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Our View

By Chris Yeung
the annual report's Chief Editor and Chairman of HKJA (2017-2021)

Founded in 1968, Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA) has published an annual report on freedom of expression and freedom of the press since 1994. Through the documentation and analysis of the relevant media-related events in the previous year, we strive to take a penetrating look at Hong Kong’s media ecology and changes in the city’s room for freedom, social and political environment. We express our views on press freedom and media development - their present and future. The first section of previous reports had been “Introduction and Recommendation.” We renamed it “Our View” this year.

One day before the writing of “Our View” on May 15, three news stories saw the media themselves in the news. It is in itself a manifestation of the scene of broken freedom in Hong Kong in the wake of the promulgation of the National Security Law (NSL). With the law in place, “red lines” are everywhere and fear prevails. The media environment has rapidly deteriorated, Freedom in Tatters, the title of this year’s report, is vividly shown on the front and back pages through the work of Zunzi, a renowned cartoonist.

Next Digital founder Jimmy Lai was charged with the offences under the NSL last year. Although he remains innocent for those charges, he was convicted of other crimes and is serving a jail sentence. On May 14, the Government invoked the NSL to freeze his assets, including all shares in Next Digital and assets under his three companies in local banks. The group’s Chief Executive Officer Cheung Kim-hung stressed that the operation and finance of the company was unaffected. But the unprecedented move has dealt a big psychological blow to their staff and the whole media sector.

On June 17, five top executives of Next Digital were arrested for allegedly breaching the national security law. More than 50 police and national security officers conducted a raid at the newsroom of Apple Daily. They took away more than 40 computers from reporters, which contained journalist materials. Secretary for Security John Lee ordered the company’s bank accounts be frozen. On June 17, the newspaper’s publisher Cheung Kim-hung and Chief Editor Law Wai-kong were formally charged with colluding with foreign forces under the national security law. With their bank accounts frozen, the company ran into difficulty in their operation. At a meeting on June 21, the group’s board of directors set June 26 as the last day of their operation if a request for the frozen assets be released is rejected. Staff could tender their resignation with immediate effect. On June 23, Police arrested a man, surnamed Yeung, an editorial writer at the newspaper who goes by the pseudonym “Lu Ping”. He was also alleged of colluding with foreign forces. Following an emergency meeting of the board, the management of the newspaper decided to stop operation by midnight. The newspaper said in a farewell note to Hong Kong people in its final edition the decision was made after considering staff safety and manpower. HKJA and seven media unions and groups said in a joint statement Hong Kong lost a media organisation, who has the courage to speak up, because of suppression by the regime. More than one million copies of its final edition were printed.

In the wake of the anti-extradition bill protest, the Chinese National People’s Congress imposed the NSL in Hong Kong. Guided by the principle of rule by law in the mainland, a lot of provisions and details of implementation under the law are not in line with the common law system. The power of the judiciary in exercising checks and balances over the power of the national security and prosecution authorities in accordance with the Basic Law, the Bill of Rights and common law system has been neutralised. Furthermore, judicial independence is facing unprecedented political pressure from the official media and pro-Beijing forces. Pressure grew for the courts to “coordinate” with the executive authorities. In March, the NPC approved a resolution on the “improvement” of the election systems in Hong Kong. Under the new system, the political space for the democrats in the legislature in future will be significantly narrowed. The pro-establishment camp will enjoy an overwhelming dominance in the legislature. The strength of the democrats, who won the majority of votes in the 2019 District Council elections, will be further weakened. They will find it more difficult to counter the Government and the pro-establishment camp.

Chief Executive Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor has said on a number of occasions that the wrongs of the media should be corrected. The media system, she said, should be improved. “The Government will study how to handle “fake news,” Police Commissioner Chris Tang has said legislating on “fake news” is a good thing. Both the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong and the Federation of Trade Unions led the campaign for a law on fake news. Given the current legislature is due to finish its extended term later this year, it is unlikely the Government will formally put the issue on the agenda. But whoever becomes the next chief executive looks certain to adopt a list of measures to rein in the media. They include a fake news law, restrictions on access to companies’ information in a government registry and other public data. With no representatives in the future legislature and the voices of the democrats severely suppressed in the society, the dissenting voices in society will fade. The environment for press freedom will further get worse.

Paving the way for regulating the media, Article 9 of the NSL says the Government shall take necessary measures to strengthen public communication, guidance, supervision and regulation over matters concerning national security, including those relating to schools, universities, social organisations, the media, and the internet.”

HKJA has issued a statement raising fears that media organisations will face more curbs. Moves to strengthen supervision and regulation of the internet will adversely affect the collection of information by journalists.

Article 43 says, when handling cases concerning offence endangering national security, Police’s national security department may require a person, who is suspected, on reasonable grounds, of having in possession information or material relevant to investigation, to answer questions and furnish such information or produce such material. We worry news materials will no longer be protected as they have been under the existing laws. Mrs Lam’s remarks on media regulation and fake news are part of the moves to implement the NSL. The process of rectification of the media has already begun.

Although the process is still at its early stage, some media outlets have already been targeted by the authorities and pro-establishment forces in the past 12 months. Due to the Jimmy Lai and the Apple Daily factors. Next Digital has emerged as the Number One enemy of the authorities. This is not surprising. Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) is a public service broadcast government department. Some programmes such as the TV satire Headliner has been a long-time target of attacks by pro-Beijing figures. But taken as a whole, RTHK programmes won fame for their high-quality production. They received more praises than curses from the populace.
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Even before the 1997 handover, pro-Beijing figures had already voiced their discontent with RTHK, saying the broadcaster was impartial. Though confronted with continued pressure, RTHK has largely been able to maintain editorial autonomy and play the role of “people’s broadcasters.”

The past year saw RTHK being destabilised by a “super typhoon.” As this report went to press, the storm is not yet over. RTHK has received a huge number of complaints lodged with the Communications Authority against some of their episodes relating to the 2019 social movement. They include an episode of satire programme Headliner, which has allegedly denigrated the Police, an episode of a commentary programme, Pentapiram II, which featured remarks by a Polytechnic University academic on the Police-protester clash at the university in 2019. The Authority found complaints against the two programmes established. The RTHK-bashing campaign saw a familiar pattern starting with criticism by pro-Beijing media, political parties and patriotic organisations, followed by the official investigation by the Authority and relevant ruling. Although public views of some programmes were being questioned about are divided, the Government has endorsed all rulings made by the Authority and adopted follow-up actions.

In the name of reviewing the governance and management of RTHK, Mrs Lam started paving the way for a major surgery of the broadcaster by setting up a team led by a former senior government official. The goal is to get rid of politically sensitive, “incorrect” content from their programmes and “disobedient” editorial staff. The review report was published at the end of February. On the same day, the Government announced the early departure of Leung Ka-wing from the post of Director of Broadcasting. Leung was replaced by Patrick Li Pak-chuen, a senior administrative officer. As soon as Li took office in March, he decided to pull out some programmes, reshuffle production teams, set up an editorial board and micro-inspect programme content. The management decided not to renew the contract of Nabela Qin, who has been vehemently attacked by the pro-Beijing circle for her reporting style.

While diluting political content, the new management has increased government propaganda. One of the major initiatives is a series of interviews hosted by Mrs Lam beginning from the end of April about the new electoral system. The series has a total of 40 episodes, with each broadcast every four times respectively each day. Media reports said the number of viewership of Mrs Lam’s shows hit a low point. Referring to the low rating, prominent pro-establishment columnist Chris Wat Wing-yin has ridiculed RTHK for succeeding in achieving “zero” target in audienceship - thanks to Mrs Lam.

Manned by AOs, the new management team has been taking orders from the Chief Executive and the relevant policy bureau for the purpose of gaining full control of the broadcaster. Their moves to axe programmes and replace an existing public affairs programme team with an outside content provider through outsourcing is an insult to their existing outstanding team. Some felt disappointed and decided to quit. Bad money drives out good. The Government has acted contrary to common sense, leading RTHK towards the path of demise. It is utterly incomprehensible.

The political shock Next Digital and RTHK faced in the past year is partly due to their own historical background. But more importantly, their plight reflects the big picture of increased curbs on the media in times of big change in Hong Kong. With the city ushering in a new era of “patriots ruling Hong Kong” and Beijing asserting full jurisdictions, a national security law and a set of new election systems are now in place. Under the new governance mode, the media that Beijing and the pro-establishment camp reckoned as “too free” needed to be regulated through an overhaul of the media system. Next Digital and RTHK are the first

blood. The crackdown and regulating of other media outlets by the authorities through various means have begun. It will become more apparent.

HKJA has also been a target of bad publicity in the past two years. We have been accused of issuing press cards excessively, we have been branded as a political organisation. There were calls for a ban on HKJA made by anonymous netizens on social media and some pro-Beijing newspaper columnists. Those accusations lack evidence. But we observed a marked change of attitude of the Government towards us from the way they handled the Police’s amendment of the definition of “media representatives” in the Police General Orders and the issue of media access to public data. We have made requests to meet with the relevant department and bureaus to express our concern. With the exception of the Financial Services and the Treasury Bureau, officials turned a deaf ear to our demand for a meeting. We reiterated our wish to meet with officials to exchange ideas, resolve differences and find solutions.

In our 2020 annual report, we wrote: “We are convinced freedom is inseparable from Hong Kong’s success in the past. It is only with free speech, free press and free flow of information that we have a robust economy, unlimited creativity, advanced innovation and technology and a lively cultural life. We hope the Government will adopt concrete actions to rebuild a free environment for the city to shine again.”

We repeated what we said last year. This is because freedom is in tatters. Hong Kong people are not free from fear. Media faces unprecedented shock. The room for press freedom is shrinking. The risk journalists facing amid the NSL and the imminent fake news legislation is growing. Self-censorship, both direct or indirect, looks certain to increase. There will be fewer truth, true words the public can get from the media.

We hope freedom and diversity will be back again. We hope those with power will stop suppressing people. We hope the Government and people will join hands to kick out fear.

Below are what we urge.

1. The Chinese National People’s Congress should review the implementation of the NSL taking into account the change of circumstances and the anxieties of Hong Kong people. The NPC should study amendments and supplementary provisions, in particular making public interest as a defence for journalists. That will safeguard press freedom.

2. The Government should allow media access to public data as they had before. Doing so will help journalists get information for reporting activities and thus be able to play their role of monitoring in society.

3. The Government should shelve studies on legislation on misinformation. To beat misinformation, the Government should do so by other means including education and publicity, which could help enhance public understanding about misinformation for them to exercise self-monitoring.

4. Police should revoke the amendment of the definition of “media representatives” in the Police General Orders and genuinely facilitate the reporting of journalists.

5. The Government should speed up the enactment of an archiving law and a freedom of information law that are effective in enhancing public access to information.

6. The Government should stop putting pressure on RTHK and respect its editorial autonomy.
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National security law spreads fear, curbs freedom

By Chris Yeung

Chief Writer of Excerpts and Chairman of the Hong Kong Journalists Association (2017-2021)

The Chinese National People’s Congress announced in June 2020 the national legislature will enact a national security law (NSL) for Hong Kong in order to plug what they called a longstanding loophole in national security. Central government officials, Chief Executive Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor, Secretary for Justice Teresa Cheng, Secretary for Security John Lee and pro-Beijing figures spoke in one voice. They repeatedly assured that the national security law will only target “a small number of people.” It will not affect the basic rights and freedom of the majority of Hong Kong people, they said. One year after the NSL took effect, facts speak louder than words; the assurance of only targeting “a small number of people” is lies.

Following the enactment of the law, the city’s democrats from different generations have suffered from a near-total elimination. The law has also caused strong deterrent effects and profound impact on different aspects of life in the society. An air of fear and anxiety has blanketeted the city. With the political “red line” almost everywhere, pressure on free thinking is mounting. Chilling effect and a culture of censorship are growing. With the city’s democratic election leaped backwards to nowhere following an overhaul in 2021, the room for freedom is shrinking swiftly.

University should have been the freest place in society. But increasingly, university is no longer the place where views that are deemed as a threat to national security are allowed. Artworks could become “defendants”, facing charge of endangering national security on the dock. Oscar film award ceremony is an annual global event, which has been broadcast live on Hong Kong Television Broadcasts for 52 year after the station was inaugurated. That became history in 2021. TVB Pearl decided not to broadcast the event live, citing commercial reasons. It is widely understood that that was because a film being nominated was accused of “humiliating China” and
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that another documentary was about the anti-extradition bill protest.

Democratic elections in Hong Kong marked a big step backward after the central authorities overturned the election methods of the chief executive and legislature. Calls for voters casting blank votes in elections as a vote of defiance against the unfair system have surfaced. The pro-Beijing Ta Kung Pao said in an editorial said the idea represented an attempt to distort the voting wish of people and an organised move to sabotage the election. A pro-establishment lawmaker, Paul Tse, said casting a blank vote may violate the national security law. On April 14, the Government tabled a bill on elections, in which it was stipulated that it is unlawful for anyone to openly incite people not to vote, cast a blank or invalid vote.

On April 15, the Government held the first National Security Education Day in Hong Kong after the law took effect. Secretary for Security John Lee said Police’s national security team has arrested a total of 100 people in the first nine months after the law was in place. Of them, 57 have been formally charged with the NSL. They include Next Digital founder Jimmy Lai and 47 democrats, who were charged with organising and participating in the Legislative Council primaries in July, 2020. Compared with the total number of people who were arrested during the 2019 protests, the tally of arrests is involved with the NSL is relatively small. But the offences that they have allegedly committed are far more serious. Most of them were denied bail and were held in detention before trial. They lost their freedom. More seriously, the NSL has created a chilling effect. People fear they might have crossed the “red lines” inadvertently because of their deeds and words, worsening the problem of self-censorship. The law has been “weaponised” by the Lam administration, pro-establishment and pro-Beijing media to curb dissenting views. The room for freedom of expression and freedom of speech is shrinking. Freedom of the press is in danger.

Press Freedom Index hits new low

On May 3, the World Press Freedom Day, HKJA published its 2020 Press Freedom Index. Out of 100, journalists gave an average 32.1 points for press freedom in Hong Kong, a historic low since the annual survey was launched in 2013, 91 percent of journalists who responded say press freedom grew worse in the past 12 months. 85 percent say the Hong Kong Government is a source of crackdown against press freedom, 99 percent say the NSL has damaged press freedom.

The annual press freedom survey has been conducted by the Public Opinion Research Institute (former University of Hong Kong Public Opinion Programme) since 2013. It comprises two parts among journalists and the public respectively. This year’s survey was conducted between February and March. A total of 1,023 people responded to the public survey through random phone calls. The survey conducted among journalists was collected through questionnaires. A total of 367 valid responses were received. In the public section, the Press Freedom Index recorded 42.6 points out of 100, slightly up by 0.7 point, which is the second lowest so far. The drop in journalists’ rating is attributed to a sharp fall in ratings of a number of factors. They include worries about criticism against the Hong Kong government. More than 40 percent say their seniors have put pressure on them to avoid or play down reports relating to the issue of Hong Kong independence. (See Appendix)

On April 20, the Paris-based Reporters Without Border (RSF) published its 2021 World Press Freedom Index. Hong Kong ranked 80th out of 180 countries and regions, same as last year’s. The report said press freedom and journalists in Hong Kong faced more threats after Beijing enacted the NSL. Jimmy Lai was arrested and charged with NSL. He may face life imprisonment. Radio Television Hong Kong is also facing intimidation by the Government, seriously eroding the public broadcaster’s editorial independence. The RSF report said Hong Kong still has resistance forces, referring to some independent online media, including CitizenNews, Stand News, Initium Media, Hong Kong Free Press and Inmedia. They all rely on public funding, with their readership growing constantly.

Although the RSF report shows Hong Kong’s rank stayed unchanged, the reality is that the whole freedom environment has sharply deteriorated, which is fully manifested in different sectors, including not just media, but arts and culture, film and publication.

Chilling effect worsens

On July 7 last year, HKJA published its 2020 annual report on freedom of expression. Chris Yeung, the then Chairman, said at a press conference the final version of the NSL was far more harsh than many people had anticipated. Its chilling effect has already emerged in just one week after it took effect. A lot of shops removed some slogans that were featured in the 2019 protest. Media is one of the sectors that saw immediate impact. The problem of self-censorship by the media when dealing with sensitive stories will become more serious.

The NSL was promulgated by the NPC, which is the highest power organ in the mainland, but the mainland does not practise the common law system. One of the fundamental problems of the NSL is that it is not in line with the common law system. It has therefore dealt a serious blow to the existing rule of law system and seriously weakened the checks and balances function of the court and the city’s independent judiciary. One of the most critical arrangements is that the Chief Executive is given the power to appoint judges who handle cases relating to the national security law. The criteria of selection will be the deeds and words of judges, not their legal expertise and experience in adjudicating cases.

Another important arrangement is that the newly-established national security committee will be chaired by Carrie Lam, who will be subjected to the supervision and leadership by the central authorities. Decisions made by the national security committee will not be subjected to judicial review in court. Put it plainly, local courts have no power to adjudicate on whether decisions made by the national security offices are lawful and reasonable. The public has no power to challenge court decisions on certain cases.

The definition of national security is too broad to be conveniently applied and indefinitely extended in its application. The scope of unlawful acts set out in the NSL is very broad. Under the ruling philosophy of the Chinese Communist Party, the ultimate goal is to assert full control of society and change the thinking of the masses. Under Article 9 and Article 10 of the NSL, the media and internet took certain to undergo drastic change towards the mainland model. The changes will include an official press card system, which will be subject to an annual renewal. Press cards issued by media outlets will not be recognised by the Government. Under a new system in the future, the authorities will issue directives on a daily basis to notify media outlets and editors the stories that they are not allowed to publish. Newspapers and magazines will
that another documentary was about the anti-extradition bill protest.

Democratic elections in Hong Kong marked a big step backward after the central authorities overhauled the election methods of the chief executive and legislature. Calls for voters casting blank votes in the election as a vote of defiance against the unfair system have surfaced. The pro-Beijing Ta Kung Pao said in an editorial said the idea represented an attempt to distort the voting wish of people and an organised move to sabotage the election. A pro-establishment lawmaker, Paul Tse, said casting a blank vote may violate the national security law. On April 14, the Government tabled a bill on elections, in which it was stipulated that it is unlawful for anyone to openly incite people not to vote, cast a blank or invalid vote.

On April 15, the Government held the first National Security Education Day in Hong Kong after the law took effect. Secretary for Security John Lee said Police’s national security team has arrested a total of 100 people in the first nine months after the law was in place. Of them, 57 have been formally charged with the NSL. They include Next Digital founder Jimmy Lai and 47 democrats, who were charged with organising and participating in the Legislative Council primaries in July, 2020. Compared with the total number of people who were arrested during the 2019 protests, the tally of arrests involved with the NSL is relatively small. But the offences that they have allegedly committed are far more serious. Most of them were denied bail and were held in detention before trial. They lost their freedom. More seriously, the NSL has created a chilling effect. People fear they might have crossed the “red lines” inadvertently because of their deeds and words, worsening the problem of self-censorship. The law has been “weaponised” by the Lam administration, pro-establishment and pro-Beijing media to curb dissenting views. The room for freedom of expression and freedom of speech is shrinking. Freedom of the press is in danger.

**Press Freedom Index hits new low**

On May 3, the World Press Freedom Day, HKJA published its 2020 Press Freedom Index. Out of 100, journalists gave an average 32.1 points for press freedom in Hong Kong, a historic low since the annual survey was launched in 2013. 91 percent of journalists who responded say press freedom grew worse in the past 12 months. 85 percent say the Hong Kong Government is a source of crackdown against press freedom, 99 percent say the NSL has damaged press freedom.

The annual press freedom survey has been conducted by the Public Opinion Research Institute (former University of Hong Kong Public Opinion Programme) since 2013. It comprises two parts among journalists and the public respectively. This year’s survey was conducted between February and March. A total of 1,023 people responded to the public survey through random phone calls. The survey conducted among journalists was collected through questionnaires. A total of 367 valid responses were received. In the public section, the Press Freedom Index recorded 42.6 points out of 100, slightly up by 0.7 point, which is the second lowest so far. The drop in journalists’ rating is attributed to a sharp fall in ratings of a number of factors. They include worries about criticism against the Hong Kong government. More than 40 percent say their seniors have put pressure on them to avoid or play down reports relating to the issue of Hong Kong independence. (See Appendix)

On April 20, the Paris-based Reporters Without Border (RSF) published its 2021 World Press Freedom Index. Hong Kong ranked 80th out of 180 countries and regions, same as last year’s. The report said press freedom and journalists in Hong Kong faced more threats after Beijing enacted the NSL. Jimmy Lai was arrested and charged with NSL. He may face life imprisonment. Radio Television Hong Kong is also facing intimidation by the Government, seriously eroding the public broadcaster’s editorial independence. The RSF report said Hong Kong still has resistance forces, referring to some independent online media, including Citizen News, Stand News, InMedia, Hong Kong Free Press and Inmedia. They all rely on public funding, with their readership growing constantly.

Although the RSF report shows Hong Kong’s rank stayed unchanged, the reality is that the whole freedom environment has sharply deteriorated, which is fully manifested in different sectors, including not just media, but arts and culture, film and publication.

**Chilling effect worsens**

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Fake news law another weapon

On August 10, Police arrested Jimmy Lai at his home. He was alleged of violating NSL Article 29, which outlaws “collusion with foreign forces.” At around 10 am, national security department senior superintendent Li Kwa-wah led a fleet of over 200 police officers from the national security department to raid offices of the Apple Daily in Tseung Kwan O. Officers inspected items on the desks of reporters. Raids at the offices of media outlets are common in Third World countries; it was rare in Hong Kong. Not surprisingly, the raid story hit the headlines of international media. Lai was later being laid more charges relating to the NSL, unlawful assemblies and breaches of land lease agreement for the group’s premises in Tseung Kwan O. The Apple Daily, the group’s flagship newspaper, was the target of coordinated attacks by the Police, mainland media and local pro-Beijing newspapers.

One day after the April 15 National Security Education Day, the first of its kind in Hong Kong, the Apple Daily ran a front-page picture of pupils playing toy guns inside a mock MTR train at the Police training college. The photo was juxtaposed with a picture of armed riot police pointing their guns at passengers inside a real MTR car at the Prince Edward Station on August 31, 2019. A caption read: Netizens say the picture of child play is reminiscent of “Prince Edward (station) incident.” The front-page picture drew sharp criticism from Police Commissioner Chris Tang two days in a row since then. He slammed the report as “fake news,” saying it was divisive and had incited hatred. But speaking on a TVB Pearl programme a few days later, he clarified he did not mean to say the relevant photos were “fake news.” Tang said legislating on fake news is a good thing and could help implement the NSL.

Tang’s citation of the picture of children playing innocently is a good example that shows those who advocate fake news law are not targeting the relevant content of the media reports. The two relevant photos published on the Apple Daily are not fake. Tang, not happy with the way the newspaper handled the story and the angle it took, cited crimes such as incitement and threat to national security in the NSL to scare the newspaper. His salvos were echoed in a blitz of attacks by the local pro-Beijing newspapers. Calls for the de-registration of the Apple Daily and also Stand News, an online media outlet, grew. An online media argued the British Hong Kong colonial government had also invoked draconian law to close down pro-Beijing newspapers, giving not-so-subtle advice to Beijing on how to get rid of the Apple Daily. It could also be a move to sound out the idea to help lessen the shock when the Government does act to shut down media outlets.

In an article published on May 8, Ta Kung Pao and Wen Wei Po accused the Stand News as having incited terrorism and violence in an article about the future of Hong Kong’s political struggle from the perspective of the experience of the struggle of Northern Ireland. Stand News had pulled the article from its website, but Ta Kung Pao said that was not the end of the story as if it had not been published. Citing anonymous legal figures, Wen Wei Po said the website would not be immune from legal liability even though it had stopped publishing the article. On the same day, some residents staged a petition outside the Government Headquarters, calling on the Government to conduct a full investigation into the publication of the article.

As this report went to the press, it is still unclear whether Stand News will be charged with the NSL crimes simply because it had published an article that was said to have incited terrorism and violence, as well as the NSL to the media. Publication of articles with sensitive contents may be charged with incitement. To avoid trouble, the Stand News decided to drop the article. And when similar articles come up in the future, media outlets may just play safe not to publish them.

The power of deterrence of NSL is enormous. The police chief gave a big push to a fake news law, which is clearly aimed at slamming down Apple Daily and even Stand News, as it eyes on information on the internet. Mrs Lam has revealed the Government will study fake news legislation, but hinted that it will not be put on the agenda of the current legislative year of the Legislative Council. The next Legco election will be held in December. The next Chief Executive will be sworn in on July 1, 2022. It looks more likely that fake news legislation will be put on the agenda of the next administration.

On May 14, the Security Bureau invoked the NSL to freeze the assets of Jimmy Lai, including all shares in Next Digital and assets under three companies in local banks. The media group stressed that the finance of the company was unaffected. But the unprecedented move has dealt a big psychological blow to their staff and the whole media sector.

On the same day, an online media outlet, post852, announced they will suspend operation. Founder and Chief Editor Yau Ching-yuen said the NSL has posed a threat to them. He also cited a drop in revenue and the Government’s imminent move to legislate fake news are also factors behind their suspension. A total of seven staff had been laid off. Yau said he will keep his regular commentary programme on Youtube and Patreon.
have to get licences issued by the Government. Online service providers will have to install certain software and delete articles that are deemed as inappropriate. Under NSL Article 43 and its details of implementation, Police have already been given the power to delete contents posted on the internet.

Less than one week after the NSL took effect, the Government gazetted a set of details of the enforcement of the law under Article 43 - with immediate effect. It gives extensive powers, almost without any restrictions, to them for conducting interception of telecommunication, emergency search of premises, freezing of assets for their investigations. On July 1, 10 people were arrested for having allegedly breached the NSL. Of them, some were found to have carried posters with slogans “Hong Kong independence,” “Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of the times” in their bags. The Government said those slogans have the meaning of seeking “Hong Kong independence” and subverting state power. In early July, public libraries took a total of nine books written by student activist Joshua Wong, former legislator Tanya Chan and commentator Chin Wan-kun respectively off the shelves. They said they would study the contents of the books to assess whether they have violated the NSL. Schools were ordered to follow. The then US Secretary for State Mike Pompeo described the move as “Orwellian” censorship. Participants at a book fair have urged the Government to confirm whether they have a list of banned books for them to avoid crossing the “red line.”

Fake news law another weapon

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Top radio host, columnist take a break

An air of fear engulfed the media. Hong Kong-born Indian Michael Chugani, a veteran journalist with more than 40 years of experience, suspended his regular TV programme and newspaper columns in mid-April. They include his hosting of TVB Pearl’s Straight Talk and columns published in the South China Morning Post and the Hong Kong Economic Journal. He told journalists “Hong Kong has changed,” adding he has to be more careful in doing his columns because “there are so many red lines.” It is understood that Chugani faced increased pressure in recent years as he became more critical in his commentaries, in particular those relating to Mrs Lam. He said he was “burned-out” and needs to take a break.

In late April, veteran journalist Li Wai-ling stopped hosting her D100 online programme, saying she was so physically and mentally exhausted to be able to keep hosting the 150-minute daily phone-in programme. She said she will not emigrate, nor retire, and may pursue her work on other media platforms. Following the promulgation of the NSL, several political commentators have emigrated. They have continued to write and give commentaries via online platforms. They include Sang Pu (now in Taiwan); Simon Shen (Taiwan), Lau Sai-leung (Canada) and Ching Cheong (the US). It is widely understood that some foreign media whose background is politically sensitive have made contingency plans to relocate their operation.

‘Red lines’ everywhere, curbing freedom

Artworks have emerged as the target of attack at a time when fears over the NSL spread. In March, Ta Kung Pao and Wen Wei Po launched a joint attack on M+ in the West Kowloon Cultural District. The museum was accused of having a large number of collections that “challenge the dignity of the nation, insult national heroes, ignore social morality, demigrate religion and promote pedagogical consciousness.” At the brunt of the attack were several artworks by Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei, including one picture with his middle finger pointing at Tiananmen Square. New People Party legislator Eunice Yung claimed the artworks “spread hatred,” “insult national dignity,” violate the NSL. She called on the government to set up a new department to screen exhibits.

In April, Ta Kung Pao ran a front-page story about the screening of “Inside the Red Brick Wall”, a documentary about the protracted clashes between riot police and protesters at the Polytechnic University in November 2019, and another documentary about the occupation of Legco on July 1 2019, by the Confederation of Trade Union. The screening was arranged by Ying E Chi, a body formed by independent filmmakers. The movie was accused of promoting violence and independence thinking among the youth. A local group staged a petition against the screening outside the Police Headquarters. They accused the union of “secretly” screening the movie, which has nothing to do with the union’s work. They called on the Police to enforce the law, claiming the union had breached the NSL. The CTU had suspended the screening. The document won awards in several film contests. It was classified as Category III under the present system. Although the film was not banned, it has never been able to be screened in local cinemas. In March, Golden Scene Cinema announced the documentary will be screened. It drew enthusiastic responses from film-goers. But in less than a week after the public screening was announced, the cinema announced on its Facebook the screening will be cancelled because they want to avoid misunderstanding in view of the grave concern about the film.
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Flashed back to August 2020, former secretary for transport and housing Anthony Cheung Bing-leung has urged the Government to be vigilant of the problem of “weaponisation” of the NSL. Without naming Cheung, Mrs Carrie Lam said she was shocked by the remarks, arguing that the NSL was aimed to deter and punish the wicked. In November, the Police’s national security department set up a hotline for people to report cases of violations of the NSL. By early May, the department said they had received more than 100,000 calls. The information they received includes photos, audio and video tapes. The department did not give details about their investigation. Police have launched a promotion of a culture of “reporting”. The West Kowloon Cultural District, media outlets and shops are among many bodies that were the targets of “reporting” national security crimes. The NSL has not just become a weapon, but a chemical weapon, poisoning the basic value of mutual trust, eroding the free atmosphere and harming the healthy development of the society.
Guilty of data search: public registers cordoned off with ‘orange tapes’

By Charlie Tang
Investigative reporter

It used to be a common practice for reporters to find news clues for news stories by conducting searches of different types of public registers, just like a driver looking for directions and routes towards the destination from the map.

Their access faced threats after RTHK’s Hong Kong Connection producer Choy Yuk-ling, nicknamed An Bao by fellow journalists, was arrested in November 2020 for making “false statements” in conducting a vehicle licence search. The press found the “orange tape,” which is often arbitrarily used by police officers in public places to restrict reporters’ activities in recent years, had already been employed to cord off media access to various public registers.

In fact, as early as in 2019, various government departments already started working quietly on restricting access to registers amidst the anti-extradition bill movement. For example, the
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In fact, as early as in 2019, various government departments already started working quietly on restricting access to registers amidst the anti-extradition bill movement. For example, the
Transport Department revised the application form for checking vehicle license plates in October that year, leaving behind a legal grey area. In the same month, the Immigration Department also tightened controls on applications for accessing birth and marriage records. The implications of the aforesaid measures have just gradually surfaced in the past year.

On the other hand, taking the Companies Register and the Voter Register as examples, the relevant authorities do not directly forbid searches by reporters but instead have created obstacles by reducing information accessible to reporters and the public, thus making it more difficult for reporters to carry out investigative reporting.

Meanwhile, how the Building Department dealt with the media searching the BRAVO system for building records in recent years also clearly reflects that some government departments are having more considerations in handling press access to information, inevitably inviting suspicion of press censorship.

Reviewing the usage of the aforementioned public registers since 2019, one can discern more clearly the impact and assault of the above restrictive measures on the press.

Immigration Department: birth and marriage records

The first to be conditioned with “orange tapes” are birth and marriage records used for verifying any two persons are relatives.

In October 2019, the Immigration Department suddenly altered requirements for searching and requesting birth and marriage records. Previously, an irrelevant party including the media could obtain such data just by providing personal details of the search subject such as name or date of birth and paying fees. But the newly implemented measures require the applicant to seek prior authorisation by the search subject, or to provide supplementary information showing the applicant’s relationship to the search subject, purpose of the search and usage, etc.

Following this change, the media could hardly uncover any unpublicised relations between two persons any more by searching records. Take the example of Secretary for Justice Teresa Cheng Yuet-wa’s unauthorised building works exposed by the media in early 2018. The media managed to confirm that her neighbor Otto Poon Lok-to was her husband by searching marriage records. It was revealed that her property also had illegal structures.

An Apple Daily reporter who first reported the Immigration Department changing requirements for searching records filed a complaint with the Office of the Ombudsman in October 2019 after his application was rejected. Following investigations, the Office published a report last July, pointing out that the day the Immigration Department suddenly altered arrangements was exactly the day the Junior Police Officers’ Association filed for judicial review regarding limiting public access to voter registration records.

The report also mentioned that the Immigration Department consulted the Office of the Privacy Commissioner for Personal Data (PCPD) only after altering its arrangements in October, and made official announcements on its website as late as February last year. The Office of Ombudsman criticised the Immigration Department for its hasty procedure in changing the records search arrangement.

The Immigration Department claimed that the media might apply for access to birth and marriage records on the basis of public interest, but Apple Daily’s application following the first report by the Office of the Ombudsman was again turned down, one week after submission, even though it was made clear that the search was for the pursuits of news, Apple Daily lodged another complaint to the Office of the Ombudsman.

The Office of Ombudsman put out another report, the second relating to the case. Last December, suggesting that the Immigration Department use concrete examples to explain to records search applicants who are irrelevant parties and what constitutes sufficient grounds for application and acceptable supporting documents, the report also suggested that guidelines should be drawn up to facilitate applications by citizens.

Last October, the Immigration Department’s reply to Stand News showed that the number of applications for marriage records between January and October last year had dropped by 25%. How many of these were applications by the media? The department said there was no such figure in its records.

Transport Department: Certificate of Particulars of Vehicle

Almost at the same time as the Immigration Department tightened controls on access to birth and marriage records, the Transport Department also quietly varied the application form for checking vehicle license plates that had been used for a long time.

The old form provided three options in the question asking about the purpose of the search, and the applicant would generally tick the option of “Others: please specify.” But in the new form, that option has become “Other traffic and transport related matters,” not allowing the applicant to fill in the purpose of the search any more.

According to government figures presented to the Legislative Council in 2010, there were about 3,000 applications for checking vehicle license plates every year, all from media organisations. It can thus be seen that checking vehicle license plates is a universal approach, and that the government realised since long ago journalists’ needs of checking vehicle license plates in news activities. At that time, such checking was not said to be contravening the law.

After revising the form, the Transport Department did not explain in public which option the media should choose when checking records for news gathering. It did not state either whether using vehicle license plate information obtained through such checking for news purposes would be in compliance with the purposes listed on the form.

That’s why when fellow journalists learned in early November last year that Choy Yuk-lung was unexpectedly arrested at home, many reacted quite strongly and queried, “Which reporter has never conducted (vehicle licence) searches before?” HKJA also immediately asked the department to consider the needs of the press and add an option of news reporting in the form.

However, before responding to the press, the department further launched, in January this year, without consulting stakeholders, an “email notification service” for vehicle owners to subscribe to. Under the new arrangement, subscribers will be notified when their car license plate information is being accessed. They will be given the search’s identity. Just like what HKJA Chairman Chris Yeung Kin-hing said in his reply to media enquiries, this “whistleblowing” mechanism would enable subjects being investigated by reporters to know beforehand and circumvent monitoring, thus seriously undermining media work.

On April 122 this year, a magistrate’s court handed down a guilty verdict in the Choy Yuk-lung case. Magistrate Ivy Chui Yee-mei said the question of “Whether or not there’s a good motive doesn’t matter” in the Choy case. Magistrate Choy said the applicant might consider other channels such as filling a written application to the Transport
Transport Department revised the application form for checking vehicle license plates in October that year, leaving behind a legal grey area. In the same month, the Immigration Department also tightened controls on applications for accessing birth and marriage records. The implications of the aforesaid measures have just gradually surfaced in the past year.

On the other hand, taking the Companies Register and the Voter Register as examples, the relevant authorities do not directly forbid searches by reporters but instead have created obstacles by reducing information accessible to reporters and the public, thus making it more difficult for reporters to carry out investigative reporting.

Meanwhile, how the Building Department dealt with the media searching the BRAVO system for building records in recent years also clearly reflects that some government departments are having more considerations in handling press access to information, inevitably inviting suspicion of press censorship.

Reviewing the usage of the aforementioned public registers since 2019, one can discern more clearly the impact and assault of the above restrictive measures on the press.

**Immigration Department: birth and marriage records**

The first to be conditioned off with “orange tapes” are birth and marriage records used for verifying any two persons are relatives.

In October 2019, the Immigration Department suddenly altered requirements for searching and requesting birth and marriage records. Previously, an irrelevant party including the media could obtain such data just by providing personal details of the search subject such as name or date of birth and paying fees. But the newly implemented measures require the applicant to seek prior authorisation by the search subject, or to provide supplementary information showing the applicant’s relationship to the search subject, purpose of the search and usage, etc.

Following this change, the media could hardly uncover any unpublished relationship between two persons any more by searching records. Take the example of Secretary for Justice Teresa Cheng Yeuk-wah’s unauthorised building works exposed by the media in early 2018. The media managed to confirm that her neighbor Otto Poon Lok Ho was her husband by searching marriage records. It was revealed that his property also had illegal structures.

An Apple Daily reporter who first reported the Immigration Department changing requirements for searching records filed a complaint with the Office of Ombudsman in October 2019 after his application was rejected. Following investigations, the Office published a report last July, pointing out that the day the Immigration Department suddenly altered arrangements was exactly the day the Junior Police Officers’ Association filed for judicial review regarding limiting public access to voter registration records.

The report also mentioned that the Immigration Department consulted the Office of the Privacy Commissioner for Personal Data (PCPD) on this after altering its arrangements in October, and made official announcements on its website as late as February last year. The Office of Ombudsman criticised the Immigration Department for its hasty procedure in changing the records search arrangement.

The Immigration Department claimed that the media might apply for access to birth and marriage records on the basis of public interest, but Apple Daily’s application following the first report by the Office of Ombudsman was again turned down, one week after submission, even though it was made clear that the search was for the purposes of news, Apple Daily lodged another complaint to the Office of Ombudsman.

The Office of Ombudsman put out another report, the second relating to the case last December, suggesting that the Immigration Department use concrete examples to explain to records search applicants who are irrelevant parties and what constitutes sufficient grounds for application and acceptable supporting documents. The report also suggested that guidelines should be drawn up to facilitate applications by citizens.

Last October, the Immigration Department’s reply to Stand News showed that the number of applications for marriage records between January and October last year had dropped by 25%. How many of these were applications by the media? The department said there was no such figure in its records.

**Transport Department: Certificate of Particulars of Vehicle**

Almost at the same time as the Immigration Department tightened controls on access to birth and marriage records, the Transport Department also quietly revised the application form for checking vehicle license plates that had been used for a long time.

The old form provided three options in the question asking about the purpose of the search, and the applicant would generally tick the option of “Others: please specify.” But in the new form, that option has become “Other traffic and transport related matters," not allowing the applicant to fill in the purpose of the search any more.

According to government figures presented to the Legislative Council in 2010, there were about 3,000 applications for checking vehicle license plates every year, all from media organisations. It can thus be seen that checking vehicle license plates is a universal approach, and that the government realised since long ago journalists’ needs of checking vehicle license plates in news activities. At that time, such checking was not said to be contravening the law.

After revising the form, the Transport Department did not explain in public which option the media should choose when checking records for news gathering. It did not state either whether using vehicle license plate information obtained through such checking for news purposes would be in compliance with the purposes listed on the form.

That’s why when fellow journalists learned in early November last year that Choy Yuk-ling was unexpectedly arrested at home, many reacted quite strongly and queried, “Which reporter has never conducted (vehicle licence) searches before?” HKJA also immediately asked the department to consider the needs of the press and add an option of news reporting in the form.

However, before responding to the press, the department further launched, in January this year, without consulting stakeholders, an “email notification service” for vehicle owners to subscribe to. Under the new arrangement, subscribers will be notified when their car license plate information is being accessed. They will be given the search’s identity. Just like what HKJA Chairman Chris Yeung Kin-hing said in his reply to media queries, this “whistleblowing” mechanism would enable subjects being investigated by reporters to know beforehand and circumvent monitoring, thus seriously undermining media work.

On April 12 this year, a magistrate’s court handed down a guilty verdict in the Choy Yuk-ling case. Magistrate Ivy Chui Yee-mei said the question of “Whether or not there’s a good motive doesn’t matter" in the Choy case. Magistrate Choy said the applicant might consider other channels such as filling a written application to the Transport
Department if she found that online options were limited or did not suit her real needs.

Inevitably, the press was utterly disappointed by the verdict. That day, HKJA and seven media groups issued a joint statement, stressing: “A journalist looks for the truth, not out of personal gains but out of public interest. Why is it guilty?” It pointed out that when reporters work on an issue of public concern, searching records to investigate the sequence of events, it should in fact help clarify who is responsible, thus ensniring the press’s function as the Fourth Estate. “That the government sent a reporter to the defendant’s dock and the court ruled a reporter guilty is an affront to the Fourth Estate. It spoilt the death knell of press freedom.”

After deliberation, Choy decided to appeal the conviction. Before the ultimate judgment is available, most media could only suspend vehicle license plates searches. Even though a certain license plate may be a very crucial clue in a news story, reporters have no choice but to give up searches for the time being. The public’s right to know and press freedom has already been dealt a severe blow.

Looking back at 2013, various professions including the media voiced strong objection, saying such a move would seriously stifle media efforts to expose hidden relations of public figures' interests through company searches and impede investigations into dubious transactions and scandals conducted through Hong Kong companies. The Government eventually heeded public opinions and shelved the implementation of the amendments.

The Government’s sudden move to reinstate the amendment was again greeted with strong opposition by the press. Media organisations of various stances all published numerous reports on how citizens and the media would be affected by the new regulations, including the impossibility of 100 percent ascertaining the identity of a target person or finding out through a company search of the property owned by a target.

Shocking investigative reports in Hong Kong, such as the land hoarding scandal that involved the then Secretary for Development Paul Chan Mo-po, would forever disappear after full implementation of the new company search regulations, as one can hardly find clues through records searches. It would also be much more difficult for reporters to track down those in charge of closed companies for unpaid workers, or to track down merchants or companies suspected of involvement in unscrupulous practices or fraud.

The day the government announced amendments to the Companies Ordinance, HKJA immediately expressed objection and, subsequently in May, handed in a submission. HKJA asserted that tightening restrictions to company searches is a move in the opposite direction as other places are moving towards greater transparency. HKJA has also made an appointment with the Secretary for Financial Services and the Treasury, Christopher Hui Ching-yu, to voice its views.

Buildings Department: The BRAVO System

Over many years, different media outlets have exposed illegal construction by social celebrities of various camps. To produce such reports, checking building plans through the Buildings Department’s BRAVO system is an indispensable procedure.

However, a very rare situation occurred last July. When the government announced that the newly established Office for Safeguarding National Security had rented Metropolis Hotel Causeway Bay for use as its base, many media outlets discovered that although BRAVO showed it maintained that building’s plans and construction records, upon further checking, the system responded, “No building records are found”.

The Buildings Department later said the relevant building plans would not be open for public inspection due to objections by the copyright owners of the building records. This is the first time ever that the department has refused to provide building plan records because of objections by copyright owners.

Having set this precedent, some media outlets found in October the same year that access to the building plans of the newly constructed Barker Road mansion of magnate Lee Shau-kee on the Peak was also denied. The Buildings Department used the same copyright excuse to disallow public inspection.

In reply to enquiries, a barrister affirmed that the department’s approach would likely deprive the public of the means to monitor the conditions of buildings upon completion, and also constitute a “legal loophole”. He believed that the department should establish a pertinent mechanism to prevent other copyright owners from abusing such provisions in the future.

On the other hand, a Cable TV reporter applied to the Buildings Department to inspect the building plans of the Yau Ma Tei building that was involved in a serious fire accident last November. She cited news purposes and provided additional information as requested by department staff, but her application was rejected nonetheless. Only after the matter was reported in the media did the department change its narrative and approve Cable TV’s inspection application, purportedly on the basis of public interest. As to what constitutes public interest as defined by the department, no clear guidelines are forthcoming so far.

HKJA Chairman Chris Yeung Kin-hing criticized the department for demanding the content of coverage before approving the application. Thus interfering with reporting independence and being tantamount to censorship.

Registration and Electoral Office: Register of Electors

In May last year, the Court of Appeal gave a ruling on an appeal by the Junior Police Officers’ Association concerning access to voters register. Under the ruling, only election candidates, political parties and the media can inspect the registers of electors.

Companies Registry: Companies Register

The final verdict of the Bao Choy case is not yet known, pending her appeal. Another public register used by the media more often also became the subject of another round of records search restriction,
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It is worth mentioning that even after the ruling, the Transport Department still simply responded to the media saying, “In accordance with the objectives of the Road Traffic Ordinance and setting up of the vehicle register, if the relevant information is used for news purposes, it must also be related to traffic and transport matters.” But the department has not provided any concrete answer to what situation constitutes traffic and transport related matters, and grey areas remain nonetheless.

Companies Registry: Companies Register

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All of a sudden, the Financial Services and the Treasury Bureau and the Companies Registry announced on March 29 this year that due to the increasing number of cases related to “doxing” and personal data misuse, amendments to the Companies Ordinance that were shelved in 2013 will be reintroduced, without any prior consultation.

Under the new arrangements, to be enforced in three phases, the government will begin right away and gradually shield information in the Companies Register. The all-important amendment is that starting in 2022, only partial identification numbers and no more residential addresses of directors will be revealed to searchers.

Looking back at 2013, various professions including the media voiced strong objection, saying such a move would seriously stifle media efforts to expose hidden relations of public figures’ interests through company searches and impede investigations into dubious transactions and scandals conducted through Hong Kong companies. The Government eventually heeded public opinions and shelved the implementation of the amendments.

The Government’s sudden move to reinstate the amendment was again greeted with strong opposition by the press. Media organisations of various stances all published numerous reports on how citizens and the media would be affected by the new regulations, including the impossibility of 100 percent ascertaining the identity of a target person or finding out through a company search of the property owned by a target.

Shocking investigative reports in Hong Kong, such as the land hoarding scandal that involved the then Secretary for Development Paul Chan Mo-po, would forever disappear after full implementation of the new company search regulations, as one can hardly find clues through records searches. It would also be much more difficult for reporters to track down those in charge of closed companies for unpaid workers, or to track down merchants or companies suspected of involvement in unscrupulous practices or fraud.

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However, the court did not offer any definition of the media. The then Deputy Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs, Rosanna Law Shuk-pui, was responsible for implementing the relevant executive measures. (Law was appointed as Commissioner for Transport in September that same year. The Choy case happened right after her appointment.) Before consulting the press, she wrote to the court, affirming that only those registered with the Government News and Media Information System (GNMIS) were entitled to inspect the electoral registers, thus ousting freelance reporters and those media not registered with GNMIS.

At that time, HKJPA declared an objection, pointing out that the director of the Information Services Department, which administers GNMIS, has authority to vet users’ registration, so the arrangement was tantamount to the administration and government officials deciding which media outlet is entitled to inspect the electoral registers. This cannot make sure that the media can inspect the registers, in a capacity independent of the administration, to expose election fraud and ensure that elections are fair and just. Regrettably, the court has finally adopted the government’s views.

In April this year, the Government made radical changes to the electoral system. One suggestion was to reduce information on the electoral registers available for inspection by the press, from full names of electors in the past to the first character of electors’ names and registered residential addresses. According to past investigation reports by the media uncovering vote-rigging, reporters need to know an elector’s full name in order to verify his identity with other public information and confirm whether there is vote-rigging in a certain property. If only the first character of the name is available, it can hardly be used for comparison and verification.

Conclusion

Starting in 2019, requirements for access to public registers managed by different government departments have gradually changed, greatly reducing information available to the press. Take checking vehicle license plates as an example. This tool, often used by reporters to carry out investigative reporting in the past, can no longer be employed.

As new inspection arrangements of more public registers continue to come into play, and various departments strengthen their gatekeeping against the press’s records searches, the feasibility of press coverage by such searches would expectedly dwindle further, and the impact on the public’s right to know would be noticeably severe.

Just as Bao Choy said in a post-verdict press conference, “Maybe (fellow journalists) would face different hardships, but I think if only we want to continue working, there’s still space.”
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On September 22, in a letter to four journalist unions including HKJA, the Hong Kong News Executives’ Association, the Hong Kong Federation of Journalists and HKPPA, Chief Superintendent Kenneth Kwok Ka-chuen of the Police Public Relations Branch (PPRB) said the definition of “media representatives” in the Police Force General Orders would be revised to assist police in law enforcement. The letter stated that police would no longer recognise those holding press passes issued by media workers’ unions such as HKJA as media representatives. They would only recognise local media outlets, or internationally renowned and well-known non-local news agencies, newspapers, magazines, radio stations and television broadcast organizations registered with the Government News and Media Information System (GNMIS). This means that reporting by many Hong Kong and international online media, student media and freelance reporters would be affected in the future.

In response, a number of press unions and associations including HKJA and HKPPA issued a joint statement criticising the police for their hasty and unreasonable decision and voicing concern that press freedom would be seriously impaired. Before the revision, “media representatives” in the Police Force General Orders covered reporters, photographers and TV crews holding three types of credentials, including newspaper offices, agencies, TV stations and radio stations; HKJA press cards; HKPPA press cards. Regarding the recent revision of “media representatives’ definition, several press unions and associations including HKJA, HKPPA, Independent Commentators Association and Journalism Educators for Press Freedom issued a joint statement criticising the police for their hasty decision and for unilaterally making a major amendment without consultation.

Vivian Tam Wai-wan, a representative of Journalism Educators for Press Freedom, said the change had excluded journalistic prakticum media, depriving students of on-the-spot reporting training. She pointed out the irresistible trend of journalists opting for freelance jobs, and that the Pulitzer Prize, a top honor award for journalistic achievements, already accepts contributions by freelance journalists. She denounced the police’s move as a step backward and complained that their demarcation of cordoned areas would bar reporters from taking newsworthy photos.

**Pro-Beijing groups advocate press accreditation system**

Responding in a newspaper article, Secretary for Security John Lee Ka-chiu said the relevant guidelines were only intended to help frontline personnel effectively and promptly identify “media representatives.” They would enable police to make special reporting arrangements for the media under feasible circumstances. He stressed that the amendment was not to set any definition for journalists. He alleged that in public activities involving violence in 2019, a large number of people wearing yellow vests or reporter-like outfits used their press status to mix with the crowds, obstruct police actions and increase police’s risks of being attacked. He cited examples of overseas countries and claimed that in places such as New York and Los Angeles of the United States, where press freedom is observed, a press accreditation system of government-issued press cards is also in place to allow accredited media to report beyond police cordons. The objective is to allow the press to report within shorter distances while conducting crowd and security controls inside cordoned areas.

The examples cited by Lee Ka-chiu are misleading. The accreditation system he mentioned is in general applicable only in certain areas, such as crime scenes, not an extensive region for a protest march or demonstration. Obviously, the police want an accreditation system to bluster online media, school media, citizen journalists, self media, freelancers and foreign media ineligible for GNMIS registration.

Although amendments to the Police General Orders have come into effect, how school media, citizen journalists, self media, freelancers, etc., would be affected when cordoned areas appear during protests remains unknown, as the ongoing pandemic and social-distancing rules have forbidden massive rallies. However, there are more signs indicating that setting the definition of “media representatives” is only the government’s first step to rein in the media. The possibility of introducing an official accreditation or registration system as their endgame cannot be ruled out.

Chief Executive Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor has talked about “improving” the media system on several occasions, but has so far only listed fake news legislation as one initiative. But results of an online questionnaire survey released in May by pro-China group “Youth Vision Hong Kong” on “Hong Kong people’s views on media landscape” showed that 83% thought traditional media were not sufficiently regulated. The group suggested that the government set up a journalis registration system. Youth Vision Hong Kong’s members include Holden Chow Ho-ding and Ben Chan Han-pun of the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong (DAB), and Eddie Lam Yu-sing of the New People’s Party. The reliability of online questionnaires is low, but the obvious purpose of the survey is to create a public opinion illusion. Behind DAB is the Liaison Office of the Central People’s Government. That Beijing wants the SAR Government to launch a scheme to regulate the press has become all the more explicit.
Erupted in June 2019, opposition against an extradition bill has since escalated, resulting in chaos during clashes between riot police and protesters. Police had alleged time after time that there were “fake reporters” among the fleet of journalists at the scenes, causing confusion and difficulties in law enforcement. Police once asked the Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA) to work with the government and come up with some on-the-spot press identification arrangements such as wearing government-issued credentials or specified clothing. But HKJA was concerned that such arrangements might become a de facto accreditation system and that the Government might decline to give accreditation to media outlets who are deemed untruthful. Furthermore, according to international standards, anyone is entitled to film or report in public places. Any identification or registration for the accreditation system hinges upon matters of principle and complicated implementation issues, HKJA opposed it in principle.

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RTHK revamp puts broadcaster in danger

By Au Ka-lun

2021 was a year of regression for Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK), which the SAR government ruthlessly rectified using an outrageous approach. In mid-February, the Government published The Governance and Management of Radio Television Hong Kong Review Report, which pointed out the inadequacies of RTHK’s editorial management system, the passive roles of senior staff, serious dependence on commissioned staff, etc. However, the review report was completely silent on RTHK’s number two ranking on media credibility among Hong Kong media in surveys, nor it says anything about its programmes having won more awards than any other electronic media outlet in the city.

At the same time of the publication of the report, the Government announced that Director of Broadcasting Leung Ka-wing would end his contract early, and be succeeded by an administrative officer Patrick Li Pak-chuen who had no media experience. As soon as Li assumed his post, he implemented an all-round programme vetting system. Programmes like Hong Kong Connection, LegCo Review and This Week became the major rectification targets. These shows, used to be produced by the TV Division’s Public and Current Affairs Section, have long been criticised by the pro-establishment camp. Rectification is accomplished by vetting the entire process, rescheduling programmes without prior notice, banning political topics, replacing presenters, hiring commissioned staff to supplant the original production teams, etc. Supervisors, executive producers and veteran journalists resigned one after another. RTHK also announced that it would withdraw entries submitted for the selection of press awards, and would not accept awards even if given. It would also remove archived programmes uploaded more than one year ago from Youtube. Just within a few months, RTHK has become unrecognisable.
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Just within a few months, RTHK has become unrecognisable.
Vanished: Leung Ka-wing

Director of Broadcasting Leung Ka-wing departed six months ahead of his contract. In his farewell email to members of staff, he wrote, "These past five and a half years of serving RTHK and society with you have been indelible, and I am grateful for every moment."

(Literal translation of his Chinese message: About to depart. In the same boat for five and a half years, we have had some turbulence; we supported each other, we may now put it behind me. I deeply appreciate. Facing both praise and criticism with a normal attitude; don’t care much about staying or departing. Whether it be blows, misfortunes or prosperity doesn’t bother me.)

Structure-wise, the Director of Broadcasting is RTHK’s Editor-in-Chief. The review report said: “the Editor-in-chief and senior management have been put in a passive position,” “the awareness to be accountable is weak in editorial management.” It went on to say that the RTHK management “has not actively sought advice from the Board of Advisors on matters pertaining to editorial principles, programming standards and programming quality as required under the Charter.” However, the Charter’s relevant provision states that the Director “may” seek advice from the Board. He is not required to do so “actively.”

Some RTHK staff revealed that Leung faced enormous pressure throughout his tenure, but overall, he respected editorial independence and never meddled with programme details.

Vanished: Hong Kong Connection

Episodes of RTHK’s 43-year-old flagship programme Hong Kong Connection have been withdrawn. Some were directly cancelled and forbidden to air. Some were suspended pending long-awaited vetting decisions and could not air according to the original schedule. Withdrawn programmes include an episode that tells a story of difficulties in running online news media, Journaists of CitizenNews and Hong Kong Free Press (HKFP) were interviewed for the report. Management requested adding interviews of pro-China media. The Hong Kong Connection production team found it hard to modify, saying the subject matter was irrelevant to the political stance and pro-China media had nothing to do with the subject angle. In the end, the episode was put on the shelves. Another episode recounts the process of how the Chinese University Student Union, subject to threats and suppression by the university, finally resigned en masse. Although two pro-establishment councilors were interviewed for the documentary, broadcast was still disallowed. Another episode probes into “improving the electoral system.” Several pro-establishment figures were interviewed in the show, including Eric Yeung Chun-sing, who lost in an information technology functional constituency election, and barrister Lawrence Ma Yan-kwok, member of the pro-Beijing party DAB. Despite their interviews taking up more time, the episode was still axed, and the producer in charge resigned immediately after the decision was made.

Another episode features activists who asserted Chinese sovereignty over the Diaoyu Islands. Interviewees included a veteran member of the Action Committee for Defending the Diaoyu Islands, Lo Chau, who was filmed weeping on hearing the Chinese national anthem. RTHK management reportedly sent the episode to the Secretary for Justice for reviewing whether it contravened the National Anthem Ordinance. No date has been fixed for airing yet. Permission to air an episode of The Screening Room which interviewed renowned forensic pathologist Dr Philipp Beh Swan-lip has been withheld. It is believed that the problem laid with Dr Beh’s explanation of his name “Swan-lip” (literally “declaring independence”) in the show, saying his parents gave him the name to commemorate Malaysia’s “declaration of independence.”

Programmes to commemorate the June 4th anniversary, follow up on the Yuen Long July 21st incident and probe into the “definition of media representatives” proposed by the Hong Kong Connection reporting team were all vetoed. Management even reportedly instructed that no political topics could be covered in future; only stories related to people’s livelihood are acceptable. Hong Kong Connection executive producer Paul Lee Yin-chit resigned.

Vanished: Discussion and perspective

Other programmes of the Public and Current Affairs Section also suffered. In an episode of LegCo Review aired in May, a segment that featured vigil organisers running a marathon to mark June 4th was shown at the end when the credits were running. Patrick Li said the segment was an “unapproved addition,” “without the approval of the editorial committee.” The episode was removed for editing, and he vowed to punish those responsible. The RTHK Programme Staff Union hit back, saying that for more than two months, management never requested that the end segment of LegCo Review be submitted for vetting, and queried that Li’s words had deviated from the truth, giving only a unilateral account.

Management was also unhappy that one LegCo Review segment had been presented by Audrey Eu Yuet-mee all along. Following the June 4th marathon incident, management replaced the production team with an sourced one to produce the episodes before and after June 4th. The replacement programme presented included pro-establishment ex-district councillor Yolanda Ng Yuen-ting. Eric Yeung Chun-yiu of Open TV and current affairs commentator Wan Chi-keung, the union said they were all pro-establishment and doubted they could achieve impartiality as stated in the Charter. In the productions by the new team, almost all interviewees expressed pro-establishment views.

The operation of This Week was also affected. In one episode, artist Bonnie Chu Ting-hyun and media figure Michelle Lo Milk-suet were to discuss the state of play in the entertainment industry. The original plan of a live telecast was blocked. The show could air only after vetting. In the past, the presenter would often talk about hot topics of recent days or even that day as a lead-in at the beginning of a show to enhance timeliness. However, this part was deleted because the time constraints did not allow prior vetting by seniors. Production workers of different
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programmes all said the new management framed all matters with the political perspective, and in covering issues unrelated to politics, still requested “balance” of interviewees by adding “pro-China” voices. Voices critical of the political reforms even from the pro-establishment camp have been deleted. Many production personnel were apprehensive that opinions had become “only one voice reigning supreme,” and stringent censorship rendered content of current affairs programmes to lose their timeliness.

**Vanished: Openness and transparency**

Although senior management of RTHK claimed that vetting standards were based on the RTHK Charter and Producers’ Guidelines, they never explained in concrete terms the problems they had with what details of individual programmes, RTHK only admitted withdrawing three shows, not other problematic programmes, saying these involved editorial decisions. The union accused management of using linguistic hypocrisy to cover up.

At the end of March, RTHK issued a statement saying there were programmes had been suspended because the contentious topics were not presented in an “impartial, unbiased and accurate” manner. But it did not point out in concrete terms the parts that did not pass the review. It just explained that some programmes had inaccurate descriptions about “improving the electoral system” and the National Security Law. “some programmes might breach the law or the Communications Authority’s Codes of Practices; some programmes only stated the position of one side; and for some programmes, although they interviewed people with different stances, most of the programme content only focused on the opinions of one single side; and there were programmes that covered the situation faced by the interviewees but did not explain the background and causes of the matter.”

The union said management had never formally conducted face-to-face discussions with staff to explain editorial standards. All directives were from top to bottom, and more often than not, there was no justification. The union also criticised management for demanding programme producers of various sections to submit detailed production outlines in black and white while seniors’ demands for rectification or vetoing were conveyed orally without written instructions, making it hard for staff to comply. Some demands were even said to be confidential and supervisors told not to leak, or they would be punished according to the Official Secrets Ordinance.

Even the RTHK review by the Commerce and Economic Development Bureau was conducted without transparency. The full member list of the dedicated team responsible for writing the report reviewing the governance and management of RTHK has been kept secret all along. The Government only revealed that the team included directorate administrative officer Jessie Ting Yip Yin-mei and RTHK’s Assistant Director of Broadcasting Albert Cheung Kin-wah. The Government explained that disclosing members’ information would make it more difficult to conduct other reviews in future.

**Vanished: Bao Choy Yuk-ling**

*Hong Kong Connection* producer Bao Choy Yuk-ling was the first being convicted in the series of incidents pertaining to the Yuen Long attacks. In producing the programme, 7.21 *Who Owns the Truth?,* she searched records at the Transport Department to trace the identities of who owned the vehicles used for transporting weapons and suspects in the July 21st incident. She was charged with two counts of “making false statements,” convicted and fined $6,000 in total.

On convicting Choy, Magistrate Ivy Chu Yee-mei said she did not accept that probing for information of vehicles transporting weapons was one of “traffic and transport related matters.” She found Choy guilty of “making false statements” in filling in the application and stated that any “good motive” did not matter. In her judgment, the magistrate did not consider elements such as press freedom and that the event involved major public interest. She further restricted access to records saying such information could only be used for personal purposes.

In the incident, RTHK neither offered Choy, a Category II service provider (Cal II), any assistance nor took legal costs or the fine. RTHK even suspended her work with *Hong Kong Connection* before the court passed the verdicts.

RTHK also withheld an episode of *Outstanding Teachers* produced by Choy. The programme, sponsored by the Education Bureau, features special education schools and teachers who have won the Chief Executive’s Award for Teaching Excellence. The content had nothing politically sensitive at all. Thereafter, in view of discontent among the teachers, school principals and the education sector, the episode eventually aired after postponement. Choy has filed an appeal against her convictions.

The investigative report of 7.21 *Who Owns the Truth?* won this year’s Kam Yiu-yu Press Freedom Award and the Chinese-language Documentary Award at the Human Rights Press Awards, and has been shortlisted for the Society of Publishers in Asia (SOPA) Award for Public Service Journalism. Choy has also been selected one of this year’s Nieman Fellows by Harvard University. She will go to study at the university for one year.

**Vanish: Nabela Qoser, Yvonne Tong Yeuk-wun and numerous senior producers**

This Week presenter and producer Nabela Qoser had her probation extended twice and was finally not employed as a civil servant by RTHK. She departed at the end of May. Time after time, she raised pointed questions at government press conferences during the anti-extradition bill movement, including once asking Chief Executive Carrie Lam to “talk like human beings”. RTHK received many complaints against her but cleared her of wrongdoing after investigation. In a rare move, RTHK reopened the investigation and eventually did not employ her on civil service terms. Two episodes of This Week co-produced by Qoser won a merit at this year’s Human Rights Press Awards.

Another RTHK producer Yvonne Tong Yeuk-wun became a target of complaints by partisan media and groups because she asked assistant director-general of the World Health Organization (WHO) during an interview in the English The Pulse programme last year whether WHO would reconsider the membership status of Taiwan. Thereafter, in the Prisons that Don’t Exist, a documentary Tong co-produced that featured Xinjiang Re-education Camps and aired two years ago, was dredged up and Tong brought to account. Tong eventually resigned. That Xinjiang feature has won numerous local and international awards.

In the course of incidents, Head of Public and Current Affairs section under RTHK’s Television and Corporate Businesses Doris Wong Lok-har, Senior Executive Producer Sit Yau-tak, *Hong Kong Stories* Executive Producer Fong Hiu-shan and the original Executive Producer of Headline Liu Wai-ling have all resigned.
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Vanished: Awards

After new broadcasting director Patrick Li assumed office, RTHK wrote to organisers of major press awards to notify their withdrawal of all submissions. RTHK said the review report would review its operations, including the mechanism for nominating programmes for local and international awards. During the transition period, RTHK would not nominate programmes for the selection of awards, would withdraw submitted entries and would not accept any awards if won.

The Human Rights Press Awards administrator said the awards were presented to journalists and there was no mechanism for institutions to withdraw. RTHK programmes won six awards in the video and audio categories of this year’s Human Rights Press Awards. RTHK said it would not take them. The international organisation, Reporters without Borders, said that rejecting awards like what RTHK did was unheard of.

Vanished: Archived programmes

RTHK announced in early May that its programmes on Youtube would be available for only one year, aligning with the RTHK website where only programmes from the past 12 months are available for viewing. When news of the removal of programmes broke, some netizens described it as “a modern version of burning books and burying scholars alive.” Fearing that it would be difficult to review classic productions of the past and that history would be deleted, many rushed to download RTHK’s current affairs programmes. RTHK Programme Staff Union said Youtube did not have an upload limit and no extra public money was involved. Continuation on Youtube helped to boost viewership, thus maximising the cost-effectiveness of public funds. The union said RTHK programmes were public resources and common property of Hong Kong people. It suspected that management had other purposes in mind by doing so.

In May, netizens also discovered that award-winning programmes previously available on RTHK’s website archive were inaccessible.

Vanished: Headliner

Headliner, the only programme in Hong Kong which discussed current affairs in a relaxed and satirical way, has disappeared from the new programme season and would hardly air again. The original producer has also resigned already. In January 2021, the Communications Authority ruled as substantiated complaints against three earlier Headliner episodes and issued a strong warning. The complaints concerned a segment entitled “Scary Information (驚方訊息)” in which artist Wong He parading a policeman emerged from and retracted into a rubbish bin. The authority considered Wong’s acts and words as maliciously smear and denigrating the police.

Vanished: Pentapism

Personal political views programme Pentapism disappeared from RTHK at the end of July 2020. The Communications Authority issued a warning to RTHK in September after reviewing complaints against four episodes aired during the anti-extradition bill movement in 2019, saying the guests were biased and one-sided in commenting on police enforcement, and the programme failed to give the force an opportunity to respond. Pentapism had aired for 12 years after changing its Chinese name. The format of the programme had always been for invited guests to express their personal opinions alone for four to five minutes.

Vanished: Police Report

Amid the awful relationship between RTHK and Hong Kong police, RTHK’s most long-lived show, 47-year-old Police Magazine (English-language version: Police Report) also ended in August 2020. Police said that in light of the extensive use of social media in recent years, and changes in the way the public received information, they would stop co-producing the show with RTHK and that the relevant resources would be reallocated. The classic dialogue, “Scammers’ modus operandi for cheating is forever changing,” has shifted to TVB News, as police began sponsoring the News Channel to produce programmes such as Scam Encounter (騙案追緝作) to promote police work.

Summary: Vanishing public broadcasting

In the course of the ruthless and rapid-fire rectification, the Government no longer used the past “insidious erosion” method, but has changed to wittingly public power fully, RTHK management parodied censors, interpreted rules partially and used administrative powers arbitrarily to delete content and reposition personnel. There is no monitoring or checks and balances in the processes. The concept of RTHK serving for public broadcasting also quickly withered.

RTHK programme sections, on the one hand, tend increasingly to be “soft”, non-politicised and less critical. Maybe there are still niche interest subjects and voices of underprivileged communities, but the propaganda role is all the more conspicuous. After coming on stage, the new management soon added a series of main-theme programmes including “Hello Sisters (姐妹們你哋好)”, a segment co-produced by the Putonghua Channel’s New Bauhinia Square (新紫禁廣場) radio programme and the pro-establishment Hong Kong Island Women’s Association. It has also launched The Century-Long March (世紀長征), a programme on modern Chinese history. More controversial is the 40-episode Election Commission Subsector View (選委界別功能組圖片) hosted by Chief Executive Carrie Lam, who discussed the new electoral system with Election Committee members. She was accused of using a public tool to pave the way for her re-election, posing a conflict of interest, RTHK Programme Staff Union questioned why the show, with only one-sided voices, was regarded as impartial.

The most important elements in the concept of public broadcasting are doing away with political and economic influence, independent operations, producing programmes free from the drive of power and monetary interests, monitoring the government, giving a voice to the voiceless and really serving the people.

In the name of “exercising comprehensive jurisdiction”, the SAR government shows reckless disregard for “editorial independence”, “impartiality” becomes an excuse for censorship. The judgment of professional production teams is ignored, RTHK has quickly transformed into a mouthpiece. The size of the speech birdcage is determined by the censor at will, highlighting the fragility of the concept of public broadcasting under an authoritarian regime.

In filing an appeal against her records search convictions, Choy Yuk-lung wrote a sorrowful line, “As a media person, my career goal has all along been reporting facts, speaking the truth. When my city collapses, I expect myself to ‘live in reality’, sincerely, kindly and with integrity.”
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i-Cable ‘difficult to run’

By Lam Man-yun
Former Assistant Executive News Editor of i-Cable News
She led the editorial desk and was the producer of news program
News Lancer (新聞晚報), she resigned on 1 December, 2020.

On March 23, 2021, i-Cable Communications convened a special general meeting, which resolved to raise $200 million by issuing long-term convertible bonds to majority shareholder Forever Top (Asia) Limited. It is difficult for outsiders to figure out how many times funds have been raised since i-Cable changed hands from The Wharf to Forever Top. After the meeting, i-Cable Chairman David Chiu Tak-cheong sighed, “VuTV is younger, TVB has everything, we are difficult to run.” As a former employee, I cannot help recalling: Cable used to have “a trump card of its own.” If not for the string of incidents, maybe Boss Chiu could still take on a proud tone and respond by saying, “We have news!”

Mass resignation day

On December 1, 2020, Cable News laid off 40 staff members, triggering the resignation of 16 news editors and reporters from the local news section as well as the whole China news team. Many core members of the finance news team also resigned one after another. People may ask: What’s wrong with firing staff because the company is losing money? Why are you guys so emotional? But if you know those being dismissed are the entire team of News Lancet, master-level personnel of the film crew and 'quick hands' in the video editing team, maybe you will understand why we surrounded senior management heads, demanding an explanation.

“Why? Why are the most capable ones (sacked)?” “Why get rid of the whole News Lancet (investigative news) team? Yeung Leung-kit (from News Lancet) has snatch many awards for the company!” “You promised to communicate. Why didn’t you even bother to ask?!” In view of teammates being summoned by phone one by one to enter the meeting room for the (termination) letter and got dismissed on the same day, we eagerly and anxiously questioned the four senior executives: Deputy General Managers Edna Tse Yin-na, Fung-fai and News Controllers Oscar Lee Tsun and Anderson Chan Hing-cheung. The foursome was sometimes speechless, sometimes repeatedly said it was the company’s restructuring plan. Then there was the unforgettable line from one of them, “Are you guys triad members bargaining?” Anyway, after multiple encounters, the four still failed to produce a compelling narrative. On the contrary, they ruined any remaining mutual trust.

I say “remaining” because there was not much left. 2020 was an eventful year for Cable News. In mid-August, executive director William Fung Tak-hung was suddenly retitled as Advisor without any prior warning. Edna Tse, who was in charge of the English Channel, was promoted to Deputy General Manager. The following day, Oscar Lee and Anderson Chan parachuted to become news controllers. Less than two weeks after the trio reported duty, three veterans of the engineering department were fired, triggering a signature
i-Cable ‘difficult to run’

By Lam Miu yan
Former Assistant Executive News Editor of i-Cable News
She led the political beat and was the producer of news program
News Lance (新闻俱乐部), she resigned on 1 December, 2021.

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Happy news department

There was a gap of more than two months between the resignation and the official departure for many of us. During that period, many Cable old-timers took the initiative to form an alliance, film for remembrances, form a team to stretch a banner, and even agree on a dress code to greet colleagues’ last day. Some outsider friends said they found long-lost warmth in the live streams of Cable news staff bidding farewell to colleagues. As a matter of fact, Cable was well-known as being simple as far as personnel is concerned; there was no factional divide; it was called “Happy News Department. On the other hand, Cable was also famous for being challenging, demanding, asking for both depth and creativity, paying much attention to reporters’ discipline in pursuing stories.

This unique brand of “Cable DNA” could only be brewed by a group of leaders who cared about only “professional merits and faults,” led one generation after another generation of newcomers willing to learn and work hard. They fought one battle after another, cultivated tacit understanding and deep affection over the years.

We attached importance to planning and deploying for big stories. They include the continuous live broadcast of the 1997 handover during “the last 24 hours under British rule +, the first 24 hours after reverting to China,”. When China sent their first astronaut into space in 2003, Cable set up in advance in the desert near the launching site. We became the first news organisation in the world to televise the launch scenes. Following the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan’s Wenchuan, we went straight to the disaster areas to probe into the “touf buildings”. During the 2012 Chief Executive election, we came up with the idea of counting votes by sight by our own colleagues. We scored a landslide victory at the media front. The spirit of planning and deploying seriously was fully applied to daily reporting. When a news event occurred, in addition to reporting in the frontline, we brainstormed ideas on ways to report stories from multiple angles to make them more comprehensible.

We pierced the appearance, treasuring thin ice. In addition to daily reporting, we created News Lancet, trying hard “not to cover just the stuff on its surface.” Over the years, it has dug out a story about “beef balls without beef”, “city competitiveness ranking”, “animal telepathy”, “pro-establishment opinion surveys” etc. to uncover the unexpected truths beneath the surface. The Lancet has “pierced and hurt” many people in these years, but has never been sued, and no story had to be taken down, thus allaying to the team’s attitude regarding careful verification.

We talked like human beings: some people said Cable stories were written in an unique way, different from the serious presentations of other media. Indeed, we put efforts to tell stories in such a way that the audience could understand most easily. Political reforms were boring? We used a race on the track to explain. Following the opening of the West Kowloon high speed rail link, how did it compare with the Hung hom through-train? We dispatched two teams to compete which reached Guangzhou faster. The spirit of “talking like human beings” is not about a contest of the use of vulgar languages or making it fun and amusing but about communication by the most appropriate means. Serious and arduous topics such as court stories, the National Security Law and resolutions of the National People’s Congress were unerringly explained to the audience, even at the cost of six to seven minutes on one story to educate them.

We strove to be fair. In recent years, as Hong Kong inclined towards disturbances and polarisation, we strove to remain objective and fair. As a middle-level gatekeeper at Cable during these years, I could feel how much effort and energy were spent in this respect. A 2020 survey by the Hang Seng University showed that during the anti-extradition bill movement, most recipients of the top seven most used media outlets had a clear inclination: either more than half were “blue”, or pro-establishment, or more than half were “yellow”, or pro-democracy. Cable was the only exception, with both “blue” and “yellow” accounting for similar proportions, a difference of only two percentage points. A scholar concluded that Cable was “a relatively objective and independent media outlet, providing content that both sides of the split community were happy and unhappy to see, probably thankless.” From the business angle, such positioning may not be wise. But looking from the perspective of journalism as a profession, it’s an extraordinary achievement.

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The gain and loss of the ‘New Cable’

Let’s return to that general meeting of shareholders. David Chiu said at that time that with the efforts of colleagues, the News Lancet and China Beat programs were “back to normal.”

The fact is, after the entire News Lancet team was made redundant, a former newspaper follower who had switched to the catering industry many years ago was recruited to succeed. Finally on February 12, an episode about the wild boar and trap was broadcast as a Lancet story, but was subsequently taken down. Several days later, another story about illegal workers and problems about pipes in “three-nothing” buildings was put on air, again subsequently taken down. Up to the day when this article was finished, no more Lancet stories had been screened. As for the online platform, the Lancet program has disappeared.

As for the China news team, after the whole team departed, China Beat was put on air as usual on the evening of January 1. Management of the news department was reportedly satisfied with the “seamless transition”, but netizens noticed striking differences from the past in terms of content selection and angles. The number of likes on the China Beat Facebook page has also dropped.

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persons related to Legco primary elections as an example. In the past, reporters would almost certainly be deployed to report live the case at the court entrance. But it was said that Cable only dispatched a newbie to the spot this time. Other areas such as the medical beat, political beat and education beat, which various veteran reporters used to follow closely, have also been taken up by different people. The breadth and depth of coverage would inevitably be affected.

Many friends in my in-and-out media friends have dropped, and the extent of the fall would only be known after results have been announced. I also have no idea whether advertising and sponsorship have improved so much that the management could laugh off the bank, and how much has been saved by “going beyond the redundancy target” after the shakeup. But one thing has definitely increased: interviews with senior officials.

After the Central Government moved to alter the electoral system, Chief Executive Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor and Secretary for Justice Teresa Cheng Yeuk-wah have given interviews to Cable. Between them, Lam even gave the station a second interview, after giving one more than four months ago. Last time, News Controller Oscar Lee was in charge. Lam commented that he was “very cooperative, very accommodating”. This time, a different reporter interviewed the Chief Executive and Oscar Lee interviewed Teresa Cheng. Both started with the schedule of local legislation being tight, Oscar Lee followed up by asking, “Which party works harder? The Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau, or the Secretary for Justice?” The secretary answered with a smile, “The entire government works very hard.” Perhaps, having overhauled the news team, Cable was rewarded with interviews that could not be lined up before. But how much these would benefit the news content and Cable’s influence is a different matter.

The Cable newsroom used to be noisy, no-holds-barred and very warm. Although old-timers have departed, they have scattered all around: some become teachers, some publish books, some open a coffee shop, some write commentaries, some switch to newspapers, and some switch to online media. The original members of the China news team have formed the “China news team at CitizenNews”. Its nightly newscast reconnects past fans with a sense of amability. It also represents an adventure into new media. In the 47-person case, the near “handicap” performance of other TV stations has helped mold Stand News into the leading court beat channel. Tens of thousands of viewers were eager to watch the court coverage by Chan Yuen-ting, a “previous Cable person”. Changes at Cable, from another viewpoint, have forced a group of people who have inherited the Cable spirit to step out of their comfort zone, break into parts, and shine everywhere. Look at this way, isn’t it a blessing in disguise?

As for Cable News, after conversion to the new Cable, the nightly main newscast at 7 pm has been renamed “Open at the Forefront of Facts”. Inspiration of the big Chinese character for “Open” must have come from the free “Open TV” channel. A major battle has recently broken out in the TV industry, the first one in a long time. As TVB and ViuTV are being locked together in the fight. Open TV makes no noise and is mentioned by none. I remember when Forever Top first took over iCable, Boss Chu once described Cable News as a “hit product”. How come nothing hit is produced now, falling into the predicament of “difficult to run”? Cable is said to be the epitome of Hong Kong. Recently, I heard someone use such a saying to describe Hong Kong, “If something is too good to last, it probably won’t.”

By Rose L.W. LUGU
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She researches censorship, propaganda and social movements in authoritarian regimes. She has been a journalist for 25 years and was a 2007 Newman Fellow at Harvard University. She received her PhD in mass communication from Arizona State University and earned her bachelor’s degree in philosophy from Peking University.
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Many friends in my filter bubble vowed to terminate their subscription of i-Cable. Whether subscription figures have dropped, and the extent of the fall would only be known after results have been announced. I also have no idea whether advertising and sponsorship have improved so much that the management could laugh all the way to the bank, and how much has been saved by “going beyond the redundancies target” after the shakeup. But one thing has definitely increased: interviews with senior officials.

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1. Ming Pao 30/1/2008, Spill Society, Spill Media. Professor Lee Shiu Nam Paul, School of Communication, The Hong Kong University of Hong Kong
On January 20, 2020, the Chinese government confirmed that a novel strain of coronavirus transmissible from human to human had emerged in Wuhan. Various news media were quick to engage themselves in reporting the outbreak. Apart from providing disease-related information, many investigative reports criticised the Wuhan government for underestimating the pandemic and deferring publicity. Despite the tight control of the Communist Party (CPC) over news media content, in case of unexpected happenings, the propaganda apparatus could not act fast enough to devise a uniform propaganda line, thus giving rise to a window for news organisations to exercise public opinion supervision through news coverage. This window was closed down in mid-February. On February 15, speaking at a meeting of the Central Political Bureau Standing Committee, CPC General Secretary Xi Jinping gave instructions on how to do a good job in publicity, education and public opinion guidance on the pandemic. He made three demands. First, measures taken by the Party and the government and their effectiveness should be portrayed in a positive light. Secondly, control of online media should be strengthened. Thirdly, the authorities should be proactive in shaping international opinion.

The three demands were implemented to their fullest. Articles challenging the government’s incompetence in combating the virus were deleted from the media, Wuhan, a city devastated by the coronavirus, became the best example manifesting the Chinese government’s superpower governance. Trauma inflicted by Covid-19 was brushed aside. The government was eager to showcase its remarkable feat in fighting the pandemic and achievements through various platforms.

As news media were more stringently supervised, the public turned to online platforms to publicise and search for information. When Wuhan was in lockdown, local residents made their voices heard through the internet, and citizen journalists came into play. But such voices were quickly silenced and four citizen journalists disappeared from Wuhan. One of them, Zhang Zhan, has been sentenced to four years in jail, and there was not much news about the other three. In the campaign to promote the official narrative about fighting the virus, the successful image crafted by the authorities was undermined by voices critical of the government on the internet and details deviating from the official lines that these citizen journalists publicised. Even those compiling records by indirect means were struck. Three volunteers who created online files to gather deleted Covid-19 news reports have been arrested.

Over the past year, the Cyberspace Administration of China continued to adopt measures with a view to rectify and supervise commercial websites platforms and self-media, severely cracking down on those non-accredited ones that published or reproduced news information. In China, commercial websites and self-media must be officially accredited to carry news coverage. According to the new rules, official approval is also required for commentaries.

Apart from telling China’s success stories, and highlighting the superiority of China’s political system as well as the superb leadership of Chinese leaders to the international community via the state media’s own communication channels, which are capable of global communication, the state media have also bought a lot of social media ads to push China’s official views and narratives at targeted audiences and portray a positive image of the Chinese government. Such content went so far as to incorporate fake news, such as changing the coronavirus’s place of origin, from initially admitting that it came from the Huanan Seafood Market of Wuhan, then changing it to virus transmission by some “unknown animal” and even spreading the conspiracy theory that the virus had been imported from abroad.

The disappearance of news supervision by public opinion

The concept of public opinion supervision by public opinion first appeared in a report of the 13th National Congress in 1987, which asked to strengthen coverage of government and CPC activities, support the masses to point out deficiencies in work, oppose bureaucratic, thus defining public opinion supervision as the Party’s media supervising the Party and the state. The importance of public opinion supervision has been reiterated from time to time in documents issued by CPC leaders and the CPC. Meanwhile, details of how to exercise public opinion supervision changed with time, thereby determining the space of media coverage. Marketisation has brought significant changes to China’s media. A batch of media workers no longer see themselves as workers of the Party and state institutions but public supervisors. In light of the influence of Western journalistic professionalism on media practitioners and market pressure, a vast array of coverage laden with criticism was produced, creating space for news supervision.

For a considerably long period, optimists thought that marketisation of China’s news media, especially with the role of news supervision by public opinion stressed by CPC would enable the media to facilitate China’s democratisation process. However, after comparing with the Soviet Union’s media reform measures, academics realised that the public opinion supervisory role CPC gave to the news media would only enhance the persistence of the political regime, while Soviet reform measures such as lifting press censorship and allowing private ownership of news media outlets had enhanced the Soviet democratisation process. The space CPC offered to media, which reflected careful strategic calculations, including many ambiguous and harsh details as guidance, would thus vary with changes in the leadership and priorities of the Party’s interests.

A case in point is the disappearance of China’s investigative reporters in recent years, and starting in 2018, the increasing number of Chinese reporters jailed because of unfavorable coverage. Another example is the difference between news coverage of Covid-19 and the SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) coverage in 2003.

At the beginning of the SARS outbreak in 2003, the Chinese Government did not disclose crucial information related to SARS. The state media also kept silent. CPC effectively controlled SARS coverage by issuing top-down directives until the then CPC General Secretary Hu Jintao asked the media to report the disease in a truthful and objective manner. Only then did the public begin to learn about the epidemic. Nonetheless, CPC imposed strict controls on some content. For example, before reporting the number of confirmed deaths, media outlets must first secure the approval of Ministry of Health and propaganda departments and make sure their reports would not jeopardize social stability.

Such controls have apparently also been applied in the novel coronavirus crisis. Therefore, although some news organisations could publish in-depth reports criticising local officials for failing to control the situation after the Chinese government had acknowledged the outbreak, controls were quickly strengthened with instructions for the state media to restrict the dissemination of negative news. Under Xi Jinping’s directive of positive propaganda philosophy, China’s news media could not play its public opinion supervisory role through news coverage. Viral news reports featuring supervision of government and officials were quickly deleted. These reports touched on problems exposed by the pandemic, government officials’ wrong decisions and catastrophic consequences. Chinese media reports centered on praising Xi Jinping, as a state leader, for his efforts in fighting the virus, that the international community had marvelled at China’s anti-virus measures, and that the success was due to China’s superior political system.
On January 20, 2020, the Chinese government confirmed that a novel strain of coronavirus transmissible from human to human had emerged in Wuhan. Various news media were quick to engage themselves in reporting the outbreak. Apart from providing disease-related information, many investigative reports criticised the Wuhan government for underestimating the pandemic and deferring publicity. Despite the tight control of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) over news media content, in case of unexpected happenings, the propaganda apparatus could not act fast enough to devise a uniform propaganda line, thus giving rise to a window for news organisations to exercise public opinion supervision through news coverage. This window was closed down in mid-February. On February 15, speaking at a meeting of the Central Political Bureau Standing Committee, CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping gave instructions on how to do a good job in publicity, education and public opinion guidance on the pandemic. He made three demands. First, measures taken by the Party and the government and their effectiveness should be portrayed in a positive light. Secondly, control of online media should be strengthened. Thirdly, the authorities should be proactive in shaping international opinion.

The three demands were implemented to their fullest. Articles challenging the government’s incompetence in combating the virus were deleted from the media. Wuhan, a city devastated by the coronavirus, became the best example manifesting the Chinese government’s superb governance. Trauma inflicted by Covid-19 was brushed aside. The government was eager to showcase its remarkable feat in fighting the pandemic and achievements through various platforms.

As news media were more strictly supervised, the public turned to online platforms to publicise and search for information. When Wuhan was in lockdown, local residents made their voices heard through the internet, and citizen journalists came into play. But such voices were quickly silenced and four citizen journalists disappeared from Wuhan. One of them, Zhang Zhan, has been sentenced to four years in jail, and there was not much news about the other three. In the campaign to promote the official narrative about fighting the virus, the successful image crafted by the authorities was undermined by voices critical of the government on the internet and details deviating from the official line that these citizen journalists publicised. Even those compiling records by indirect means were struck. Three volunteers who created online files to gather deleted Covid-19 news reports have been arrested. Over the past year, the Cyberspace Administration of China continued to adopt measures with a view to rectify and supervise commercial websites and self-media, severely cracking down on those non-accredited ones that published or reproduced news information. In China, commercial websites and self-media must be officially accredited to carry news coverage. According to the new rules, official approval is also required for commentaries.

Apart from telling China’s success stories, and highlighting the superiority of China’s political system as well as the superb leadership of Chinese leaders to the international community via the state media’s own communication channels, which are capable of global communication, the state media have also bought a lot of social media ads to push China’s official views and narratives at targeted audiences and portray a positive image of the Chinese government. Such content went so far as to incorporate fake news, such as changing the coronavirus’s place of origin, from initially admitting that it came from the Huanan Seafood Market of Wuhan, then changing it to virus transmission by some “unknown animal” and even spreading the conspiracy theory that the virus had been imported from abroad.

The disappearance of news supervision by public opinion

The concept of public opinion supervision by public opinion first appeared in a report of CCP’s 13th National Congress in 1987, which asked to strengthen coverage of government and CCP activities, support the masses to point out deficiencies in work, oppose bureaucratism, thus defining public opinion supervision as the Party’s media supervising the Party and the state. The importance of public opinion supervision has been reiterated from time to time in documents issued by CCP leaders and the CCP. Meanwhile, details of how to exercise public opinion supervision changed with time, thereby determining the space of media coverage. Marketisation has brought significant changes to China’s media. A batch of media workers no longer see themselves as workers of the Party and state institutions but public supervisors. In light of the influence of Western journalistic professionalism on media practitioners and market pressure, a vast array of coverage laden with criticism was produced, creating space for news supervision.

For a considerably long period, optimists thought that marketisation of China’s news media, especially with the role of news supervision by public opinion stressed by CCP would enable the media to facilitate China’s democratisation process. However, after comparing with the Soviet Union’s media reform measures, academics realised that the public opinion supervisory role CCP gave to the news media would only enhance the persistence of the political regime, while Soviet reform measures such as lifting press censorship and allowing private ownership of news media outlets had enhanced the Soviet democratisation process. The space CCP offered to media, which reflected careful strategic calculations, including many ambiguous and harsh details as guidance, would thus vary with changes in the leadership and priorities of the Party’s interests.

A case in point is the disappearance of China’s investigative reporters in recent years, and starting in 2018, the increasing number of Chinese reporters jailed because of unfavorable coverage. Another example is the difference between news coverage of Covid-19 and the SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) coverage in 2003.

At the beginning of the SARS outbreak in 2003, the Chinese Government did not disclose crucial information related to SARS. The state media also kept silent. CCP effectively controlled SARS coverage by issuing top-down directives until the then CCP General Secretary Hu Jintao asked the media to report the disease in a truthful and objective manner. Only then did the public begin to learn about the epidemic. Nonetheless, CCP imposed strict controls on some content. For example, before reporting the number of confirmed deaths, media outlets must first secure the approval of Ministry of Health and propaganda departments and make sure their reports would not jeopardize social stability. Such controls have apparently also been applied in the novel coronavirus crisis. Therefore, although some news organisations could publish in-depth reports criticizing local officials for failing to control the situation after the Chinese government had acknowledged the outbreak, controls were quickly strengthened with instructions for the state media to restrict the dissemination of negative news. Under Xi Jinping’s directive of positive propaganda philosophy, China’s news media could not report public opinion supervisory role through news coverage. Viral news reports featuring supervision of government and officials were quickly deleted. These reports touched on problems exposed by the pandemic, government officials’ wrong decisions and catastrophic consequences. Chinese media reports centered on praising Xi Jinping, as a state leader, for his efforts in fighting the virus, that the international community had marvelled at China’s anti-virus measures, and that the success was due to China’s superior political system.
Starting in 2012, CCP tightened its control over the media, especially the marketized media. The Nanfang Daily Newspaper Group, known for its investigative reporting, used to be the most successful media outlet in China. Its downfall reflected CCP's absolute command over the news media. In accordance with the Party's demands, China's news media boosted morale by positive propaganda, using the approach of "conducting funeral services like happy events." For example, there were not many newspaper reports about medical personnel dying of coronavirus. In cases reported as prototypes, emphasis was placed on highlighting medical personnel's commitment and dedication, while reasons causing their deaths were ignored. Regarding criticisms of local governments and officials, the public would be guided away from blaming the Central for inadequate crisis management.

Resisting Western Influence

In December 2013, the Publicity Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the Ministry of Education issued a joint statement, which clearly stated that journalism and communication academies in universities had to be jointly launched by both the school and the local propaganda department to control journalism education and ensure Marxism thoughts guiding position in journalism education. CCP was worried that education in a journalism academy would be under undue influence by Western journalism. Over the past 20 years, many scholars studying Chinese journalism have pointed out in detail the influence of Western journalistic professionalism on Chinese journalism and news practitioners. In 2016, speaking at the News and Public Opinion Work Conference, Xi Jinping told journalists to be politically firm and persist in the correct political orientation, "The Party's news and public opinion work must adhere to the principle of the Party character, cleaving fundamentally to the Party's leadership of news and public opinion work. Media run by the Party and government are propaganda positions of the Party and the government, and they must reflect the Party [lit, "be the named Party"]... The supreme leader's demands on the news media were reflected in the news coverage during this pandemic period. From content to form, the reports have abandoned elements such as news supervision or gatekeepers of public interests, which were emphasised by journalistic professionalism, no longer representing public supervision of the government and officials. Emotional languages were heavily used to unabashedly promote the Party and government, in stark contrast to the writing style under the influence of Western journalistic professionalism.

Although Xi Jinping stressed that positive propaganda by the media did not clash with public opinion supervision, in news practice, when the media are expected to represent the public in case of public crises and demand more rights to know in order to supervise the government and officials, the two will manifest incompatibility. News and propaganda are fundamentally different. When news media organisations hold the government accountable, they inevitably clash. Media propaganda and media censorship by the government are based on worries that facts provided in news reports, problems thus exposed and their underlying causes would spark citizens' anger and dissatisfaction, and reveal the government's weaknesses and incompetence, thus jeopardising social stability and its ruling party authority. As long as politics and social stability remain CCP's main task, China's news media would not be able to deliver its seeming responsibility of placing government behaviors under public supervision. Another urgent task on hand is using the news media as a tool to maintain stability, a fortress against western influence. More precisely, it is necessary to take control of the news media from the Western press so that the Marxism news view would gain the upper hand. That media management has once again centralized reflected that the Chinese government has tightened its grip on the news media further.

After Covid-19, the Chinese government has further strengthened control of the news media and the internet. At the same time, it has also become more aggressive in international communication. Such controls have stimulated and encouraged in China the voice of nationalism, a source that suppresses speech freedom in the civil society. So far, there is no sign whatsoever of such controls loosening.

6. Repolho, M. (2017a), Media openings and political transitions: Glorified versus vilified, Problems of Post-Communism, 64(4-6), 141-151.
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2. The Cyberspace Administration of China (CASA), The Cyberspace Administration of China: Focus on rectifying prominent problems related to “five media”, lists of trending topics, CC70.com, https://www.cc70.com/2019/12/07/14251414614719445171607431.html
Appendix

Freedom of the Press in Hong Kong has greatly deteriorated in the past year. The Hong Kong Press Freedom Index 2020 released by the Hong Kong Journalists Association shows that the index for journalists has dropped to a record low. The main reason for the drop is that journalists are more cautious than ever when they criticize the HKSAR Government and the Central Government, and management has put more pressure on them.

The survey reflects the evaluation of press freedom in the past year, and is divided into two parts: the general public and journalists respectively. The Press Freedom Index for the general public shows a slight increase of 0.7 to 42.6 on a scale of 0-100, (Table 1).

The reason for this slight increase is mainly due to the reduction in conflicts between police and civilians caused by the anti-extradition movement. The risk of reporters encountering violent treatment at the frontline has been correspondingly reduced, and the scores in the public survey concern "local journalists becoming the targets of extrajudicial intimidation or physical violence when reporting" have been greatly increased.

Although the public's index increases slightly, three of the scores still dropped sharply by 0.5 to 0.9 points, including (1) adequacy of legislative safeguards for journalists' free access to information; (2) watchdog role played by the local news media; (3) the diversity of viewpoints within local media, (Table 2)

The Press Freedom Index for journalists is 32.1, showing a sharp decrease of 4.1 points compared to that of the 2019 index. There has been a drop of a total of 8.8 points in the past two years. The main reasons are that there have been significant declines in the scores of various issues, including the doubt or hesitation when criticizing the Hong Kong Government and the Central Government, the adequacy of legislative safeguards for journalists' free access to information, personal safety threats to reporters when covering news, effectiveness of watchdog role played by the local news media and the diversity of viewpoints within local media, (Table 3)

The proportion of the public and journalists who believed press freedom in Hong Kong had worsened compared to a year ago has increased. Among them, the general public's rating of the degree of freedom of the press fell by 1.2 points to only 4.5 points, the rating of the degree of press freedom by journalists also plummeted by 1 point to only 3.4 points, (Table 4)

Over 85% responding journalists agree with the statement that HKSAR Government as a key player in the suppression of press freedom, (Table 5). In the past year, several incidents were rated as harmful to press freedom by the vast majority (96% or more) of the interviewees, and they were mainly related to government and police suppression, (Table 6)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Changes in Hong Kong Press Freedom Index in the past eight years (2013-2020)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>49.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>48.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>47.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>46.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>47.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>45.9**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>41.9**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>39.4**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Factors with significant changes affecting the general public press freedom index (on a scale of 0-10)*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local journalists becoming the targets of extrajudicial intimidation or physical violence when reporting</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequacy of legislative safeguards for journalists' free access to information</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effectiveness of watchdog role played by the local news media?</td>
<td>5.9**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversify of viewpoints within local media</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The larger the number, the more positive the representative's evaluation; the smaller the number, the more negative the evaluation.
** Compared with the last survey, the change is statistically significant at p<0.01 level.
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Public</th>
<th>Journalists</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>40.9**</td>
<td>41.9**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>39.4**</td>
<td>41.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>39.2</td>
<td>41.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>38.3**</td>
<td>41.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>40.9</td>
<td>41.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>49.4</td>
<td>49.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>49.4</td>
<td>49.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>49.4</td>
<td>49.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2: Factors with significant changes affecting the general public press freedom index (on a scale of 0-100)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local journalists becoming the targets of extrajudicial intimidation or physical violence when reporting</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>3.3**</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>+0.8**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequacy of legislative safeguards for journalists’ free access to information</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>5.3**</td>
<td>4.7**</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>-0.5**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effectiveness of watchdog role played by the local news media?</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>6.3**</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>5.9**</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>-0.9**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity of viewpoints within local media, (the higher the score, the more diversified)</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>5.9*</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>5.4**</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>-0.5**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The larger the number, the more positive the representative’s evaluation; the smaller the number, the more negative the evaluation.
** Compared with the last survey, the change is statistically significant at p<0.05 level.
Table 3: Factors with significant decline affecting the journalists press freedom index (on a scale of 0-10*)

<table>
<thead>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local news media have doubt or hesitation when criticizing the HKSAR Government</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>-0.9**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(the higher the score, the more uncommon)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local news media have doubt or hesitation when criticizing the Central Government</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>-0.7**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(the higher the score, the more uncommon)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequacy of legislative safeguards for journalists' free access to information</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>-0.6**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(the higher the score, the more adequate)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>6.3</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>-0.6**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(the higher the score, the more effective)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>5.8</td>
<td>5.4**</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>-0.5**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(the higher the score, the more diversified)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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Table 4: The degree and satisfaction of press freedom in Hong Kong (the higher the score, the more satisfy)

![Graph showing the degree of press freedom and satisfaction of press freedom over years]

Table 5: Some have suggested the HKSAR Government as a key player in the suppression of press freedom, to what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>51.8%</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>77.4%</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>77.4%</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: Do you think the following incidents in the past year damaged press freedom in Hong Kong?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Incidents</th>
<th>Damaging</th>
<th>No damage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Enactment of Hong Kong National Security Law</td>
<td>98.9%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Police conducted search at Next Media Premises</td>
<td>97.8%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Police amended the definition of &quot;media representatives&quot; in the Police General Order; membership cards issued by HKJA and HKPPA no longer recognized</td>
<td>98.4%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Bao Choy, Producer of RTHK’s program &quot;Hong Kong Connection&quot; accused by the police of making false declarations after checking vehicle registrations for news gathering purpose</td>
<td>98.3%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Mass layoff of i-Cable’s news department</td>
<td>96.2%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. Factors with significant decline affecting the journalists press freedom index (on a scale of 0-10*)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local news media have doubt or hesitation when criticizing the HK SAR Government</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>-0.9**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(the higher the score, the more uncommon)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Local news media have doubt or hesitation when criticizing the Central Government</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>-0.7**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(the higher the score, the more uncommon)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adequacy of legislative safeguards for journalists'</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>-0.6**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>free access to information</td>
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<td>(the higher the score, the more adequate)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Effectiveness of watchdog role played by local news media?</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>-0.6**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(the higher the score, the more effective)</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Diversity of viewpoints within local media</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>5.3*</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>5.4**</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>-0.5**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(the higher the score, the more diversified)</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* The larger the number, the more positive the representative's evaluation; the smaller the number, the more negative the evaluation.

** Compared with the last survey, the change is statistically significant at p<0.01 level.

Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Some have suggested the HK SAR Government as a key player in the suppression of press freedom, to what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>51.6%</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>77.4%</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6. Do you think the following incidents in the past year damaged press freedom in Hong Kong?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Incidents</th>
<th>2018</th>
<th>2019</th>
<th>2020</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Enactment of Hong Kong National Security Law</td>
<td>98.9%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Police conducted search at Next Media Premises</td>
<td>97.6%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Police amended the definition of “media representatives” in the Police General Order; membership cards issued by HKJA and HKPPA no longer recognized</td>
<td>98.4%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Bao Choy, Producer of RTHK’s program “Hong Kong Connection” accused by the police of making false declarations after checking vehicle registrations for news gathering purpose</td>
<td>98.3%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Mass layoff of i-Cable’s news department</td>
<td>96.2%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>