

Hierarchy of Influences on Press in a “Partly Free” Society: Dismantling Journalistic Autonomy

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Abstract

This study used the hierarchy of influences model to explain the control of the state over the newsroom in a partly free society of Hong Kong during the anti-extradition movement. We interviewed 20 reporters, who work as leading journalists or editorial managers in 9 influential media houses in Hong Kong. Previous studies have used the political economy perspective to analyze the autonomy of Hong Kong media and treated self-censorship as an influential practice. By contrast, this paper has shown how the influence of the state, political actors, media owners, advertisers, and the audience have aligned to undercut journalistic professionalism and autonomy. This paper contributes to the literature by demonstrating the effectiveness of the model in illustrating how political control has been exercised from the macro- to the micro-level.

Keywords: *journalistic autonomy, hierarchy of influences, press freedom, political control*

1. Introduction

Independence is one of the most important factors in maintaining professionalism in journalism. Many media scholars and critics have investigated how news media become a tool of autocratic regimes and how to retain journalistic autonomy worldwide under such challenging circumstances (Milojević and Krstić, 2018). Advances in digital communications and the development of commercialization have made it more difficult for authoritarian states to control the press. However, political actors hold hostile attitudes toward reporters, even in democratic societies. The President of the United States, Donald Trump, has accused the media of disseminating false information. He has called the press “the enemy of the people”. Hong Kong Journalists association has warned that this messaging is sending the wrong signal to other countries that reporters can be verbally abused (*The Guardian*, 25th February 2017).

At the same time, civil society in authoritarian states is striving toward more freedom (Chan, 2018; George, 2012; Zhao, 2008). Journalists are promoting and protecting press freedom in docile media systems, such as those of China and Singapore. Hong Kong is an exceptional case that warrants attention. Hong Kong is a previously free society that has been returned to an authoritarian state. This situation provides a unique case for political communication scholars to examine how a state exercises control over media during such a political transition (Lee, 2015).

Since the return of Hong Kong to China, the consensus among observers, academics and journalists is that press freedom in Hong Kong has declined. According to the Freedom House 2020 rating, Hong Kong is “partly free” on the Global Freedom Index, with a score of 55/100. Hong Kong’s ranking for press freedom dropped to 80th in 2020 (Freedom House, 2020) from 18th in 2002 (HKJA, 2017).

Many media scholars and critics have analyzed the decline in press freedom in Hong Kong from a political economy perspective (Fung, 2007). Under the Sino-British Joint Declaration and the Basic Law, Hong Kong is guaranteed to retain its autonomy from the central government and have the right to freedom of speech and press. The central government is not supposed to exert any direct control over the Hong Kong news media. The strategy of the Chinese state since the early 1990s has been to co-opt the major Hong Kong media owners, many of whom are businessmen with vast interests in China. They are entitled to political appointments (Lai, 2007), and some are members of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Committee (Ma, 2007). Media owners’ newsroom interventions are subject to individual news media, but they are rare in terms of daily operations. Instead, media owners exercise indirect control through the assignment of managerial positions and the allocation of resources. Self-censorship has become a widespread practice (Lee, 2015).

Unlike mainland China, Hong Kong does not have a government censorship system for news content before publication. Continual negotiation between news media and state power is inevitable (Au, 2017; Lee, 2000). The literature on journalism has addressed the influence of political power on Hong Kong news media from the political economy perspective and has outlined the transformation of the Hong Kong media ownership structure. Studies have examined the central government’s response to the digital transformation and journalists’ reactions to political pressure (Lee and Chan, 2008a; Tsui and Lee, 2019).

However, there is a gap in the literature concerning the political influence of social practices and individual-level control on Hong Kong news media. This paper contributes to the discussion by analyzing the

anti-extradition bill movement as a critical turning point. The Chinese state control over Hong Kong news media went from co-opting media owners to taking comprehensive control. Second, this paper is the first to use the hierarchy of influences model to explain the control of the authoritarian state over the newsroom in a partly free society. We argue that the hierarchy of influences model is useful for exposing political control over media at various levels and their interactions. It is time to revisit this model and explore how such comprehensive control over news media developed in Hong Kong.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *The Change of Hong Kong Politics*

According to Siebert *et al.* (1963), social systems have significant influence over press systems. In *Four theories of the press*, Siebert *et al.* (1963) suggested that the news media are required to be a “servant of the state” (p. 3) under authoritarian regimes. The government exerts direct control over the press. The Soviet Communist theory extended these concepts, and the press media has been used as a propaganda tool in several countries, including China and the former Yugoslavia. In contrast, the libertarian theory asserts that the news media system is independent of government. It works as a watchdog, monitoring the government’s policies and administration and promoting democracy. The main task of journalists is to uncover the truth and inform the public.

After its return to China, Hong Kong fell under the rule of “one country, two systems.” Hong Kong has autonomy from the central government, and its citizens are guaranteed the freedom of press and speech, under constitutional protection. China has recently been called an example of networked authoritarianism (Chan, 2018). The

authoritarian state uses news media as an instrument to achieve the political aims of the Party-state in a digital era. Although China has undergone marketization and has become the world’s second-largest economy, there is no private ownership of news media. China lacks press freedom and has strict control over political information (Xu and Jin, 2017).

It has always been challenging for Hong Kong to exercise its autonomy and retain its press freedom. The Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) and half of the Legislative Council members are not elected through universal suffrage. The election process favors pro-establishment parties and candidates. In recent years, Beijing has taken a more proactive role in controlling the politics of Hong Kong. It has gradually increased its role in governing Hong Kong and its emphasis on the rule of “one country” (Hong Kong Journalist Association, 2017). In 2014, Beijing refused to fulfill the promise of universal suffrage in Hong Kong, and its control has expanded since the Umbrella Movement of 2014. In mid-2019, Hong Kong experienced the largest, most prolonged demonstrations in its history. The protests were initiated by the Hong Kong government’s effort to pass a controversial extradition amendment bill (Kaeding, 2017). The Hong Kong government finally deferred the bill; however, the late response did not ease the anger of Hong Kong people. Nearly 2 million people in Hong Kong participated in the demonstrations and requested that arrested citizens be discharged and that police brutality be investigated (Lee *et al.*, 2019). The demands have not been answered, and the demonstrations have remained vigorous.

The relationship between the Hong Kong government and news media worsened after the handover of Hong Kong, and press freedom has continued to decline ever since. The central government exerts indirect control over news media by co-opting news media owners, who

have business interests in China (Lee, 2014). At the same time, the Hong Kong government has adopted a more hostile attitude toward some of the press. For example, the Hong Kong government holds off-the-record briefings and release information only to the “trusted” media (Hong Kong Journalist Association, 2013). The continued focus on the political economy perspective in the literature has resulted in a lack of thorough analysis of other forms of political control over the media. Hong Kong is considered a partly free society, and, indeed, the relationship between its press and its government differs from that of an authoritarian state or a democracy.

This paper uses the hierarchy of influences model to illustrate press control in the anti-extradition movement, which is the most prolonged demonstration in Hong Kong history. The hierarchy of influences framework portrays the impact of different components on news content and organizes them on a continuum from smaller-scale individual factors to full-scale social system-level factors (Franklin, Hamer, Hanna, Kinsey and Richardson, 2005). The hierarchy of influences model can help us understand the current situation in the Hong Kong media landscape as it comprises five levels of influence: individuals, routine practices, media organizations, social institutions, and social systems. From this perspective, we analyze how factors at the higher system level relate to the factors operating at other levels.

2.2. Individual-Level Influences

At the center of the hierarchy of influences is the individual level. It involves the attributes of individual communicators (Reese and Shoemaker, 2016), which are considerable. In the United States, there is an assumption that individuals hold a portion of attributes (e.g., partisanship) that suppress an independent lack of bias. Sociologists and journalism experts continue to presume that individual qualities make a

difference in the sustainability of the larger profession. Several studies have suggested that gender, age, education, and personal background contribute to distinctions in news content; however, few studies have examined political power as the source of individual-level influence (Weaver *et al.*, 2007).

Scholars have found that in terms of suppressing the independence of reporters at the individual level, economic constraints and low salaries predict relatively low professionalism among reporters in newly democratic societies. Newsroom workers experience harsh social inequalities and job insecurities in democracies (Hughes *et al.*, 2016; Mellado and Humanes, 2012), as they generally have lower salary packages and work as temporary labor. Job satisfaction and job security affect a journalist’s autonomy (Milivojević, 2012). Is the reporter’s experience similar in the partly free society of Hong Kong?

Violence, threats, and harassment also constrain journalistic autonomy and impede reporters from serving democracy (Waisbord, 2013). Reich and Hanitzsch (2013) suggested that physical harassment and attacks on reporters pose a threat to journalistic autonomy. Personal threats, in many cases, aim to silence reporters and news media. Systematic violence and intimidation damages the freedom of expression in general (Waisbord, 2002). Studies on personal harassment and threats against journalists in democratic societies are frightening; however, there is evidence that media professionals are being attacked. Many such cases have been seen in Central and Eastern Europe (Chalaby, 2000; Nerone, 1994).

This paper examines how political power is exercised at the individual level in the journalistic field during the Hong Kong anti-extradition movement. We are interested in how political power operates in terms of working conditions, physical attacks, and threats.

RQ1: How has political power been exercised at the individual-level in the journalistic field during the anti-extradition movement?

2.3. Routine-Level Influences

Reporters are also influenced by routine-level structures of activity based on the promptness required by their jobs. These structures extend from news beliefs, such as that impartiality itself is a “strategic ritual” (Tuchman, 1972). Pack reporting, the reversed pyramid composition style, and story outlines (e.g., “horserace” inclusion) have been merged to encourage crowd interaction and increase the number of clicks. Routines are most easily spotted at the newsroom level. It is important to examine how political power influences newsroom routines. As Entman (2004) mentioned, top government officials always set the news frames and influence the decisions of journalists and news organizations. Newsrooms are semi-autonomous and tend to rely on the narratives provided by official sources. However, exceptional conditions can break this routine; investigative news reports and breaking news events are two examples (Lawrence, 2012).

News routines help to fulfill the needs of the press and address the concerns of the audience. These routines constantly change to maintain acceptability and value in the eyes of the audience. Technology is one factor. The digital environment allows the news media to present information quickly and with greater user participation. In the past, audiences were an imagined community. The reading habits or responses of a target audience can now be verified by online activity. Reporters of both traditional and new media have developed new routines to monitor information, verify stories, interact with each other, and engage with the audience. Coddington (2015) called this dynamic “second-hand

story-telling”. The new routine reconciles the tension between the professional imperative of control and a more open participatory news space online. In the past, news values and occupational norms were seen as routine-level phenomena. This paper investigates how political power is exercised at the routine level in the journalistic field in terms of how governments and organizations alter the routines of journalists.

RQ2: How has political power been exercised at the routine level in the journalistic field during the anti-extradition movement?

2.4. Organizational-Level Influences

The organizational level refers to how news is delivered inside bodies that have their own approaches and financial objectives. Organizations must equate business with the concerns of the target audience. The implementation of policy through the hierarchy of leadership means that jobs inside the organization outline can be recognized through ethnographic observation; however, concerns are frequently aired by media economists, who discuss ownership concentration, cross-possession, and incompatible objectives among the news, amusement, and nonmedia segments of larger firms (e.g., acquisition by Amazon proprietor Jeff Bezos of *The Washington Post*).

Reese and Shoemaker (2016) noted that tensions at the organizational level are revealed when a society faces a crisis and changes. Lee and Chan (2008b) argued that although Hong Kong has a strong tradition of journalistic professionalism, self-censorship increased after the handover to the mainland government, which put more political pressure on local media. News managers try to minimize conflicts by assigning sensitive stories to less experienced journalists and warning them ambiguously to “be smart” or justifying their instructions with a

professional rationale (“be objective”). Since the so-called Umbrella Revolution, news organizations have faced more significant challenges in smoothing over conflicts with owners, many of whom have business ties to the mainland. It is crucial to examine how news media practice self-censorship during times of civil unrest.

RQ3: How has political power been exercised at the organizational level in the journalistic field during the anti-extradition movement?

2.5. Social Institution Influences

Social institutions refer to the “additional media” level, which concerns the impact of non-news media and communication. These institutions included public relations, advertising, and ground-breaking news sources. Researchers have reconsidered this jargon to become more theoretically advanced. They now use the term “social-institutional” level to encapsulate the impact of media associations, which operate in a manner comparable to larger institutions and have organized relationships with various establishments, both political and economic.

We are interested in examining how various media organizations interact with other institutions, such as the state, public relations, and advertising. The news media is affected by its structured connections with other major institutions, and there is a spectrum of connections for investigation. Benson (2004) urged researchers to engage in the sociology of the media system. Such analysis focuses on the journalistic field and investigates the institutional components of the media system. It refers to the meso-level analysis of economic, political, and cultural factors in the journalistic field as a whole.

RQ4: How has political power been exercised at the social-institutional level in the journalistic field during the anti-extradition movement?

2.6. Social System

The macro-level was initially called “ideological” to convey the expansive feeling of “ideas in the service of interests”. It seeks to answer questions over how the various levels cooperate to create an anticipated ideological outcome. Journalism at this level is a major aspect of a natural, sociocultural entity, catching a portion of the vital investigation of news, as done by, for instance, Gitlin (2003) and the Glasgow University Media Group (1976). This level has been renamed the “social system” level, which better apprehends the larger, more perplexing frameworks within which journalism works. It takes into account a worldwide viewpoint rather than the culturally bounded work of ideological examinations.

This level concerns the ideological processes and traditional theories of society and power as they relate to media. The new media landscape has disrupted the very definition of journalism and dismantled its boundaries with other fields (Carlson and Lewis, 2015). This disruption can still be understood from a macro-level perspective. As media fields police their boundaries and defend their professional prerogatives, they seek to repair and maintain the journalistic “paradigm” (see, e.g., Reese, 2001). This ideological process captures the social system level of analysis.

From the political economy perspective, journalism is a reflection of class and power. Herman and Chomsky (1988) asserted that journalists cannot work independently in the propaganda model. Reporters must serve the interests of their sources, advertisers, and class interests. Hegemony theory suggests that reporters enjoy some degree of

autonomy, but the media ultimately serve the interest of elites by obtaining the consent of the masses. Ideology explains how social systems work in the service of broad corporate and government interests.

RQ5: How has political power been exercised at the social system level in the journalistic field during the anti-extradition movement?

3. Methods

We conducted in-depth interviews to make sense of journalists as social actors and study the rhetorical construction of their perspectives. Conducting in-depth interviews is less time-consuming than ethnographic observation; however, interviews also have limitations. The participants in our study come from the media and are very familiar with interview tactics; studies have suggested that journalists do interviews with great caution. All the interviewees in this study chose to remain anonymous to protect their identities. Each interview lasts between half an hour and one hour. All the interviews are recorded and transcribed.

We interviewed 20 reporters, who work as leading journalists or editorial managers in various media houses in Hong Kong. They come from Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK), *Apple Daily* (蘋果日報), *Oriental Daily News* (東方日報), *Ming Pao* (明報), *South China Morning Post*, TVB, Cable TV, *HK01* (香港01), Now TV and *Stand News* (立場新聞). The selection of news media was based on circulation, popularity, and impact. These organizations are regarded as the most influential news media outlets in Hong Kong (Chan *et al.*, 2019). We included the leading broadcast, print, and online media in Hong Kong, and they represent different political camps. We sought to

reflect the current situation from diverse positions on the media spectrum (Chan *et al.*, 2019; Chan *et al.*, 2017; Luqiu, 2017).

4. Results

4.1. Individual-Level Influences: Low Salaries and Attacks

Regarding RQ1, we found that political power has been exercised in the form of physical and verbal abuse on journalists. Attacking and threatening were considered exceptional in the past. Hong Kong reporters have faced frequent physical and verbal harassment since the beginning of anti-government protests in 2019. Most of our interviewees recalled police violence while they were reporting on the front lines of the protests.

Their testimonies were supported by a study conducted by the Hong Kong Journalists Association that revealed that the police unleashed physical and verbal abuse on journalists during the recent political protests. The police also deliberately obstructed news reporting. More than half of the 222 surveyed journalists interviewed claimed that they had been treated violently by the police on five or more occasions (HKJA, 2020). Many of our interviewees reported that they had been pushed by the police or pepper-sprayed. One of the interviewees had red, itchy skin after being exposed to tear gas.

Our interviewees also revealed that colleagues and acquaintances from other news organizations have been doxed and subjected to online harassment. The “Little Pink”, anonymous online pro-establishment activists, have threatened these journalists over the phone and online by leaking personal information. One journalist said, “My telephone number and personal information were leaked. A strange man called me, abused me using foul language, and threatened me.” He added that his wife was very worried and had asked him to take precautions.

Political power has also been exercised through the worsening of working conditions. The Hong Kong government did not support the development of media or encourage positive competition. Lower wages have been another problem facing media professionals. Frontline reporters in our study said that they work under tremendous pressure with low salary packages. One interviewee said that he is considering leaving the industry once the anti-extradition movement is over. He graduated from one of the best universities in Hong Kong, and his hourly rate is just above minimum wage. The interviewees generally found reporters' wages to be very unsatisfactory. One stated, "Our staff worked very hard to report on the anti-government protests over the past year, but they only received half of a monthly income as a bonus."

One experienced journalists in our interview suggested that low wages have forced good, experienced journalists to leave the industry. This issue is leading to a deterioration in the quality of the news.

4.2. Routine-Level Influences: Frequent Press Conferences and Denial of Information Access

Regarding RQ2, we found that the Hong Kong government uses press conferences as an effective tool to control the news narrative. For instance, during the protests, the Hong Kong police have held routine press conferences almost every day to spin stories to fit their narratives. "I have a bad feeling about the police press conferences," a journalist said. "I had to keep reporting their point of view, which did not hold any news value. We had no choice but to write their versions as they hold the power. I always struggled when I attended their press conferences."

Despite guaranteed freedom of the press under the Basic Law in Hong Kong, journalists find it difficult to access information in the SAR. A survey by the HKJA in May 2020 showed that Hong Kong press freedom had dropped to a record low in the eyes of the general public

and newsroom practitioners (HKJA, 2020). More than half of our interviewees expressed concern over difficulties in accessing government information on a daily basis. Government officials are refusing to disclose important information, including the names and titles of police officers. Even access to data on the marital status, birthdate, and voter registration of officials, which used to be public, has become difficult for journalists to obtain.

4.3. Organizational Level: Self-Censorship and Resource Allocation

Regarding RQ3, several interviewees admitted that they practice self-censorship. They sometimes select or omit sources on political grounds for their stories. This finding is particularly revealing in the case of pro-establishment media organizations. For instance, one interviewee suggested that pro-establishment reporters were banned from quoting blacklisted pro-democracy experts. Instead, they were encouraged to interview pro-establishment experts. The editors justify these practices by stating that they want to include diverse voices in the stories and claiming that it is more objective because the pro-democracy experts' comments are extreme. The interviewees said that the selection of sources tightened after the anti-government protests broke out in 2019.

Reporters from pro-establishment organizations are not allowed to incorporate user-generated comments or videos from pro-democracy media. The editors justify these practices by stating that user-generated and pro-democracy media content is not professional enough to be included. Several interviewees hinted that their senior reporters and editor-in-chief change their news content that touches on sensitive issues and add the viewpoints of pro-establishment parties without consulting them.

In the case of public service broadcasting, the situation is more complicated. RTHK, which was founded in 1928 and is sometimes

compared to the BBC, enjoys a high degree of editorial independence. The editor-in-chief only gives general directions to the staff, and interventions from commercial interests are prevented.

However, RTHK has recently found itself at the center of a political storm due to its critical stance on the government and the police. The government has reportedly cut funding for the broadcaster to cover a shorter period, and the grant could now vary from year to year. Our interviewees revealed that RTHK faces a staff crunch and resource scarcity, and no new recruitment of talent or acquisition of resources has been made. The interviewees from RTHK admitted that they do not have resources to do investigative reporting, although their staff still strives to do it. For instance, the RTHK piece “721 Yuen Long Nightmare” won international recognition and raised public awareness of the relationship between the police and the transnational organized crime syndicate called the “triad”.

4.4. Social Institutions: Economic and Political Influences

Regarding RQ4, political power has been exercised in the form of control over media at the social-institutional level by co-opting advertisers, political actors, and government officials.

Economic Pressure from Advertisers. Our interviewees explained that corporate interests are well aligned with political interests in Hong Kong. It was an open secret that news media routinely face political pressure from corporate giants in the form of advertisement withdrawal. Pro-democracy media organizations have been boycotted by large companies, who have pulled their advertisements from the columns, for at least a decade because of the news organizations’ political stances. Recently, more companies have joined the movement against daily and other media organizations such as *Stand News*.

Political Pressure from Political Actors. Journalists working in pro-democracy media organizations also face other kinds of boycotts. The interviewees revealed that pro-establishment companies and party officials refuse to talk to them for stories or withhold information. The interviewees from pro-democracy media said that boycotts from advertisers and political actors are more illuminating during the anti-government protests.

The political actors always use their positions to develop a relationship with the senior reporters or journalists from the management team. They seek to spin the news stories by purposely leaking information to the journalists. Our interviewees suggested that the police in managerial positions sometimes talk to the senior reporters or ask them to arrange exclusive interviews to express their views. This is consistent with Örnebring’s (2013) argument that personal relationships between politicians and journalists may influence journalistic content. It is an example of the normalization of political communication. Pfetsch and Voltmer (2012) warned that such relationships should be treated carefully and tactically. The relationships are ambiguous and under continual negotiation between different players’ trust and distrust (Mancini, 1993).

With the decline in press freedom, some news programs have come under direct attack. For instance, RTHK found itself in trouble because of its long-running political satire show called *Headliner*. It was allegedly mocking the Hong Kong police force. The Hong Kong Police Chief Chris Tang wrote a public letter to the director of RTHK slamming the show (*Time*, 20th May 2020). Communications Authority, which regulates the city’s broadcast and telecom sectors, published a report criticizing the broadcaster. The Commerce Bureau then announced an unprecedented, government-led review of RTHK’s governance and management. The interviewees from RTHK admitted

that they are under tremendous political pressure to handle the complaints.

Economic Awards from the SAR Government. The Hong Kong government often uses public funds to push their political agenda through large-scale media advertisement campaigns and reward the pro-establishment media outlets. For example, the government spent more than HK\$3 million on advertisements in media to promote positive images of the government during the anti-government protests.

4.5. Ideological Forces

Regarding RQ5, we found that political power has been exercised through ideological force. Audiences with pro-establishment stances have lodged complaints against RTHK. The interviewees from RTHK said that they have had to toil over grievances from pro-establishment viewers, who have alleged that the broadcaster ran anti-government coverage during the 2019 protests. Despite winning local and international journalism awards for their news reports, RTHK continues to face heavy criticism from disgruntled viewers. The interviewees said that they have become more cautious and try to maintain their professionalism in an effort to combat the political pressure.

In recent years, China has developed a new version of nationalism, whose activists are called the “Little Pink”. It is different from the masculinist nationalism embodied in the “angry youth” of the past (Dumbaugh, n.d.; Ruan, 2016; Zhang, 2016). “Little Pink” refers to a soft, emotional discourse. In the case of the Hong Kong anti-government protests, RTHK experienced political pressure from this new version of nationalistic discourse in the form of formal complaints and online harassment.

RTHK’s recent fate has spread panic among other journalists. Viewers and listeners can lodge complaints to Hong Kong’s

Communication Authority against television and radio broadcasters regarding aired content. These complaints can affect the broadcasting licenses of media organizations. Our interviewees said that they had received complaints from their audiences, and some offered feedback that can help improve the programs. However, a large portion of these complaints took the form of political pressure.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This paper has adopted a hierarchy of influences model to show how journalists’ autonomy is being dismantled on all levels in the partly free society of Hong Kong during the anti-extradition movement. This paper contributes to the literature by demonstrating the effectiveness of the model in illustrating how political control has been exercised from the macro- to the micro-level. Secondly, it exposes how the media has become a battlefield and how a critical event can expedite change. The anti-extradition movement has proved to be a critical point for press control. Many interviewees felt that comprehensive control over the news media had become more evident since the protests broke out. Future studies should examine which factors in a crisis most contribute to changes in political control over the media.

Thirdly, this study offers another approach to the analysis of political suppression of the media. Previous studies have used the political economy perspective to analyze the autonomy of Hong Kong media and treated self-censorship as an influential practice. By contrast, this paper has shown how the influence of the state, political actors, media owners, advertisers, and the audience have aligned to undercut journalistic professionalism and autonomy. It has shown that co-opting media owners is no longer the most important strategy for controlling media frames or stances. Fourthly, this study demonstrates the most

influential incentives, informal exchanges, pressures, and threats facing the media and clarifies why news content is inevitably affected at every level.

At the individual level, the state exercises its control through police brutality against reporters. Hong Kong has been viewed as a police state since the anti-extradition protests began. Journalists are severely underpaid and overworked. Reporting is not rewarding in terms of working conditions. This situation is forcing young news media workers to leave the profession. At the routine level, the state has tried to control the press by controlling the flow of information by holding frequent press conferences and restricting access to information. At the organizational level, journalistic principles are used to justify the practice of self-censorship. At the social- institutional level, the state maintains corrupt relationships with key players, such as advertisers and political actors, resulting in the abuse of power. Through economic incentives, the key players align with pro-establishment media and against pro-democracy media to support their interests. Ideological influences are growing, and they should be investigated from the audience's perspective and through content analysis.

This paper has several limitations. We focused on the tactics of various players to undercut journalistic autonomy. We did not discuss journalists' strategies to retain their independence. The relationship between professionalism and political control is always under negotiation. It is very interesting and important to review how the journalists interact with different players. Secondly, this paper relied on in-depth interviews to understand the political control over news media at five levels. Participant observation could be added to future studies to make the analysis more comprehensive. Thirdly, this paper used Hong Kong as a backdrop to discuss the application of the hierarchy of influences model on press freedom. It lacks generalizability, and more

research should be done in other countries to see how political control is exercised in other societies that are free, partly free, or without freedom.

To conclude, the anti-extradition movement in Hong Kong provides a special context for scholars to examine press control in a time of political crisis. It exposes the corruption of many different parties, who have aligned with the state to exercise control over the news press. This development is worrying to many media scholars and critics because it reflects a structured change in press control at all levels, and the trend cannot be altered easily. Future research should examine what counterforces may sustain or rebuild journalistic autonomy.

Note

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