

**October 2020**

## **SOPA winners share their experience**

*How newsrooms of limited scale and resources produce ground-breaking investigations*

Both launched in 2015, *The Reporter* and *Initium Media* are two small-sized, online publications that have been recognized as contributing strongly to the Chinese language media landscape. With trust and interest in journalism declining around the globe, their missions are alike: to re-engage readers with in-depth journalism.

As part of a series of interviews with this year's prize winners, SOPA speaks with *The Reporter* and *Initium Media* on how their small teams of journalists produce award-winning investigations with big impact.

### **The Reporter**

Based in Taiwan, *The Reporter* is a non-profit media organization focused on in-depth reportage and investigative journalism. The newsroom is funded entirely by donations, with the goal of bringing professional and unbiased work into Taiwan's polarized media environment.

A team of 30 journalists work at the publication in Taipei, including three designers, three social media editors and four photojournalists. The editors also work with dozens of freelancers.

This year, *The Reporter* won nine awards from SOPA, including seven awards of excellence and two honorable mentions. The winning entries — investigations into Asia's online gambling industry, information warfare business, and Xinjiang re-education camps — all tried to expose governments' failures and human rights violations, as well as Taiwan's position in cross-border issues.

"When we approach stories, we try to look at things from an international perspective," says Sherry Lee, editor-in-chief. "The interaction between Taiwan and the world is getting closer. Whether it is about information warfare, online gaming or the re-education camps, you can all see cross-border international cooperation behind them."

To incorporate international perspectives into Taiwan's stories has always been an important objective of *The Reporter*. The newsroom's investigation into online gambling is one example of how it adds context to complex, cross-border crimes.

"The Invisible Online Gambling Empire: From China, Philippines to Taiwan" revealed how online casinos operate across Asia. The journalists began their reporting by looking into a growing workforce of young Taiwanese providing remote engineering, design and customer services to clients in the online gambling industry. The team then discovered a larger, systematic and cross-border operation across China, Taiwan, Cambodia and the Philippines, whereby

Taiwanese workers are lured into quick money making but find themselves caught in money laundering operations.



Credit: 報導者 — 線上博奕帝國，攝影蘇威銘，設計黃禹禎

The Reporter — Online Gambling Empire, Photo by Wei Ming Su, Design by Yu Chen Huang

“We try to not only report on personal stories of interviewees, but also disclose structural problems related to the topic,” Lee says. “This is sort of like our dos and don’ts.”

The report, which was published in 2019, was followed up by Taiwanese prosecutors and later led to money laundering charges. The team revisited the story this year based on the prosecutors’ findings and uncovered other Chinese companies that use Taiwan for money laundering.

“Journalism is a relay race,” Lee says. “I think news organizations nowadays should pay continuous attention to the stories they’ve done before. Do follow-up. Investigations shouldn’t be one-off.”

Another example of *The Reporter’s* long-term input into one specific topic is its investigations into the information warfare business. The team won the award for Excellence in Explanatory Reporting this year for their stories about the production and dissemination of disinformation prior to Taiwan’s 2020 presidential election.

“It was 2018 when we first reported on the information warfare business,” Lee says. “We tracked down a group of Taiwanese marketing professionals who manipulate public opinion for monetary interests. In April 2019, we wrote about the export of cyber warriors. And in December 2019, we followed up on the manipulation of information before the elections. By that time, we had already accumulated a lot of contacts and leads around this area.”



Credit: 報導者 — 資訊戰，設計畫面蘇威銘

The Reporter — Information Warfare, Photo and design by Wei Ming Su

As a small newsroom that reports on stories across countries, *The Reporter* sometimes teams up with local journalists. For the online gambling story, it sought help from the Philippines press association for local contacts. It also works with BuzzFeed's Craig Silverman, an expert of online misinformation and media manipulation, for its information warfare stories. "This helps us avoid looking at things too one-sidedly," Lee says.

When dealing with big investigative projects, *The Reporter* establishes a project manager system to supervise the process.

"Journalists are responsible for most of the interviews and writings, so they won't be able to coordinate different departments," Lee says. "So the project manager needs to ensure consistent style, decide the best story angle, and bring in designers and social media editors to the project at the right timing."

This is very important for online publications. "It is knowing how to make your stories more influential, and what media or methods you should use to best reach your readers," Lee says. "We hope every story we do presents the big picture and points to the core of the problem. This is especially important in this era where everything is fragmented."

## Initium Media

*Initium Media* chose a totally different approach to *The Reporter*.

The Hong Kong-based digital start-up was founded with a mission to provide quality news for all Chinese-speaking readers worldwide. “We aim to redefine the way we normally do news,” Irene Chan, chief editor of *Initium Media*’s Hong Kong desk, says. “Local news production is normally catered to a local audience. For example, when journalists in Hong Kong write stories, they usually write for an auntie living in Yuen Long, or an expat staying in Wan Chai. *Initium Media* wants to look more broadly.”

This is a pressing issue for the publication. In recent years, the dynamic of geopolitics in greater China has unleashed changes in other parts of the world. “If you only look at local events, you cannot get the bigger picture,” Chan says. “We hope to tell complicated stories in a clear and simple way, and we hope all the stories we tell are understandable by Chinese speakers no matter where they are based.”

A team of 25 journalists, including designers and photojournalists, as well as freelancers around the globe, now work at *Initium Media*. They are divided into six different desks: China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, International, Culture and Opinion. This year, the publication won 11 awards from SOPA, including seven prizes for excellence and four honorable mentions.

Writing for readers across regions and cultures is not straightforward. “Even though we are reporting local Hong Kong events, I often let journalists imagine their readers as a university student in Taipei or a scholar in Beijing,” Chan says. “If they can understand what you are writing, then you are all set.”



Credit: 端傳媒 — 攝影林振東

Initium Media — Photo by Lam Chun Tung

For *Initium Media*, Chan explains, the key to resonating with readers of different backgrounds lies in the art of storytelling.

*Initium Media* brought back two awards this year in the Feature Writing category with its reporting on the mass killing pits of Guangxi and the siege at Hong Kong Polytechnic University during last year's protests. Chan points to the university story as a good example of the type of non-fiction feature writing *Initium Media* has strived to achieve since it was launched.

"We want to weave together the stories of our interviewees with major social events," Chan says. This requires journalists to focus on the details. "Details help us create the main storyline. Journalists use details to rebuild a moment, a scene. They need to then digest complex information and present social problems through human stories."

*Initium Media's* editorial tone is informed by the type of non-fiction reporting common in the US media, Chan says. She cites *In Cold Blood*, the nonfiction novel by Truman Capote, as a textbook example in reporting and writing.

Alongside nonfiction long-form features, *Initium Media* produces explanatory and in-depth investigative reports. The team has also found that it needed to offer real-time coverage and breaking news analysis as a result of the 2019 anti-extradition movement.

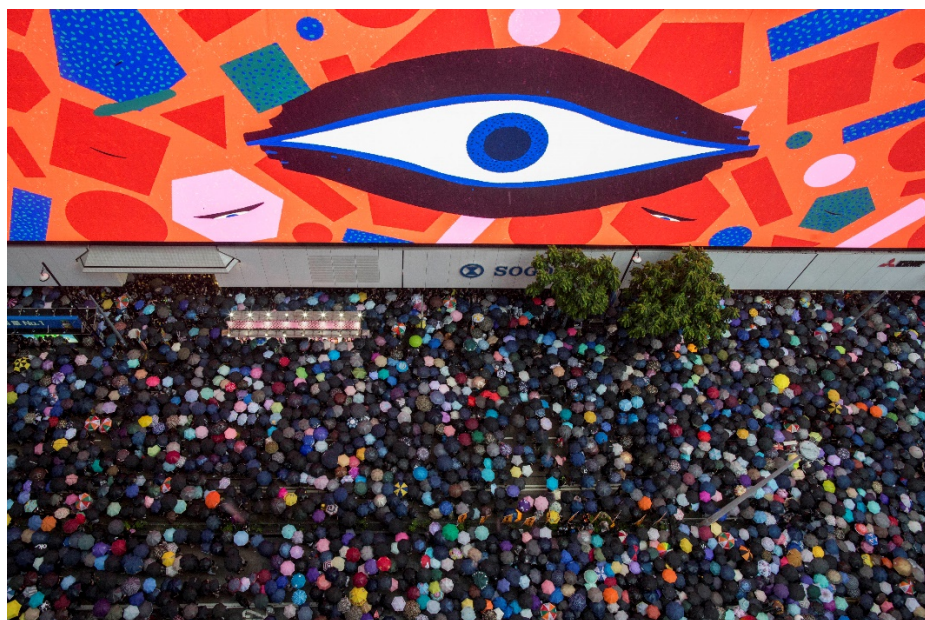
Their investigation into the July 21 Yuen Long attack, which was awarded Excellence in Reporting Breaking News, is an example of the newsroom's quick work in reporting, information gathering and story organizing.

"To put it simply, no matter how long the time frame is, we require journalists to bring back solid and in-depth reporting," Chan says.

To create a type of media culture that is best suited to this new era, *Initium Media* also incorporates innovative digital storytelling with on-the-ground reporting. The publication's coverage of the 2020 Taiwan presidential election, titled "A War of Anxieties about Subjugation of the Nation", won the Excellence in Journalistic Innovation award this year for its use of data, infographics, and text to explain a multilayered story.

"These are all what we've been experimenting on for the past five years," Chan says. "As a small team, we try not to compare with others on the scale of our stories, but on the quality of our perspective."





Credit: 端傳媒 — 攝影林振東

Initium Media — Photo by Lam Chun Tung

The SOPA Awards for Editorial Excellence were established in 1999 as a tribute to editorial excellence in both traditional and new media and were designed to encourage editorial vitality throughout the region. The prizes cover a broad range of categories reflecting Asia's diverse geopolitical environment and vibrant editorial scene.

SOPA 2020 Awards for Editorial Excellence attracted an astounding number of entries that saw over 750 nominated works from all over the Asia-Pacific region.

List of winning entries:

### **The Reporter**

- Award for Excellence
  - Excellence in Human Rights Reporting  
[Silent Extermination: First-hand Testimonies From The XinJiang Re-education Camp](#)
  - Excellence in Arts & Culture Reporting  
[Street Art Gallery in the Hong Kong Anti-Extradition Movement](#)
  - Excellence in Explanatory Reporting  
[Meet businessmen behind Asia's Information Warfare : How They Influence and Monetize the Information Operation In 4 Asian Countries](#)
  - Excellence in Business Reporting  
[The Invisible Online Gambling Empire:From China, Philippines to Taiwan, An Investigation Into the Cross-border Industry](#)
  - Excellence in Investigative Reporting  
[Who is Making Money Through Public Opinion? A Deep Investigation Into the Cross-border Information Warfare Business](#)
- Honorable Mention
  - Excellence in Explanatory Reporting  
[Silent Extermination: First-hand Testimonies From The XinJiang Re-education Camp](#)
  - The Scoop Award  
[The Truth the Government Wouldn't Face: An Exclusive Uncovering to The Taiwan Railway Examination Report](#)

## Initium Media

- Award for Excellence
  - Excellence in Reporting on Women's Issues  
[Unbearable pain of childbearing: buried children of Chinese female workers were dugged up after forced abortions](#)
  - Excellence in Journalistic Innovation  
[A War of Anxieties about Subjugation of the Nation](#)
  - Excellence in Feature Writing  
[Mass Killings Pits in the Cultural Revolution: a crime in Guangxi Province](#)
  - Excellence in Reporting on the Environment  
[Local indigenous communities' legal actions to stop Chinese mining companies in Amazonian Ecuador](#)
  - Excellence in Photography  
[Hong Kong's anti-extradition bill protest: a photo documentation](#)
- Honorable Mention
  - Excellence in Video Reporting  
[Statement of a Hong Kong young valiant: if the problems were solved, we won't be here](#)
  - Excellence in Feature Writing  
[A feature of the Polytechnic University siege](#)
  - Excellence in Reporting Breaking News  
[Investigation of the indiscriminate attack of July 21 Yuen Long Nightmare](#)
  - Excellence in Reporting on the Environment  
[To overcome poverty, people in Xiangshui experienced explosions, leaks and "great escapes"](#)

The Reporter and Initium Media are also both part of the Environmental Reporting Collective, which produced [The Pangolin Reports](#) that won Award for Excellence in Journalistic Innovation and Reporting on the Environment.