

15th ASEF Journalists Seminar (ASEFJS15) - “Journalistic Resilience in a Volatile World” 14-17 September 2026 – Bangkok, Thailand

Module 2: Media trust and resilience in the current situation – combatting news fatigue; political polarisation of media

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Photolangage

Immersing ASEFJS15 journalists into creative and experiential writing within five minutes – this was accomplished, thanks to the powerful set of black and white photos from the Photolangage series that Claire Belisle and Alain Baptiste created back in 1979-1980. The very first in-class exercise was primarily aimed at getting the Asian and European journalists to realise that personal experiences do factor when headlines and captions are written today.

The statement in its core reasoning is simply this - In journalism pedagogy, assigning journalists to write a reflection on the Photolangage exercise is designed to highlight subjectivity and implicit bias. Here is why this reflection exercise is used:

Framing and Perception: Photolangage forces writers to choose images, headlines, and captions based on evocative visual cues. Reflecting on their choices reveals how individual backgrounds, cultural assumptions, and personal emotional responses shape their editorial instincts.

The Myth of Absolute Objectivity: By examining why they selected a specific word or photo caption, writers realize that headlines are rarely purely objective neutral descriptions - they are framed by human decisions and lived experiences.

Critical Self-Awareness: Recognizing that personal experiences factor into copy-writing helps journalists actively identify and check their own biases before publishing headlines and captions today.

ASEFJS15 Alumni Michele Calamaio’s personal photo reflection:

“In today’s journalism industry, media governance has lost the trust of its audience in the content it produces because of a lack of ethics and knowledge. Through this picture, I feel that the necessary credibility needed to regain this trust comes from a “lectured journalism” that can combine rigorous reporting and truth-based practices.”

Mobile Journalism as a Catalyst for Change

To help Asia-Europe journalists understand how photojournalism 'done right' can combat news fatigue, I took them on a photo journey featuring an assignment I undertook back in 2014, months after a devastating typhoon hit the Philippines.

That journey to Samar, Philippines serves as a practical, real-world masterclass in how ethical mobile photojournalism can re-engage audiences suffering from news fatigue.

When ASEFJS15 journalists reflect on that 2014 assignment, the hope is they'll walk away with key takeaways that demonstrate how "photojournalism done right" can turn passive, exhausted viewers into active, empathetic participants:

[a] Replacing Disaster Porn with Human Resilience

- **The Trap:** News fatigue often stems from endless, distant coverage of destruction that leaves audiences feeling helpless and detached.
- **The Samar Approach:** Instead of focusing purely on rubble, iPhone photos captured survivors rebuilding their lives, children smiling despite hardship, and communities rallying together.
- **The Impact:** Showing local agency alongside tragedy restores hope, making stories actionable rather than overwhelming.

[b] Stripping Away Production Noise for Raw Authenticity

- **The Trap:** Sensationalized news broadcasts can breed audience scepticism and cynicism.
- **The Samar Approach:** Using a simple iPhone allowed for an unobtrusive, low-profile presence that captured intimate, unvarnished moments without making subjects feel objectified or staged.
- **The Impact:** Raw visual truth cuts straight through media noise, fostering immediate trust and emotional connection across different cultures.

[c] Ethical Storytelling over Profile Exploitation

- **The Trap:** Audiences tune out when vulnerable communities are reduced to mere statistics or emotional props for fundraising.
- **The Samar Approach:** Grounded in ethical principles - informed consent, accurate quoting, avoiding forced emotional output, and focusing on local dignity ("*Ayaw kami kalimti*" which is *waray* for "do not forget us") - the photos kept the survivors' authentic voices at the center.
- **The Impact:** Respecting the human beings behind the story creates a dignified narrative that respects the audience's intelligence and deepens their engagement.

[d] Building a Universal Bridge between Asia and Europe

- **The Trap:** Cross-continental news reporting often creates a sense of "othering," making distant crisis events feel irrelevant to audiences half a world away.
- **The Samar Approach:** Ground-up mobile photojournalism highlights universal human conditions - grief, community, hope, and survival - that resonate equally with European and Asian viewers.
- **The Impact:** Demonstrates to journalists from both regions that simple, human-centered visual stories can break down geographic biases and build lasting cross-cultural empathy.

Trust in journalism is no longer a given.

Building institutional trust to achieve media resilience is achievable in both Asia and Europe, but it requires radically different pathways due to distinct political architectures and cultural values.

Recommendation: all ASEFJS15 participants should explore a shift to constructive journalism¹. Established newsrooms working alongside freelancers should be ready to adapt by prioritizing truth, trust and transparency. Editors and journalists alike should also embrace solutions-oriented narratives - solutions journalism and clear curation to help exhausted audiences navigate a highly fragmented digital landscape.

Building on the Photolangage exercise, ASEFJS15 journalists unpacked what ‘framing’ and the power of that all-important headline is and how it is affecting people in Europe and Asia. Negative stereotypes surrounding immigrants is a case in point and this was discussed in the session. Participants were challenged to revisit the current headlines and delve deeper into what the real issues are.

Recommendation: ensuring the newsroom stylebook replaces terms like “illegal migrants” with “irregular migrants” - leading to better storytelling and reporting.

The Headline Audit (De-escalating Polarization)

Participants identified real headlines covering sensitive political topics (ex. elections, climate policy, immigration, labour rights) written in *loaded, conflict-driven language*.

[a] Deconstruct Analyse the given headlines. Highlight specific "trigger" words (ex. slams, destroys, extremist) that invite audience cynicism or partisan outrage.

[b] Rewrite for Neutrality & Context Rewrite each headline and opening lines using neutral, precise, and analytical language. The goal is to inform a reader who disagrees with the story's core premise without provoking an immediate defensive reaction. Ask: "Would a reader from a non-mainstream or opposing political background in your country read past this headline?"

ASEFJS15 Alumni Aslah Razali and Davide Raffaele Lobina focused on Rohingya Families in Malaysia while Lenka Komárková and Yik Wai Chee looked at headlines linked to the Alternative for Germany (AfD) - all journalists working as pairs identified trigger words and rewrote it to lower defensive reactions without sacrificing rigour.

¹ [What is Constructive Journalism?](#)

Combatting News Fatigue

"Doomscrolling" is here to stay and to counter this and audience burnout, and the psychological exhaustion caused by information overload, editors need to prioritize explainers and short social media posts that save time. This will provide context and help audiences feel empowered.

Using the ongoing crisis in Nepal as a case study, participants were exposed to the Exhaustion Index. The table demonstrates how different angles of the same story affect your mental battery:

Nepal Crisis Headlines Rated by the Exhaustion Index		
Headline Example	Index Rating	Mental Impact Analysis
"During Nepal floods, decentralized, community-based warning systems saved lives" ²	Level 1 Inspiring	Focuses on human resilience, proactive localized solutions, and tangible examples of communities protecting each other.
"China sends third batch of aid to Nepal ³ , search continues for missing" [<i>international rescue teams assist in search for survivors</i>]	Level 2 Routine	Informative and logistical news. It updates you on standard international relief cooperation and ongoing operational deployment.
"Nepal bet nearly everything on hydropower - the floods show why that's a problem" ⁴ [<i>floods show why climate change threatens that ambition</i>]	Level 3 Demanding	Requires analytical processing. It details how the climate crisis impacts long-term economics and infrastructure, which is mentally tiring but necessary context.
"One year on from Nepal protests, have Gen Z demands been met?" ⁵ [<i>Gen Z uprising, key demands remain unimplemented as new government struggles</i>]	Level 4 Draining	Leans into political cynicism. It highlights systemic stagnation, broken promises, and the frustrating cycle of bureaucratic failure.
"Nepal flash floods death toll rises to 1,385; 5,000 missing" ⁶ [<i>flash floods leave region a total wasteland</i>] ⁷	Level 5 Paralyzing	Pure trauma and bleakness. The staggering scale of loss and destruction can easily trigger feelings of helplessness and panic, leading to mental paralysis.

Recommendation: use the table for your personal media diet. When reading about global events like the Nepal crisis, try to mix Level 3 analysis with Level 1 community stories so you stay informed without falling straight into a Level 5 doomscrolling spiral.

² ["During Nepal floods, decentralized, community-based warning systems saved lives" - Google Search](#)

³ [China sends third batch of aid to Nepal, search continues for missing | East Asia Tonight 3 Sep 2026](#)

⁴ [Nepal bet nearly everything on hydropower – the floods show why that's a problem](#)

⁵ [One year on from Nepal protests, have Gen Z demands been met? | Protests News | Al Jazeera](#)

⁶ [Nepal flash floods death toll rises to 1,385; 5,000 missing - The Tribune](#)

⁷ [Nepal endured months of political upheaval. Devastating floods are now testing its new government - ABC News](#)

Cross-Border Collaborative Journalism

Beyond the explainers and media literacy capsules, providing the space for journalists and reporters to produce higher-quality, deeply researched pieces is still key. And here, ASEFJS15 alumni working in pairs, identified possible areas for cross-border **collaborative journalism**.

Rimjhim Jethani and Dario Veréb are thinking about a collaborative story concept titled "Going viral: The effects of AI videos spreading in India and Switzerland."

Gabriela Ivanova and Mỹ Linh Phùng hope to collaborate on a shared issue: Extreme heat in East Asia and West Europe.

And so, it has begun, the seeds have been planted. This ASEFJS15 project will be classified as 'work in progress' ... collaborative stories waiting to unfold.

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