeah, that's interesting. I was at the Federation for Australian Studies in China conference last November, and these days I guess in the press want you read about are two big areas. One is the trade - booming numbers of Chinese tourists, students, iron ore, beef, wine. And then we've got the highly contested geopolitics on the other side, but then you have all these other stories. You mentioned those journalistic connections, and in academia as well. Some fabulous stories of Australian academics going to China, even before the opening up period, and shortly after then Chinese academics coming to Australia as well. It's good those people-to-people stories are told as well.

Kirsty, can I try to connect that earlier experience you've had with being a journalist, or a 'foreign English language polisher', with your more recent experience? One of the narratives we hear about China today is that China's changed under Xi Jinping; particularly since Xi Jinping. And just to be frank, I'm asking you for the journalism perspective, but from my own experience as an academic, it's true, China's changed. And what I mean by that is academics who would five years ago speak quite openly with me, no problem getting them to talk publicly about issues, now they're much more circumspect and hesitant to do so.

In fact, it's not even easy for us to get Chinese voices coming out to Australia, to places like this to speak, because they're just conscious of what the repercussions of that could be. So Kirsty, you spent more time on the ground than me over the last three years, how has it changed? What have you noticed have been the big changes? Or are there some narratives about a change, but in fact there's a lot of commonalities as well. That is, is the China under Xi Jinping radically different to China under Jiang Zemin or Hu Jintao?

Kirsty Needham:

It definitely has changed. That was apparent in the three years living there. It's an interesting question of how. On one level there's certainly economic growth. There's amazing roads and bridges being built. There's a lot of work to lift people out of poverty. Students and tourists can travel much more freely than they could in 2004. When I was there in 2004, there had been a lot of really big legal changes only three months earlier. At the end of 2003 the law was changed, so if you wanted to get married, or get a passport, or get divorced, you no longer had to get permission from your *danwei*; from your working leader. That was astonishing to me, that there'd be that kind of intrusion into personal life. But that was done away with in 2004, I could see the state withdrawing from people's lives. I was working alongside young journalists who had studied overseas and had grand ambitions of what they thought journalism could do and you could see liberal voices in 2004. I believe up until 2000 - remember Beijing had the Olympics in 2008 - that opening up did continue for foreign media. They were lifting restrictions for where you could go travel outside of Beijing.

But I think it's pretty clear and uncontested that after 2012, when Xi Jinping became general secretary and later president we have seen a tightening up. More focused on social stability, the clear signs of that Xi himself has been given more power than Hu Jintao ever had as general secretary and president. There's no successors that have been appointed twice a decade, leader of the communist party. There were no heir apparents that were appointed. The term limits on president were lifted. Xi Jinping's ideology was incorporated into the Constitution. So we have a leader now with a lot more personal power, from what we can see on the outside, than we've had in many decades. I wouldn't compare it to Jiang Zemin though, because he's still around and I wouldn't discount the role of the factions. We don't know. Looking from the outside, we see the persona of Xi Jinping. We don't know how much of that is a construct by the Standing Committee, that they think this is something that the people can follow; where personal power lies with those factions.

But definitely this is a strongman leader, and how can we see that it's a more authoritarian society? If you look at the corruption crackdown that he presided over where tens of thousands of officials have been arrested and convicted. If you see the crackdown more recently in Xinjiang on the Uighur Muslims, in a very systemic way of solving what they felt to be the problem of terrorism. But doing that by locking people up and teaching them Chinese and trying to change their minds; it's a lot more authoritarian system. There's been crackdowns on NGOs, churches and Buddhist temples are now required to raise the national flag. And where in 2004 I'd seen the state withdraw from private lives and leave people a sphere, the family was predominant and people could have control over their lives, there's now definitely I think a push to raise the profile of the party, and to push the party and ideology back into schools, into universities, into the workplace. And also meshing ideas of the party with ideas of nationalism. So these are big changes that I'd seen between 2008 and 2017.

James Laurenceson:

Right. When I try and stay engaged with China and learn about China, one of the voices that I respect the most is not so much a Chinese diplomat sitting in Canberra, or indeed someone sitting in Washington. But just everyday Chinese friends and colleagues. I remember, the thing that really struck out to them was when the two-term limit got abolished. Before that, a lot of my Chinese friends were saying, 'Look there's good reasons for Xi Jinping to centralise his power, there's a lot of corruption'. Which is true, right?

Kirsty Needham:

Yeah.

James Laurenceson:

I mean, that was rampant. That needed to be cracked down.

Kirsty Needham:

Yes.

James Laurenceson:

There's no argument about that. Indeed, I think generally speaking, that still remains quite popular. But once that step was taken, I noticed a lot of my Chinese friends saying, 'Gee, we weren't expecting that and now we are a bit more concerned'. Next question, Kirsty. We talk about the different ways, disciplines, and by that I mean fields of study, engaged with China. I'm an economist and I think over time perhaps I was a bit slow off the mark. But I think over time I have become more conscious of the fact that as an economist, I did my PhD on financial reform and economic development in China from 1997 to 2000. Frankly, the last two decades, the Chinese economy has been pretty impressive.

It's not hard for someone like me. My touchpoints with China are pretty positive, optimistic touchpoints. And maybe that's the same for Australian businesspeople as well. You're coming from a very different perspective. My impression is that being a journalist in China is bloody hard work. And if you've been following the media over the last 24 hours last night, we had a significant development affecting journalists of *The Wall Street Journal*. Three journalists, including one Australian by the way, had his credentials revoked. Not because of anything they'd done or said, but by a headline in the paper, in the opinion section. Completely different from the news department. It was quite an offensive headline, I thought, by the way. But the point is that they had absolutely nothing to do with it, but now they're being punished for it. So it's a tough gig. Is that hard to deal with? You'd be facing a lot of challenges every day, practicing journalism on the ground. How do you keep the balance in not drifting into imagining that all of China, or all engagement with China is of that negative type?

Kirsty Needham:

Absolutely. I think life in China can be very different for the average middle class family going along, doing what they need, focusing on school, on buying an apartment. You know, these basic things that everyone everywhere would deal with. But if you're a dissident, if you sit outside that mainstream, or you're a group that comes to the attention of the Communist Party, like an NGO, a church group or a foreign journalist, then you have a very different experience, and it's getting worse. I think yesterday, with the three *Wall Street Journal* journalists being expelled - and they've got five days to get out of China - we haven't seen anything like this in several decades. Usually China would try to express its displeasure at foreign correspondents by refusing visa renewals, or only issuing two months, or even I've heard more recently of a one month visa renewal, to put people on notice that they need to start packing their bags. But to expel them with five days' notice is quite extreme. I think it's always been there, a suspicion of foreign journalists as spies, or wanting to interfere, or wanting to bring down the communist system. It has gotten worse and the crackdown on journalists is enabled by digital technology. So I wanted to go through three different areas, which I guess are the basic difficulties that we face.

One of them is, I guess, physical. That when you travel outside of Beijing for work, I need a press card to operate anywhere. My passport has the journalist visa in it, so anytime I check into a hotel, or catch a train, or catch a plane, I'm marked out as a journalist. So as soon as you go outside of Beijing, you'll usually very quickly get a phone call or a visit from the police, to find out 'Why are you here in this town? What are you doing here? Do you have permission?' And it can just make it really difficult for you to do basic interviewing. One experience you would have is interviews that you'd pre-arranged; when you get there they're just being cancelled because the interviewee was pressured by the local propaganda department or the local police. So that's an interference in just doing run-of-the-mill journalism.

Other more interesting experiences of being detained is quite common. I can think of three stories. One up on the border of North Korea in Dandong, we were doing a story after some UN sanctions had been put onto

North Korea. We were just looking at the impact on Dandong - which is a big border town - looking at the seafood trade and the trucks coming across the bridge and asked quite openly. I had press credentials, I was entitled to be there, but we were accused of being spies when we asked at the local information bureau about some of these basic things in Xinjiang. Xinjiang is quite a sensitive area and the Chinese government will say, 'Well, this is an open area. Journalists can come and say what they like'. But they can't. I had the experience there of being detained for eight hours by police. And then when I left that particular town, going back to the capital Urumqi, being trailed by about 10 state security officers, being accompanied to the toilet. Just basically being prevented from photographing or talking to anyone, until I had gone through the security at the airport and got on my plane back to Beijing. So real physical efforts to stop you from doing a story.

It's frustrating because I think it's such a waste of energy and time, because foreign journalists are over there to tell the China story. Our readers are fascinated and we really want to know, this is the second largest economy in the world. China's engaging with Australia and a lot of other countries, and we're curious and we want to know. But even a good news story - the 70th anniversary of Communist China's founding last year, we're really committed to going big on this. In the end I had a double page spread in the Sunday paper. It got quite a big run but it was a huge drama to get that story. In Beijing, all foreign correspondents are having real difficulty getting anyone to go on the record and talk of these anniversary stories, we're in the middle of the trade war. And academics, people were just really cautious about talking to foreign media because they're worried about the downside, that they would have repercussions in their own careers.

So I thought, my most common solution to this in China was just go somewhere. Go there, go on the ground, go and talk to people face to face. And often this would work. So we decided to go to Yan'an, tell the story of the Long March. We'd lined up some interviews with historians, and I did have success in speaking to people who had amazing personal histories, and their recollections of being sent down youth or afar. One woman I spoke to and her father had been there with Mao at the beginning. Amazing personal stories, and we wanted to finish it off by going to the village where Xi Jinping had been as a sent down youth, as a 15 year old, which was nearby. This is a tourist attraction, so tour buses would come in and Chinese people would come and learn about Xi's time as a sent down youth. But as soon as we stepped foot there, 10 police descended on me. Took me off to a little room and watched me sip tea for over an hour, while they made phone calls to the foreign ministry and to local officials who were panicking that a foreign journalist had turned up at this site. And in the end myself and my photographer were allowed to go into the village, but we couldn't talk to anyone. We couldn't take any photographs, even with a phone. I said, 'Look, can I even take a selfie of me here so I can show my son?' And also it's kind of a cool thing to have it in your picture book when you go back home - this is Xi Jinping's village when he was a sent down youth. But no, that wasn't allowed. So it's just very heavy handed. And I said, 'Why?' And they said, 'The 70th anniversary is a sensitive anniversary and we just don't want things to go wrong'. So that suspicion and fear of journalists, it's only growing.

I'll next talk about the digital interference, which I think is even more of a problem. And the Firewall and how that interferes with just reporting on straight events that you would think China would want reported on. So my mobile phone was often cut. My mobile phone: they knew that this is a foreign journalist's phone and all my phone calls were monitored. We worked out that when a call was connected through, then the public security bureau would listen in, because you'd wait for the extra click. For large amounts of time, I couldn't ring Australia so I couldn't ring my family, I couldn't ring my editors at work and when my family wanted to ring me, they had to ring three times. My mum, who's in her seventies learned to ring three times and then finally, it would go through. I couldn't send text messages to my editors at work. At one point, my texts were going via England - and this was happening to another correspondent - we think that they were getting translated into Chinese or there was some reason why they were all being routed through this one number in England. ABC Radio interviews; quite frequently the ABC might line me up to talk about something and they simply couldn't get through. The interviews were abandoned. My computer would stop working. We knew my emails were being read because there were things that would happen, it was quite clear that the contents of an email or something we'd organised had been read. And you had to work around this when you're organising for stories. There were break-ins at my house where nothing was touched. Quite misguided break-ins, actually, because they would go through my husband's computer. And my husband was on a spouse visa, looking after my son

so this computer was full of Peppa Pig and school projects and it was a lot of effort that they'd made. He works in IT, so he had quite good security, a lot of effort they'd gone through to get past that security to discover Peppa Pig, that project.

But it wears you down, it makes it harder to do your work. And that's without talking about the Firewall. I guess most people who've travelled there, you know that the Firewall, it's built on AI, it's flexible, it's sophisticated. It depends on which city you're in, how it works. We had multiple VPNs - virtual private networks - just to get our job done, to answer emails from work in the morning or to file copy. But whenever there was a big political event, which you really wanted to report on, like the military parade in Beijing for the 70th anniversary, like the twice a decade meeting of the Communist Party, it's almost impossible to get through the Firewall because they would ramp up the AI and they would ramp up the attacks on the VPNs. Really, really hard to get basic journalism done. That's just a few of my whinges.

James Laurenceson:

Right, okay. Sounds like there's a clear lesson for someone like me just coming at this from an economics perspective. Don't forget, folks, not everyone has the same experience when they engage with China, as it is to someone like me as well. Kirsty you just told us a lot about the challenges that you face from the Party in China doing your job. Now, I'm thinking that the Party's got some enemies. China's in a geopolitical competition with the United States as well. I wanted to ask you another question, aside from those pressures you've talked about, do you get pressures from different groups to write about certain topics in a certain way, or is the pressure from the Party the one that overwhelmingly dominates?

Kirsty Needham:

Well my job as a journalist is to be sceptical of lobbyists and that's something that I've learned to do in Australia as a journalist, I spent eight years covering politics and you get pretty used to the lobbying from all kinds of sides on this; 'Hey you should write this, this is this, this is that'. And your job as a journalist is to ignore that and look for what your readers want to know. And the truth, I know it's an old-fashioned concept, but I really believe in looking for the truth. There's definitely highly organised groups that don't like the Communist Party in China. Falun Gong is one example; at the moment with the geopolitical risks in the world, we see a lot of antagonism between Taiwan and mainland China, between the United States - especially in the Trump administration and the trade war and China - so I guess there are. And you see it on social media, there are a lot of these lobby groups, I would call them, but we don't get contacted in Beijing.

James Laurenceson:

Why?

Kirsty Needham:

There's so much digital surveillance on journalists in Beijing and of our office, our phone calls, emails; I think that's why those groups didn't even try. One, if they had, I take a very sceptical approach. I'm there to report the news, not to bang anyone's drum or push a barrow, and you really did not get those approaches in Beijing. And I guess that's also a show of the real crackdown on dissent within China that you just did not see those groups. One example of this is: another big story last year was the 30th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square Massacre, and that's something that we wanted to note because we know that there were a lot of Chinese in Australia at that time, that Bob Hawke had said, 'Please stay', so that's a part of the Australian-Chinese story. But to do that, I had to go Taiwan to interview people because there was just no prospect of doing that story from Beijing.

James Laurenceson:

Some of the pressures on a journalist are greater in Sydney, at least when it comes to those lobbyists from those other groups. This is not a pressure group, but I'm also thinking that you've got editors back in Sydney; you're not a freelancer, you're working for *The Sydney Morning Herald* and your readers in Sydney, they have a

certain interest in particular stories and not others. How did you negotiate that? Was your job to [go], 'this is what the readers want, that's what I deliver', or do you try and expand horizons as well?

Kirsty Needham:

One, I didn't really feel any pressure from my editors in Sydney and Melbourne. They really trusted me to pitch stories and look for stories. They would let me know if there were issues bubbling along that they wanted covered and obviously, in the last three years, diplomatic tensions between Australia and China, it was something they really wanted us to watch out for; what the Chinese media was saying, for example, or what the Chinese foreign ministry was saying, so they always wanted us to cover that. Just, that's not a major issue, I guess. I think I got a good run for my stories in the paper and such a broad range of stories. This we mentioned, the 70th anniversary of Communist China's founding, that got a fantastic run. One story about big bridges that China had built went really well online. I think one of the last stories to run on the front page was about Xi Jinping's speech at the China Import Expo in Shanghai, where he was warning the world that we shouldn't fall into technological camps, that there needed to be cross-fertilisation in advancing technology - that got a fantastic run online and paper. And often, Xi Jinping's comments on globalisation and free trade will get a really good run, but the newspaper does look at what are the stories that are engaging our readers and where you can look at that with the data for online and where's a real interest and Hong Kong last year stood out. It's not so much pressure, but there was always, yes, given the huge cost of me flying to Hong Kong and being put up in a hotel to cover those protests; there was always a 'yes' because they could see the reader interest and I think the reason is there's a lot of people migrated from Hong Kong in 1997 to Australia so you have a big readership community here in Sydney particularly, that are interested in finding out what's going on in Hong Kong, and also a lot of Australians that have worked in the financial industry or education in Hong Kong. So there's huge interest online in the paper for that Hong Kong story so that was a real standout, I think.

James Laurenceson:

I remember, I followed Kirsty on Twitter and when you were in Hong Kong, the hours that you were doing were unbelievable, I'm pretty sure you didn't sleep while you were there. While we're talking about Twitter, you're focused on the paper, but social media is everywhere and journalists are engaged with it. I follow pretty much all of the Australia and China correspondents, actually, internationally as well. I wanted to ask you a couple questions about social media. When you follow journalists on those sort of platforms, you often become quite familiar with their personal views on China as well. Is that a professional challenge for you? Because obviously, your core ethics in being a journalist is stick with the facts, objectivity. Is it a danger that when journalists get on Twitter and start talking about other issues, that people may doubt their objectivity because they've been exposed to their personal views as well?

Kirsty Needham:

That's a very good question and probably why our newspaper now has a social media policy that we need to be quite conservative in the views that we express on Twitter. The paper's quite conscious of that, that it can impact on the reputation of the masthead and objectivity. But stepping outside of that, I've been in China, I didn't read the social media policy. But in China, Twitter for me was not just a social thing, it was a real lifeline to the news. I think you'll see a lot of those China correspondents using Twitter because they can't access a lot of Western media when the VPNs go down and I could barely see anything about China on the BBC or CNN without it being blacked out. You can calibrate your Twitter feed to be more of a newsfeed I guess, and then for me, Twitter was important and I continue to use it as a news tool. So that's my take on Twitter, I guess.

James Laurenceson:

One more question about Twitter, if I may. I've been following you the whole time you were in Beijing and I've seen you cop some abuse from all sides.

Kirsty Needham:

Must be objective, then.

James Laurenceson:

It must be, it must be. That's right. You're not just copping it from one side. I wanted to ask you about that experience. What sort of stories do people react to on social media? When you know you're going to cop it, does that make your job harder as well?

Kirsty Needham:

Oh, it does and I think I knew that before I went over. Twitter did some research and they found that journalists and particularly female journalists were copping it on Twitter. So they did some outreach to media outlets just to talk about how we can protect ourselves from these kinds of things, so I had a little bit of experience with that before I went over to China, I mean you mentioned on all sides. I think two interesting Twitter experiences for me were when I reported in 2018, it was quite a bitter, to be honest, debate here in Australia about Chinese influence, foreign interference laws and it's quite divisive amongst the academic and China watching community.

I wrote a story about a letter that had been written by the first Australian ambassador to China and some quite prominent China scholars with their concerns about racism, free speech and the impact of the draft at that stage of the foreign interference legislation and that just blew up and there was a lot of accusations of 'panda-huggers' and 'anti-China'; it was very polarising. It's quite draining and tiring I guess to be in the middle of something like that, especially when you're over in the lounge room in Beijing and actually set Twitter up to be your newsfeed. I didn't really want to get involved in all this other stuff but I think that's a broader issue about Twitter and newspapers are having a look at that themselves.

Another very different experience is when I was covering Hong Kong, there was an orchestrated campaign against China correspondents in Hong Kong, particularly women again - what is it about women journalists? I don't know. People were being doxxed, I was very careful to make sure my face wasn't in my Twitter profile, I've unmasked since I've come back to Australia. But other female journalists were being doxxed and that's quite dangerous actually. Because if you were out on the street, reporting on the protest, I don't think it was a safe thing to be identified as a 'foreign agent'. This is a real problem. Twitter took down a lot of these accounts. There was state actors involved, it was very clear from the consistent messaging. We were also getting emails that were coming through, that someone's job each day was to get in there and fire off this barrage at the China correspondents who'd been identified as working on the ground in Hong Kong. It got very tiring, but there's always a block button or a mute button.

James Laurenceson:

You've got your smartphone with you.

Kirsty Needham:

Yeah. Yeah.

James Laurenceson:

One final question for me, and then I'll throw it to the audience. Kirsty, we've been speaking about your own practice as a correspondent in China, I was wondering if I could make my last question a broader one about media in the Australia-China relationship, more generally. There's no doubt that media is playing a critically important role in this relationship. Let me just give you one example. When it comes to Chinese interference in Australia, that is actions brought about by the China's state to - what the Australian government would say - undermine our democratic processes, the media is one of our best sources of defence. Right? Bringing these stories to light, that's critically important.

On the other hand, there are other people who do say that the role the media is playing in this debate is not always helpful, and I think of one of my colleagues here, Professor Wanning Sun, who's a professor of media and communications, and she's pointed out that often, stories about China or Australia-China relations can drift into some sensationalism. Language can be sloppy, such that it can have, even if it's not racist in intent,

and I'm sure it really [isn't], but it can have racist consequences. How do you think the Australian media is going in its job of covering what is a really difficult issue, right? This is a critical bilateral relationship for Australia. I mean, I often say all the opportunities are true, all the challenges are true. The media is right in the thick of it. How do you think we're going?

Kirsty Needham:

Just to preface, I'd say that the coverage that we did in the Beijing office is very separate to this kind of debate in the coverage that was done here. So we pretty much kept out of it. I've been in China for three years so I haven't been here to read a lot of that stuff, but on a number of occasions, I've observed Australian diplomats in China telling a Chinese audience, 'If you want to know what the Australian government's view or policies, don't read the Australian media', so that was interesting to me. They said, 'Go and read the Prime Minister or the Foreign Minister's statements on China', so don't necessarily believe what you're reading.

To that, I would say that perhaps within this government, there are a lot, or there have been disgruntled backbenchers or people on committees that don't toe the line or don't agree with government policy on China and that's why you were seeing some of these stories in the media, so perhaps we shouldn't always shoot the messenger, it does emanate from government so it's an issue that needs to be dealt with there. But again from China, I've been told by the Chinese Foreign Ministry that they find *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* very interesting reading, they learn so much from it. And I guess because those stories do provide beyond what the Prime Minister's official statement on something is, they're very closely read. All of those stories are read by the Foreign Ministry and state security and they're watching it very carefully. I thought those were some interesting perspectives.

From my point of view, I would say, if we believe in free speech and free press, it's important to have as wide a range of voices as possible, so I think I've seen a shift. Early on in this debate, there might have been single-source stories or stories based on a photograph, or stories based on an unnamed source, but we're seeing a lot less of that; we're seeing journalists going to Chinese-Australians, going and seeking a more diverse range of voices and we're getting more well-rounded stories. And I think that's really important. I think another observation I'd have from being in Beijing is a lot of these stories are being written by general reporters or political reporters that don't have any experience of China or much knowledge of China. But I guess their job is to write about the domestic political implications in their writing for a domestic audience and that's why it's really important that Australian media are investing in having journalists on the ground in China to write context and more understanding and the bigger picture. I think my take on that would be, it's really important for Nine, I keep going to say Fairfax, but it's Nine Newspapers, the ABC and *The Australian* to have reporters on the ground in China to provide context to the debate.

[ENDS]