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It's vital to ask the tough questions

We should be embarrassed that journalists are now routinely condemned for simply doing their jobs.

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WHEN Seven News correspondent Paul Dowsley was pelted by projectiles and urine on the streets of Melbourne this week, he joined a growing club of Australian reporters who have faced physical violence and intimidatory tactics simply for doing their job.

To report in Australia today is to report in a country where journalists are subject to assault, police intimidation, online harassment and delegitimisation, and sustained attacks by political figures. 89 per cent of Australian journalists believe that "threats, intimidation and harassment" are rising.

COVID has inflamed what was already a growing anti-journalist culture in Australia. In this new culture, even the most basic function of journalism - asking questions - is viewed by many as a hostile act.

We have seen this countless times during COVID-19 press conferences over the past 18 months. At these pressers, journalists are expected to extract information and context from politicians. Sometimes their questions stoke anger from partisan audiences, because they posit imperfections within leaders' COVID-19 policies. Irrespective of their efficacy, these policies still demand relentless scrutiny due to their unprecedented - if justified - impositions on peoples' lives.

The fact that tough journalistic questioning elicits so much anger from sections of the public reflects a widespread misunderstanding of the role individual journalists play, and how journalists tactically craft questions to ensure stories are well told.

As a kid, watching *Foreign Correspondent* on my mum's 1990s wood-panelled TV, I dreamt of being a journalist. I didn't pursue this dream, dissuaded by the economic vulnerability that would come with the career.

But unsatisfied at aged 26, I decided to try my luck at freelancing. I had little experience, but I had a story.

I'd heard about the arrest of a chief in rural Vanuatu. He was on trial for razing the village of a thief who had stolen the chief's sea cucumbers. After many failed pitches, Al Jazeera put me on a plane to the island, where I spoke to dozens of people - victims, the chief, his allies, his enemies.

Arson is objectively awful. But within this cultural context, some argued it was permitted under tribal law. Knowing this, I asked my subjects a grating question: was the razing of the village justified?

The question allowed some to opine on traditional justice. For others, it created



Members of the media look for cover as protesters throw bottles and flares in Melbourne this week. Picture: Getty Images

room to debunk antiquated beliefs.

A journalist's job is to ask questions that reflect established viewpoints (even unpopular or fringe ones) or questions that allow space for interviewees to justify a position.

Wearing a journalist's hat, I have asked countless questions reflecting positions I disagree with.

In China, I once asked whether the impacts of sinicisation in a small Tibetan village were offset by the community's economic progress. The subject used the question to refute what was the mainstream view put forward by Xi Jinping's regime.

In Kyrgyzstan, I once asked a politician whether a spate of bride-kidnappings - an abhorrent but still practised "tradition" in Kyrgyz culture - reflected local custom. She used the question to explain that these beliefs, while still prevalent, were declining.

Personally, I do not believe that people's homes should be destroyed for stealing sea cucumbers, that China's annihilation of minorities is justified, or that ancient beliefs can excuse gender-based violence. I asked these questions because it was what the stories demanded.

Journalists must ask questions that reflect views audiences and interviewees disagree with - and that the journalist often finds personally objectionable. We should be embarrassed that journalists are now routinely condemned for doing just this.

In addition to physical attacks, we see condemnation from social media zealots who think discrediting journalists is a legitimate form of activism.

In addition to physical attacks, we see condemnation from social media zealots who think discrediting journalists is a legitimate form of activism. And we see similar tactics used by more powerful actors.

Anti-journalism is common in the tirades of radical commentators (who aren't journalists) who have made careers out of demonising institutions like the ABC.

It is also common in our politics. We cannot disassociate the public distrust of journalism from the bipartisan diminution of journalists by our political class. In today's debased political culture, ministers think it is reasonable to sue our national broadcaster, journalists are raided by federal police, MPs take pot shots at journos to satiate their egos on Twitter, and former prime ministers

delegitimise everyone whose employment sees them tangentially associated with a distant, nonagenarian billionaire.

These illiberal, Trumpian tactics give false legitimacy to public assumptions that most journalists are biased, or complicit in partisan conspiracy.

Media companies themselves don't help. Opinion and news have become blurred in audiences' eyes. Partisan editorials and aggressive front pages devalue the profession.

But we must remember that individual journalists - the foot soldiers - have scant influence over editorial decision-making.

Most journalists just love telling stories and chasing facts - despite the job insecurity and low pay they typically experience.

It is hard for journalists to write about growing anti-journalist sentiments, because it can appear as if they're doing their employer's bidding. But I have no such conflict. Since my first story in 2017, I've earned less than \$20,000 from freelance journalism. Many of journalism's front-liners are not on the gravy train.

Journalists are fallible, like anyone. But if we fail to cure this anti-journalist fever running rife in Australian society, we risk the societal consequences of an irreparably neutered fourth estate.

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