



IN THE FIRING LINE:

*THE CRACKDOWN ON MEDIA
FREEDOM IN HONG KONG*

HONG KONG
WATCH

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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FOREWORD

In order to impose their rule, every known system of authoritarian government has moved decisively to suppress freedom of expression in general and media freedom in particular. In Hong Kong this has meant a breathtakingly rapid destruction of freedoms that made the former British colony a beacon of press freedom in Asia and created a flourishing international media centre.

In Mainland China freedom of expression has never been tolerated; yet the government in Beijing had explicitly promised that Hong Kong could retain an unshackled media and that it would be spared the controls applied elsewhere in the country. Like many other promises made by the ruling Communist Party, this one has now been ditched and in its place has come a clampdown that has all but extinguished a free media.

Beijing, aided and abetted by its handpicked local allies, is not even slightly concerned by the fact that destroying media freedom in Hong Kong also slashes away vital underpinnings of what had been a thriving centre for international business. It is equally important to note that while undermining the strategic commercial advantages that created economic prosperity, the authorities have taken a conscious decision to also undermine the spirit of Hong Kong, underpinned by liberty of a kind never seen elsewhere in China.

This report meticulously documents the way in which media freedom has been destroyed, chronicling the events that have led to this state of affairs and providing individual witness testimony which brings these events into sharp focus.

Exposing the way in which the Chinese dictatorship behaves when it has the opportunity to destroy freedom serves as a vital reminder to the rest of the world of the dangers posed by the Communist regime as it spreads its influence in the international community.

Stephen Vines

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Media freedom in Hong Kong has been almost completely dismantled. This report draws on interviews with over 10 journalists in exile, alongside reports by all the leading press associations in Hong Kong, to detail the variety of ways the crackdown on the press has developed since 2019, including the following:

- Since the imposition of the National Security Law on 1 July 2020, almost all independent and pro-democracy media outlets have been forced to close, 18 journalists have been arrested and at least 12 journalists and media executives are currently in jail awaiting trial.
- The Hong Kong Government is using a combination of the National Security Law and antiquated common law charges like ‘sedition’ under the Crimes Ordinance to wage lawfare against journalists.
- The Hong Kong Police Force, under the pre-text of the National Security Law, raided the newsrooms of pro-democracy publications *Apple Daily* and *Stand News* and the two publications were forced to close in 2021.
- The public broadcaster Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) has lost all editorial independence and objectivity, axed at least 12 programmes, deleted most of its archive from more than a year ago, deleted its Twitter history and banned the audience from commenting on its Twitter page.
- Media groups are exercising extensive self-censorship.
- New restrictions on access to public records have been introduced.
- The Hong Kong Police Force has introduced a new definition of “journalist”, effectively imposing restrictions on freelance reporters, online journalists, student journalists and citizen journalists.
- The government proposes to introduce a “fake news” law which will further restrict media freedom. This may be a part of Article 23 domestic national security legislation.
- Foreign correspondents face increasing challenges securing or renewing visas.
- Pro-Beijing media continues to attack and harass critics.
- Police violence in 2019 resulted in shocking violations of human rights against journalists and media workers. Journalists who previously covered police brutality during these protests have found themselves targeted in the current crackdown.

The situation for media freedom in Hong Kong is dire. The international community must speak out, especially to protect those journalists in Hong Kong who continue to try, courageously, to carve out some space, however limited, and to seek the release of those in prison or facing prosecution.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the International Community

Hong Kong Watch urges the international community to act in response to the dismantling of media freedom in Hong Kong. In particular, we call on the international community to undertake the following steps:

1. Increase monitoring of the situation and continue to speak out against violations of Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Article 27 of Hong Kong's Basic Law.
2. Regularly raise the cases of journalists and media executives currently in prison in Hong Kong, and demand their release.
3. Engage international mechanisms to monitor the situation, particularly through the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression and opinion and other relevant UN Special Procedures.
4. Issue emergency travel documents and visas for journalists at risk of arrest as part of the ongoing crackdown.
5. Consider punitive measures to pressure the Hong Kong Government to recommit to upholding the Basic Law which guarantees a free press, including targeted Magnitsky sanctions.

To the UK Government

1. Consider what material support it can offer to Hong Kong journalists who have fled the city and are now resident in the UK and are keen to continue to work and support Cantonese speaking media.

To the United States Congress

1. Pass the Hong Kong Safe Harbor Act to provide direct support to journalists and a lifeboat out of the city.

To the Australian Government

1. Consider introducing a bespoke visa route for Hong Kong journalists or freelance reporters at risk of arrest.

To the Canadian Government

1. Consider introducing a bespoke visa route for Hong Kong journalists or freelance reporters at risk of arrest.

To the EU Commission and EU Member States

1. Implement the European Parliament joint-resolution on Hong Kong and introduce emergency visas for Hong Kong journalists and freelance reporters at risk of arrest.
2. Consider what material support it can offer to develop Cantonese language media outside of Hong Kong.

INTRODUCTION

On 7 February 2022, a coalition of 22 governments from around the world issued a statement expressing their “deep concern at the Hong Kong and mainland authorities’ attacks on freedom of the press and their suppression of independent local media in Hong Kong.” The Media Freedom Coalition, which includes the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, Canada, the Czech Republic, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Lithuania, New Zealand, the Netherlands and ten other countries, said that “since the enactment of the National Security Law in June 2020, authorities targeted and suppressed independent media in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region” and that this has “eroded the protected rights and freedoms set out in the Basic Law and undermines China’s obligations under the Sino-British Joint Declaration”. The result, they concluded, is “the near-complete disappearance of local independent media outlets in Hong Kong.” (FCDO, 2022)

In its 2021 annual report, *Freedom in Tatters*, the Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA) concludes that the media in Hong Kong “faces an unprecedented shock” and “the room for press freedom is shrinking”. (HKJA, 2021, p.5) The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) comes to the same conclusion in a 2022 report titled *Lights Out: Is this the end for Hong Kong’s Media?*, noting that (IFJ, 2022, p.3) “media freedom is clinging to life in Hong Kong, the victim of political crackdowns, an erosion of the rule of law, and the intrusion of ideology into civil and economic life.” Reporters Without Borders, in a report published in December 2021 titled *The Great Leap Backwards of Journalism in China*, conclude that “the principle of press freedom, although guaranteed until 2047 in the Basic Law that commands the territory, is more threatened than ever” and is “in free fall”. (Reporters Without Borders, 2021e)

The Media Freedom Coalition, the HKJA, the IFJ and Reporters Without Borders are right. Over the past three years pressure on Hong Kong’s media has intensified. Examples of this process include:

1. Police aggression, intimidation and violence towards reporters during the protests in 2019;
2. The forced closure of Hong Kong’s last remaining pro-democracy Chinese language publications *Apple Daily* and *Stand News* in 2021 and *Citizen News* in 2022;
3. The mass sacking by i-Cable of over 40 of their top journalists;
4. The dramatic overhaul at Hong Kong’s public broadcaster Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK);
5. The tightening of access to public records and the arrest and prosecution of freelance RTHK journalist Bao Choy for searching car licence plate records while researching a television documentary about the 2019 mob attacks in Yuen Long;
6. Financial coercion against leading pro-democracy media outlets;
7. The denial of visas for some foreign journalists;
8. The possible introduction of a “fake news” law.

Media freedom in Hong Kong is being dismantled. This is having a chilling effect. In November 2021, the Foreign Correspondents' Club (FCC) in Hong Kong published a survey of its correspondent and journalist members. According to the FCC's statement (FCC, 2021), "the results revealed widespread uncertainty among members over what the media is and is not allowed to report on since the imposition of the National Security Law in June 2020, and concern over the further erosion of press freedom ... The vast majority of respondents reported an overall deterioration in the working environment for journalists, noting in particular the unwillingness of sources to be quoted and the need for reporters to self-censor their writing or delete images."

The survey revealed that 84% of respondents said that the situation had deteriorated since the imposition of the National Security Law, 76% were "very concerned" about the potential introduction of a "fake news" law, and 77% were concerned about digital or physical surveillance. At least 46% – almost half of those surveyed – said they might leave Hong Kong. Within that, 34% said they were considering leaving and 12% already had plans to do so. One Hong Kong-born reporter who had previously worked for the *South China Morning Post*, Yupina Ng, wrote in an article for Al Jazeera: "The law had a chilling effect on the most basic civil liberties of Hong Kong residents and made it almost impossible for journalists like me to do their jobs." (Ng, 2021)

This report, *In the Firing Line*, intends to unpack these various developments, shed further light on the deteriorating situation, and mobilise the international community to speak out for media freedom in Hong Kong. The title was chosen deliberately to reflect both the physical violence to which media workers – journalists, photographers and camera crews – have been subjected, particularly during the protests in 2019, and the fact that so many in the media in Hong Kong have lost their jobs. In researching this report, Hong Kong Watch has interviewed several former journalists who lived and worked in Hong Kong, including the former RTHK broadcaster Stephen Vines, the former editor of the *South China Morning Post* Mark Clifford, former *Ming Pao* reporter Matthew Leung, former TVB news presenter Chris Wong as well as several other former Hong Kong journalists in exile, including former *Apple Daily* reporters, who wish to remain anonymous for security reasons. All paint a picture of rapid and dramatic decline in media freedom in Hong Kong. At least 20 media workers, including reporters and editors, have been arrested since the imposition of the National Security Law in 2020, and at least a dozen have been charged or are awaiting trial, according to the IFJ. (IFJ, 2022) We owe it to them to speak out.

CHAPTER 1: THE ANTI-EXTRADITION PROTESTS AND THE CRACKDOWN ON PRESS FREEDOM BEFORE THE NATIONAL SECURITY LAW

From June 2019 until early 2020, Hong Kong was rocked by mass protests, initially sparked by a proposed law to allow extradition of criminal suspects from the city to mainland China. On 9 June 2019, it is estimated that at least one million people marched in the city, and a week later, on 16 June, it is believed that two million people took to the streets.

The Hong Kong Police Force responded to the protest movement with disproportionate and indiscriminate brutality, deploying tear gas, pepper spray, water cannon, rubber bullets, beating people severely with batons and causing many severe injuries. As the movement progressed, reporters, photographers and camera crews became targets for the police. This chapter documents the rising intimidation of journalists, alongside the ways that the Hong Kong government began to curtail free expression and accurate reporting in key media outlets including RTHK and TVB.

Of the 222 journalists who responded to a HKJA survey on “violence against journalists when covering public order events”, only 28 said they had not been treated violently. Another 141 reported experiencing police violence while reporting, including physical and verbal abuse and deliberate obstruction. (HKJA, 2020) Amnesty International documented some of the police brutality in a report titled *How Not To Police A Protest: Unlawful Use of Force by Hong Kong Police*, in which it noted that “footage from Commercial Radio News and RTHK Video News show police

officers using batons to disperse journalists on the night of 12 June at Justice Drive.” Amnesty International reported that “police officers used aggressive tactics to obstruct journalists on site, even after the journalists had made their identities clear to police.” (Amnesty International, 2019)

One former *South China Morning Post* photojournalist, a foreign national, told Hong Kong Watch of several occasions where he was teargassed at close range, even being deliberately targeted as a journalist.

“I was in Lockhart Road in Causeway Bay on one occasion, with two other photographers, and we saw the police punching a guy and pushing him into a van. I took pictures of the guy being punched, and the riot police turned around and sprayed a gel at me, which went over every part of my body. My camera was dripping with this gel. And then it started to burn. My whole body was burning.”

On another occasion, the same photojournalist was teargassed.

“I was in Happy Valley following the police who were chasing a group of frontline protesters. A few of us stopped by the side of the road to take a break. We were sitting on the ground, and we had taken off our gear, our masks and helmets and other protective gear. The police came and sprayed teargas directly at us. The hatred that the police showed against the media was shocking.”

Matthew Leung, who was a reporter for *Ming Pao* at the time, was on the frontlines during the protests and was shot at least four times with pepper balls:

“The first time was in Yuen Long about a week after the 21 July mob attack. I was going up an escalator trying to get a top shot, heard a pop and found my safety goggles were sprayed with powder. If I had not been wearing goggles I would have been shot in the eye,”

“Then after the first day of protests at Polytechnic University, over 30 journalists were held inside the cordon including ones who I considered important. After most of them were released around 5am, we were starting to leave and two police officers who appeared mentally out of control yelled at us to leave. I yelled back “we are leaving,” and got hit. The other times it was just collateral damage, when the police were firing at the crowd without proper justification.”

“In September 2019, I was working outside Mong Kong Police Station and had an altercation with a masked police officer. I was shoved to the ground on purpose and a fellow photojournalist witnessed how it happened. We were divided by at least 30 policemen. Media liaison officers escorted that masked officer back to the station while I demanded to know that officer’s identity.”

Mr Leung was also arrested on one occasion. He recalled:

“There were a few journalists arrested during a protest in Mong Kok on 6 September 2020. I was among them with another reporter of Truth Media Hong Kong (TMHK), arrested for possession of gas masks. They claimed those are

‘strategic commodities’, which are illegal to import and export but not illegal to possess. It started with an altercation between me and a sergeant, then he spotted my gas mask and asked me to go inside the cordon. I was arrested and mirandized, but it seemed the arresting officer did not know what he was arresting me for. After the cops talked to the Police Public Relations Branch (PPRB), I was released on scene unconditionally and they handed me my gas mask back.

The other reporter from TMHK was taken to Hung Hom Police Station as he was detained as part of a mass arrest. He was also released three hours later after a superintendent talked to PPRB.

Those were plainly false arrests just to obstruct us doing our job. They knew it was within our rights to have those kind of equipment, otherwise they should not have released us. But there were citizen journalists in the same situation who did get charged.”

Stephen Vines, a distinguished British journalist and broadcaster who presented programmes on RTHK, wrote for the *Hong Kong Free Press*, *The Guardian*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Independent*, contributed to the BBC, was previously editor of the now defunct *Eastern Express* and first moved to Hong Kong in 1987 as *The Observer*’s foreign correspondent, told Hong Kong Watch that in the 2019 protests, he had “never before seen the Hong Kong police being quite so rude to journalists”. There was, with some exceptions, still a “distinction” between how the police treated local Hong Kong journalists and foreigners, he said, and he did not directly experience any obstruction when he showed his press accreditation, but he experienced verbal abuse from the police:

“Local Hong Kong-born colleagues of mine were treated far worse. They were required to show their identity cards, intimidated, banged in the ribs and the police ostentatiously took down their details,” he recalled.

On 7 September 2019, police fired pepper spray at a group of retreating journalists, including freelance reporter Holmes Chan who worked for *Hong Kong Free Press*. Chan said:

“At least one of those bursts hit me squarely in the face, arms and chest. I wore a reflective press vest, and did not have protective gear on my face except for my helmet, which also read ‘press.’”

Despite being immediately treated by volunteer medics, Chan said he had trouble keeping his eyes open and struggled to stay upright. He ended up in a hospital emergency room with a “chemical eye injury”. (Guardian, 2019a)

On 29 September 2019, an Indonesian journalist, Vebey Mega Indah, was on a footbridge in Wan Chai district reporting on the protests and the police brutality, when she was hit in her right eye by a projectile fired by the police. (Hong Kong Free Press, 2019) Despite wearing a high-visibility jacket labelled “PRESS”, and protective goggles and helmet, she has been left partially blinded. She recalled seeing the police suddenly waving their weapons towards the media, and heard someone shout “*kei che, kei che*” (“journalists, journalists”).

“I saw them taking aim and I heard someone say, ‘Don’t aim at us!’ and before I could react I saw the projectile coming,” she said.

She collapsed and lay bleeding on the ground, her eyeball ruptured. (Guardian, 2019b)

On 8 September 2019, the FCC issued a statement strongly condemning “the increasing number of incidents involving police violence against journalists covering protests in Hong Kong. Assaults of journalists are becoming more serious, undermining the media’s ability to do their jobs and Hong Kong’s commitment to freedom of the press.” The FCC expressed “grave concern” regarding “multiple eyewitness reports and widely circulating video footage that appear to show police officers spraying pepper spray at close range at numerous reporters and photographers ... including spraying at least two journalists directly in the eyes. Accounts appear to show journalists with press identification—clearly marked vests and helmets—in an area with no protesters directly present near the scene. They did not appear to be interfering with police operations.” Such actions by the Hong Kong Police Force, the FCC said, “are unacceptable and constitute a violation of the right under Hong Kong law for journalists to cover protests free of intimidation or violence by authorities.” (FCC, 2019)

The FCC called for an independent, thorough and transparent commission of inquiry to investigate all violence and intimidation against journalists in Hong Kong, and urged the Commissioner of Police to publicly address the concerns and “clearly state that the HKPF respects freedom of the press and the right of journalists to cover events, including police operations, unfettered and free of violence and threats.” It noted that “the repeated and consistent reports of police violence against journalists covering the protests have become too many for the Hong Kong

government and the international community to ignore and seem to be increasing in frequency.”

In May 2020, the Committee to Protect Journalists issued a statement, calling on the Hong Kong Police Force to “stop attacking and harassing journalists” and “ensure their safety while covering protests in the city”, following the arrest of student reporters, both secondary school students, from an online news outlet called *Student Depth Media* and an incident in which an *Apple Daily* reporter was pepper sprayed and choked while being restrained by police, despite having a press vest and her press pass visible. (CPJ, 2020)

In June 2020, a year after the protests, both the HKJA and the IFJ called on the Hong Kong Police Force to discuss how police violence against journalists could be reduced, but with no success. (IFJ, 2020a)

Case study: RTHK

Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK), Hong Kong's public service broadcaster, was previously widely respected for objective and independent reporting, and quality content. Although it is publicly-funded and its staff are considered civil servants, it operated from the late 1970s until recently independently of government, in a similar way to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). That started to change, however, after the 2019 protests, and over the course of the past two years it has been subjected to severe censorship, major staff changes, the cancellation of several of its major programmes and its transformation from objective and independent public service broadcaster to government-controlled propaganda outfit.

Stephen Vines, who worked at RTHK for many years and presented several RTHK programmes, including *Morning Brew* and *The Pulse*, told Hong Kong Watch that in 2019 the pro-Beijing camp became seriously "exercised" about RTHK.

"They would not vote funding through, they put a hold on plans for us to move into a new premises, they periodically published editorials accusing RTHK of being a 'disloyal organisation' and the general undercurrent became more hostile," he said.

IFJ confirms this, noting that "the pro-Beijing and pro-police camps regularly accused RTHK of being biased in favour of the demonstrators against the police." The government's Communications Authority was reportedly "deluged with complaints against RTHK by pro-China activists, who were particularly upset about an episode of a satirical show called *Headliner*, which poked fun at the Hong Kong police force." (IFJ, 2022)

Yvonne Tong and the infamous WHO interview

In March 2020, as the Covid-19 pandemic was beginning to spread across the globe, RTHK reporter Yvonne Tong interviewed a World Health Organisation (WHO) advisor, Dr Bruce Aylward for an episode of *The Pulse*. When Ms Tong asked Dr Aylward a question about Taiwan, and whether the WHO would consider Taiwan's membership, astonishingly he pretended not to hear her and suggested she move to the next question. When she repeated her question on Taiwan, he then hung up on her. RTHK called him back and Ms Tong asked him how Taiwan has done containing the virus. His response, before ending the interview, was: "Well, we've already talked about China, and when you look across all the different areas of China, they've actually all done quite a good job. So with that, I'd like to thank you very much for inviting us to participate." (HKFP, 2020a)

At least 210 complaints were made to the Communications Authority, with pro-regime voices accusing Ms Tong of advocating Taiwan independence. Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development Edward Yau claimed RTHK's show had violated the "One China" principle. In June 2021 the Communications Authority dismissed the complaints as unsubstantiated, (The Standard, 2021) although Ms Tong, an award-winning journalist, resigned from RTHK in April 2021 after enduring a sustained campaign of criticism and online abuse from the pro-Beijing camp. (HKFP, 2021e)

The case of Bao Choy

Choy Yuk-ling, known as “Bao Choy”, is an award-winning journalist who first joined RTHK in 2007 and worked on multiple television programmes until 2016, when she joined the investigative news agency Fact Wire as a founding member. In 2018 she rejoined RTHK as a freelance producer for Hong Kong Connection.

In July 2020, Hong Kong Connection broadcast a documentary she had made, titled *7.21 Who Owns the Truth?*, which was an investigation into the attack in Yuen Long by suspected gang members dressed in white, on 21 July 2019. The attack, which resulted in at least 45 injuries, was suspicious because, despite numerous calls to the emergency police number, no police came to the scene for 39 minutes, and only arrived after the mob had left. Using CCTV footage to identify vehicles parked near the suspected gang members, Bao Choy requested and obtained publicly available vehicle registration records to identify the owners and therefore potential suspects.

In early November 2020, Bao Choy was arrested and charged with making false statements under the Road Traffic Ordinance, and at the same time was suspended from RTHK. In April 2021 she was fined HK\$6,000 (approximately US\$770), but avoided a prison sentence. (The Guardian, 2021a)

Reporters Without Borders condemned the conviction. “Bao Choy was only doing her job and collecting information in the public’s interest and should never have been prosecuted, let alone convicted and fined”, said Cédric Alviani, RSF East Asia bureau head. “The fact that a journalistic

investigation could become a punishable offence highlights the extent of the recent decline in press freedom in Hong Kong.” (Reporters without Borders, 2021a)

The sacking of Nabela Qoser

Nabela Qoser was Assistant Programme Officer at RTHK and co-host of the programme *This Week*. She was the most prominent non-ethnic Chinese Cantonese-speaking news reporter in Hong Kong, born in Hong Kong to a family that originated from Pakistan.

Ms Qoser’s public prominence grew during the 2019 protests, due to her growing reputation for tough questioning of government officials, in particular following the Yuen Long attack. At a press conference with Hong Kong’s Chief Executive Carrie Lam and government officials on 22 July, more than ten hours after the Yuen Long attack, Ms Qoser questioned Ms Lam and Commissioner of Police Stephen Lo about the government’s delayed response, contrasting it with the 4 am government press conference on the night of the protesters’ storming of the Legislative Council building. She pressed the government on whether the police and Triad gangs had cooperated at Yuen Long, and when the Chief Executive refused to respond, Ms Qoser urged her to “answer like a human being”. She also asked government officials whether they were able to sleep well at night in light of the attack. In later press conferences she asked the police why they did not arrest the mob attackers at Yuen Long. Her line of questioning of government officials was praised in the media and online forums, and she was described as a “reporter with conscience.” (EJI Insight, 2019)

In January 2020, Ms Qoser interviewed pro-Beijing legislator Junius Ho on an episode of *This Week*, and questioned him about the Yuen Long attack. She was then subjected to racial abuse from some of Mr Ho's supporters after the interview.

In September 2020, RTHK announced they would "reopen" an investigation into complaints about Ms Qoser, received between July and November 2020, concerning her performance during government press conferences, and decided to extend her probation for another 120 days. Her previous probation period was three years and was due to end in October 2020. According to trade union leader Gladys Chiu, Ms Qoser had already completed six reviews within her probation period.

On 21 January 2021, Ms Qoser's civil service contract was terminated, and replaced with a temporary 120-day contract. A week later, over 50 RTHK staff joined a silent protest in support of Ms Qoser, but in April 2021 RTHK informed her that her contract would not be renewed when it expired on 30 May, effectively sacking her and ending her career at RTHK. (RTHK, 2021c)

On 6 May 2021, her programme – *This Week* – won the 25th Hong Kong Human Rights Press Awards, presided over by a panel that included Amnesty International Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Journalists Association and the Foreign Correspondents' Club, while Bao Choy's team at Hong Kong Connection also won an award for "7.21 *Who Owns the Truth?*". RTHK declined to accept the awards.

New Management

In February 2021, a government review concluded that there were "deficiencies" in RTHK's management structure, and that it must "make improvements in its system, execution and monitoring". (Government of the Hong Kong SAR, 2021b) It announced that the director of broadcasting, an experienced journalist called Leung Ka-wing, would step down before the end of his contract. "There was a lot of pressure on Leung Ka-wing," recalls Stephen Vines. "But he was not a pro-democracy ally, he was simply a professional broadcaster. He was largely hands-off in editorial matters, but cautious."

His successor would be Patrick Li, an experienced civil servant who had previously served in various government departments, including the Home Affairs Department, the Financial Services and Treasury Bureau and the Chief Executive's Office, but had no media experience whatsoever. (HKFP, 2021k) At least three employees resigned following his appointment. Stephen Vines said:

"The atmosphere changed overnight. Patrick Li issued directives by messaging. We would simply be told that 'the Director has decided this', with no consultation. We were told every proposal for a theme, a story, a programme had to be approved by the management. There were so many redlines, but they were never spelled out."

Standards for "balanced" reporting changed significantly as well, according to Mr Vines.

"We were told we must maintain balance. In practice, that meant that if you could find any pro-democracy activist or politician who was not in jail and was willing to be interviewed, you had to find a pro-regime person as well – but in reality, the pro-

Beijing people refused to appear alongside a pro-democracy person. But if you had a pro-government person, you did not need to have someone from the other side, we were told. Not much ‘balance’.”

Editorial changes started being made at the last minute. Mr Vines added:

“A programme would be made, and finalised, and then cuts would be made at the eleventh hour because senior management insisted on changes. Programmes were becoming CCTV-style propaganda. A producer who was on the HKJA Executive Committee was given an ultimatum: leave the HKJA or do sub-titling.”

Within three months of Mr Li taking over RTHK, at least 12 new productions were pulled at short notice, and over 200 past episodes of *Hong Kong Connection* and *The Pulse* were deleted from RTHK’s YouTube channel. Programmes such as *China on the Dot*, one of RTHK’s best-known radio shows covering mainland China, *Headliner*, a satirical current affairs show, *Pentaprism*, a political opinion programme and *Police Report*, a show co-produced with the Hong Kong Police Force, were among those axed.

An episode of the political show *LegCo Review* was removed from the archives, because it contained footage of a Tiananmen Square massacre vigil and had been broadcast without Mr Li’s “final approval”. Mr Li also threatened to halve the salaries of employees involved in the production of content he disapproves of. (Reporters without Borders, 2021b) On 29 June 2021, the veteran radio host Allan Au Ka-lun, host of the current affairs radio

programme *Open Line Open View* for 11 years, announced that it was his last appearance as a host of the political commentary show.

RTHK then announced it would delete its archive of material more than a year old, (HKFP, 2021f) and in August 2021 it deleted all tweets and prohibited audience comments on its Twitter account. (HKFP, 2021n) The government then announced that RTHK would partner with the mainland’s China Media Group, which controls China Central Television (CCTV) and China National Radio, to air mainland-produced content to “nurture a stronger sense of patriotism”. (IFJ, 2022)

The Chief Executive Carrie Lam was given a daily talk show for a month. Commenting on this, Stephen Vines said:

“Nobody from the editorial side knew it was going to happen. They brought in people from outside, former TVB employees, and they made about 30 episodes of Carrie Lam talking to an interviewee. She did not ‘interview’ them, she talked and they nodded. It had the lowest production values on the planet. But we were told that Carrie Lam’s talk show was the most important output from RTHK.”

These dramatic changes at RTHK transformed the broadcaster completely.

“RTHK had been a very popular, much-loved, much-respected broadcaster, interwoven into the fabric of Hong Kong. It had enormous resources. Alongside commercial radio, RTHK was the place people went to find out what was happening in 2019,” said Mr Vines.

Now it is simply a government propaganda outlet.

A testimony from TVB

Hong Kong Watch spoke to a former news presenter at TVB, Chris Wong, whose personal account of events at the television broadcasting group illustrates some of the most extreme forms of censorship. He provided several examples.

In November 2019, pro-democracy district councillor Andrew Chiu was attacked in Tai Koo Shing, and his ear was bitten off. (HKFP, 2019b) Photographs and footage clearly showed the incident. But when Chris Wong came to present the report of the attack on the news broadcast, he found he was being asked to report a rather different – and very strange – version.

“The script that the editor provided said that Mr Chiu’s ear fell off naturally, somehow. Nobody did anything, it was not a bite, and the ear just fell to the floor. The editors did not want to cover violence by pro-Beijing ‘blue’ supporters,” he told Hong Kong Watch.

More generally, in coverage of the protests TVB focused extensively on violence by some protesters.

“The police always complained about i-Cable TV and *Apple Daily*, claiming they always focused on the police. They asked media to focus on the protesters, and TVB did,” said the former news presenter. “For the news anchors, our job is just to deliver the news, but we were then criticised by protestors for focusing so much on them. Even today, I and my ex-colleagues still face criticism because they believe TVB was a broadcaster of crime. Unfortunately, TVB damaged the reputation of its journalists, and because of TVB’s reputation, all former employees are living and working under a lot of public criticism.”

At the same time, TVB broadcast live all police and government press conferences in full and yet, according to the former news anchor, “TVB never covered the protesters’ press conferences.”

The editors would also control the wording used in news reports very carefully.

“For example, protesters wearing black shirts could only be identified as “black shirts” people, not as protesters. We were told ‘do not say protesters,’” he recalled. “On 31 August 2019, I was in the studio broadcasting live with the reports of the Prince Edward MTR station incident. A passenger yelled that ‘gangs’ were attacking them, and I repeated their words on air. I was then told by a colleague when I went off air that my boss was concerned about my repeating the passenger’s reference to ‘gangs’, because the passenger was referring to the police. On another occasion, in Shatin, our crew was attacked by some protesters, and in the newsroom the editors decided to report ‘TVB News condemns protesters attacking crew members’. My colleague, the anchor, did not want to read this news, and so skipped the word ‘condemn’ because they thought it was not appropriate. The anchor was reprimanded for this.”

In November 2019, Mr Wong wore a red poppy pin for Remembrance Day, but was told to take it off.

“They regarded wearing a poppy as ‘Western,’” he recalled. “We were also instructed never to wear anything black or yellow. And during the pandemic, we were told that black or yellow face masks were forbidden.”

CHAPTER 2: THE IMPACT OF THE NATIONAL SECURITY LAW ON MEDIA FREEDOM

On 30 June 2020, a new National Security Law was passed by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress and imposed on Hong Kong with immediate effect. The legislation was fast-tracked through with alarming speed, little transparency and no scrutiny by or consultation with Hong Kong's legislature, civil society or any other actors in the city. The impact of the draconian law, which focuses particularly on criminalising vaguely-defined offences of secession, subversion, terrorism and collusion with foreign organisations, has been to effectively dismantle freedom of expression in Hong Kong. The result has been the disbanding of over 50 civil society groups, pro-democracy parties, trade unions and independent media outlets, and the arrest and imprisonment of former pro-democracy legislators, activists, journalists and media workers. (HKFP, 2021a)

The impact of the law on media freedom has been significant. Articles 9 and 10 of the National Security Law (2020) makes specific reference to the media. Article 9 states: "The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region shall strengthen its work on safeguarding national security and prevention of terrorist activities. The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region 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."

Article 10 says: "The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region shall promote national security education in schools and universities and through social organisations, the media, the internet and other means to raise the awareness of Hong Kong residents of national security and of the obligation to abide by the law".

As the HKJA puts it, under these two articles of the National Security Law, "the media and Internet look certain to undergo drastic change towards the mainland model." (HKJA, 2021: 9) This includes the introduction of an official press card system, subject to annual renewal, whereby press cards issued by media outlets will not be recognised by the government. It also involves heavy censorship, especially as Article 43 gives the police the power to demand the removal of any content deemed in violation of the National Security Law, online or offline, and provides extensive powers for interception of communications and search of premises. Soon after the law was imposed on Hong Kong, public libraries, for example, withdrew copies of books written by activists such as Joshua Wong, former legislator Tanya Chan and commentator Chin Wan-kan, and schools were ordered to follow suit. (HKJA, 2021: 10)

In addition, Article 54 has implications for foreign media, as it states: "The Office for Safeguarding National Security of the Central People's Government in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and the Office of the Commissioner of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Hong Kong Special

Administrative Region shall, together with the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, take necessary measures to strengthen the management of and services for organs of foreign countries and international organisations in the Region, as well as non-governmental organisations and news agencies of foreign countries and from outside the mainland, Hong Kong, and Macao of the People's Republic of China in the Region." The term "strengthen the management" of foreign news outlets is, as the IFJ's report notes, left vague. "The only template is the situation on the mainland, where foreign media outlets are subject to various restrictions and visa renewals are used as a tool of control," the IFJ states. (IFJ, 2022)

On 21 November 2020, popular radio host Wan Yiu-sing, known as "Giggs", who presented a radio show on D100 Radio, was arrested under the National Security Law along with his wife and assistant, and accused of "inciting and funding secessionist activities" and "money laundering" after he had set up a crowdfunding page to help finance young Hong Kongers to study in Taiwan. Wan had launched a radio show titled "A thousand of fathers and mothers: Taiwan education aid programme" in February 2020, which discussed topics in support of the 2019 pro-democracy movement. (IFJ, 2020b) Concerningly, he also has been charged for 'seditious intent' under the Crimes Ordinance, in a sign that Beijing is using the National Security Law alongside other antiquated common law charges to wage lawfare against media figures. (HKFP, 2021b)

In November 2021, the Commissioner's Office of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs warned the Foreign Correspondents' Club that its press freedom survey could violate the National Security Law. The club was told to stop "meddling in Hong Kong's affairs". (HKFP, 2021c)

The National Security Law has been used to prosecute Jimmy Lai, prominent pro-democracy activist and media entrepreneur, and force the closure of the newspaper he owned, *Apple Daily*, in July 2021. A detailed case study of the closure of *Apple Daily* follows next in this report.

Case study: Apple Daily

In 1995, two years before the handover of Hong Kong to China, entrepreneur Jimmy Lai launched a new newspaper, *Apple Daily*, which was positioned as staunchly pro-democracy and critical of the Chinese Communist Party regime in Beijing. It soon became the largest circulation Chinese-language pro-democracy daily newspaper, and was strongly supportive of both the Umbrella Movement in 2014 and the anti-extradition law protests in 2019.

For these reasons, the authorities in Beijing always hated the newspaper and its proprietor, Jimmy Lai, but until 2020 the authorities tried to suffocate it through less direct forms of pressure. As Hong Kong Watch's report *Red Capital in Hong Kong: The invisible hand transforming the city's politics* noted, Beijing's strategy "involved a combination of litigation, physical intimidation and advertising boycotts". (Hong Kong Watch, 2021)

Financial pressure through advertising boycotts began in 2003, after the demonstrations against the introduction of an anti-subversion law under Article 23 of Hong Kong's Basic Law. Mark Simon, who worked as a senior aide to Jimmy Lai at the newspaper's parent company Next Digital, the largest listed media company in Hong Kong, told Hong Kong Watch:

"2003 changed everything. In 2003, I sat with the General Manager of all the major newspapers except *Oriental Daily News* and the Communist Party papers... we all got money from major tycoons to take out anti-Article 23 ads. After the July 1 march of 2003, in the fall, that was when things changed. The messages came out, and the message was that in the fall of 2003, no more State-Owned Enterprises or property developers were allowed to take ads with us.

The Bank of China read it, and saw that in four months you won't be allowed to take any more ads out. They quickly took out four months' worth of adverts. They were all Hong Kong people at this point, all the guys working at these banks were Hong Kong people. The Bank of China, ICBC etc. all took out ads for four months." (Hong Kong Watch, 2021)

In 2011-12 the situation deteriorated, under the leadership of CY Leung as Chief Executive of Hong Kong and Xi Jinping as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party. The pressure on *Apple Daily*, and other pro-democracy or independent media, intensified, and businesses, especially local Hong Kong companies or international firms with significant interests in China, joined the advertising boycott. Cathay Pacific stopped advertising in 2012, and major banks such as HSBC, Standard Chartered and the Bank of East Asia withdrew their advertising ahead of the Umbrella Movement in 2014. (Hong Kong Watch, 2021)

According to Mr Simon:

"The line had been firmly drawn, if you do something wrong, you're going to be punished. That was when TVB, and more importantly ATV, became very pro-government. That was all financial pressure which was shaping this. They would never write anti-China stories." (Hong Kong Watch, 2021)

Apple Daily courageously continued to report and publish stories and opinions that other newspapers would not touch and survived financially due to Jimmy Lai's personal investment in the newspaper and the support of subscribers and readers, but the pressure continued to intensify.

Pro-Beijing newspaper *Oriental Daily* assigned an entire team of reporters to harass Jimmy Lai, and other Next Media executives and journalists faced threats and intimidation. According to one former *Apple Daily* reporter who spoke to Hong Kong Watch, *Apple Daily*'s finance reporters were usually excluded from corporate press conferences, especially after the 2019 protests and particularly by China-listed companies.

"Some companies with big interests in China were much more cautious, even though *Apple Daily* was the largest pro-democracy newspaper," she said. "Those companies that still engaged with us usually took almost a day to respond to media enquiries."

The major turning point, however, was the imposition of the National Security Law at the end of June 2020, according to another former *Apple Daily* reporter.

"Before the National Security Law, we did not have many fears, and there were not much constraints on what we could write," she said. "Even in the early period after the National Security Law was introduced, there was some space. We were not very worried. But when Jimmy Lai was arrested for the first time [on National Security Law charges], that was a big moment, although we still thought we could produce news as usual and report what we thought was important. We tried to continue as normal. But then in June 2021, everything changed."

On 10 August 2020, over 100 officers from the Hong Kong Police Force raided the *Apple Daily* newsroom and, separately, arrested Jimmy Lai and one of his sons at his home. At least five other senior executives were also

arrested. (The Guardian, 2020a) Jimmy Lai, accused of violating the National Security Law for "colluding with foreign forces", was paraded through the newsroom in handcuffs, detained in custody and then released on bail within less than 48 hours. The public response to the arrests and police raid was extraordinary: The share price of *Apple Daily*'s parent company, Next Digital, soared by over 1000%, and Hong Kongers queued from the early hours of the morning to buy copies of the newspaper. However, this led to the arrest on 10 September, a month after the police raid, of 15 Next Digital executives on allegations of "fraud" and of manipulating the share price. (The Guardian, 2020b)

The next phase of the campaign against *Apple Daily* came on 3 December 2020, when Jimmy Lai was again arrested, charged with fraud, denied bail and remanded in police custody until his trial in April 2021. (BBC, 2020) Two other Next Digital executives, Royston Chow, the company's chief operating officer and chief financial officer, and the chief administrative officer Wong Wai-keung were also arrested and charged with fraud, although they were released on bail. All three were accused of breaching land-lease terms by improperly using Next Digital's office space in Tseung Kwan O for purposes not permitted by the lease.

Jimmy Lai was later released on bail under strict terms of house arrest, and was able to spend Christmas 2020 at home with his family, but prosecutors succeeded in overturning the bail approval on 31 December 2020 and he returned to prison.

On 29 December 2020, Jimmy Lai resigned as chair of the board of Next Digital, and on

17 May 2021 his shares in the company, which amounted to 71% worth HK\$350 million (US\$45 million), were frozen. (Reuters, 2021)

On 17 June 2021, the Hong Kong Police Force launched another raid of *Apple Daily*'s offices, sending in 550 armed police officers at 6 am. (Al Jazeera, 2021) Five senior employees were arrested during the raid, including the Next Digital Chief Executive Cheung Kim-hung, the Chief Operating Officer Royston Chow, *Apple Daily*'s editor-in-chief Ryan Law, Associate Publisher Chan Pui-man and the manager of the online news platform, Cheung Chi-wai, and others were arrested subsequently. The authorities also froze HK\$18 million worth of assets. Two days later, two of the five who had been arrested were charged under the National Security Law for "colluding with foreign forces", and the other three were released on bail. On 23 June 2021, an *Apple Daily* columnist was arrested under the National Security Law, and four days later, on 27 June, Fung Wai-kong, a senior editorial writer, was arrested at the airport at 10pm as he was about to board a flight to the United Kingdom. (The Guardian, 2021a) He was also charged under the National Security Law with "collusion with foreign forces," becoming the seventh media worker to be arrested under the draconian law within a week. At the time of writing, all seven former *Apple Daily* employees are in prison awaiting trial.

On 23 June 2021, *Apple Daily* announced that it would close. (BBC, 2021a) Despite showing extraordinary courage and determination to continue, and despite having HK\$400 million in the bank and 600,000 paid subscribers, which would have enabled it to continue to print for at least another 18 months, the freezing of its three bank accounts meant

that it was unable to pay salaries, rent and other bills. According to Mark Clifford, former editor of the *South China Morning Post* and a director of Next Digital, the company was prohibited from using any of its other bank accounts to pay salaries and bills. "We were frozen out of business," he told Hong Kong Watch. Ironically, the company was also taken to a labour tribunal for failure to pay salaries. The following day, 24 June, it published its final edition. Thousands of Hong Kongers queued for hours to buy copies, and the previous evening crowds gathered in front of the newspaper's offices in support. Staff and supporters shone mobile phone lights at each other in solidarity.

Mark Clifford, now based in New York, said that "all of the Hong Kong-based directors of the company are now incarcerated". The police, he added, began investigating at least 100 articles published by the newspaper which may violate the National Security Law.

On 13 December 2021 Jimmy Lai was sentenced to a 13-month prison term on charges of inciting others to participate in an unlawful assembly, for his participation in a vigil to mark the anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. However, this is the first of several sentences he will serve, as he faces multiple further charges under the National Security Law and under other laws, and is awaiting trial for several of these charges. He is likely to spend many years in prison.

For the more than 600 former journalists from *Apple Daily*, finding a new job has been challenging. Some joined *Stand News*, the only remaining significant independent media outlet, but then lost their jobs again when that publication was shut down in December 2021. (BBC, 2021b) Many had to leave journalism because no other media organisation in Hong Kong would employ former *Apple Daily* staff. Some moved into public relations work, but others – as an article in *Vice* describes – ended up as taxi drivers, setting up small restaurants or working in small “diners” selling fried chicken. (Vice, 2022) Others have left Hong Kong and started new lives in the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States and elsewhere. According to Bloomberg, at least 1,115 jobs have been lost in the media sector, which accounts for approximately 20 percent of media workers in Chinese-language media outlets. (Bloomberg, 2022)

One former reporter now based in the United Kingdom has continued to work as a freelance journalist but has concerns about using his real name in his by-line, in fear of the implications if he returns to Hong Kong. “I have to think much more about personal safety. I wanted to continue as a journalist, and there are a lot of stories to report on from the Hong Kong community, but I have to ask myself: are certain stories dangerous to write with my real name even from London, is it dangerous to interview certain exiled activists, where are the red lines?”

That is the most significant question, because the red lines keep moving and acts that a year ago were still normal and legal could today be a crime under the National Security Law.

On 28 December 2021, Jimmy Lai and six former *Apple Daily* journalists were charged with “conspiracy to “print, publish, sell, offer for sale, distribute, display and/or reproduce seditious publications.” (Reuters, 2021b) The forced closure of *Apple Daily* marked a death knell for media freedom in Hong Kong.

Case study: Stand News

On 29 December 2021, in the early hours of the morning, approximately 200 Hong Kong police officers raided the offices of *Stand News*, one of the last remaining significant independent media outlet in the city. (HKFP, 2021m)

In scenes reminiscent of the raids on *Apple Daily*, police seized boxes of documents, computers, telephones and other materials. At the same time, the publication's assets were frozen and seven individuals were arrested on suspicion of "conspiracy to publish seditious publications." They included acting Chief Editor Patrick Lam. The home of Deputy Assignment Editor Ronson Chan, who also led the Hong Kong Journalist's Association, was also searched. The popular singer Denise Ho, who has Canadian citizenship and prominent lawyer Margaret Ng, who has British citizenship, who had both previously served on the media outlet's board, were also arrested.

The raid and arrests were followed the same day by an announcement by *Stand News* that it would close immediately. Although the attack on *Stand News* was not unexpected, it was still a shock to many. In June 2021, following the closure of *Apple Daily*, *Stand News* announced that it would be removing its opinion articles and halting its donations scheme. Six of the company's directors, including Margaret Ng and Denise Ho, resigned from their posts. (HKFP, 2021d) These actions were not enough to protect them.

On 3 December 2021, Hong Kong's Security Minister Chris Tang criticised *Stand News*' reporting about the Castle Peak Immigration Centre and the conduct of the Hong Kong Police Force, describing it as "biased, smearing and demonising" and

promised to pursue evidence against those who threaten national security "in disguise of the media". (RTHK, 2021a) These threats appear with hindsight to have been an omen of what then hit *Stand News* just over three weeks later.

Defending the police raid and the arrests, Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam dismissed claims of violating press freedom. "These actions are law enforcement actions," she told a press conference. "These actions have nothing to do with the so-called suppression of press freedom or suppression of democracy ... Journalism is not sedition. But seditious acts and activities and inciting other people through public acts and activities could not be condoned under the guise of news reporting. It should be very clear what is reporting of news, and what is seditious acts or activities to undermine national security." (Government of the Hong Kong SAR, 2021a)

The Foreign Correspondents' Club of Hong Kong described the arrests as "a further blow to press freedom in Hong Kong" which will "continue to chill the media environment in the city following a difficult year for the city's news outlets." (FCC, 2021d) Steven Butler, Asia director at the Committee to Protect Journalists, said it was "an open assault on Hong Kong's already tattered press freedom as China steps up direct control over the former colony." (CPJ, 2021)

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights said it was "alarmed" by the continuing "crackdown on civic space," including the assault on *Stand News*, and politicians around the world, including the United Kingdom, Canada, Germany and Taiwan, condemned the arrests. (Reuters, 2021c)

One difference between the case of *Stand News* and *Apple Daily* is that the authorities chose to use the Crimes Ordinance, an old colonial law, to charge *Stand News* personnel, instead of the National Security Law. The charge is “conspiracy to produce seditious publications”.

On 3 January 2022, *Citizen News*, an online independent news outlet, announced its decision to close, citing concerns for staff safety. “At the centre of a brewing storm, we found ourselves in a critical situation,” the outlet announced. “In the face of a crisis, we must ensure the safety and well-being of everyone who are on board.” (The Guardian, 2022)

CHAPTER 3: ADDITIONAL RESTRICTIONS TO PRESS FREEDOM IN THE NATIONAL SECURITY LAW ERA

New restrictions on access to public records

Hong Kong does not have a freedom of information act, and there is no legislation requiring preservation of government records, but until 2019 journalists had extensive access to publicly available records. These included birth and marriage records, vehicle ownership records, the addresses of company directors, identity card details and other information useful for verifying identity. However, a stream of new restrictions introduced in 2019, and especially alongside the National Security Law in 2020, severely limit journalists' access, hindering legitimate investigative reporting and putting reporters at increased legal risk. The case of Bao Choy detailed earlier in this report is illustrative of this.

In October 2019, the Immigration Department changed the rules for access to birth and marriage records, permitting such access only with the agreement of the person whose records are being searched. Earlier that year, the Transport Department changed the form for searching vehicle ownership records, removing the box marked "Other" as a reason for the search. Journalists are now required to declare their reason for the search, making their ability to search the records more difficult.

In March 2021, the Companies Registry announced it would no longer make available the residential addresses and full identity card numbers of company directors. Previously, financial journalists could search the registry to be able to identify the representatives and owners of

publicly-listed companies in Hong Kong. In October 2021, the Companies Registry and the Land Registry introduced further requirements for searches, requiring those carrying out a search to provide their name and identification documents.

Matthew Leung, a former *Ming Pao* reporter, believes these restrictions significantly affect how journalists work.

"We used vehicle registration records a lot, for example to track down a victim or accused offender of a traffic accident, which was not something politically sensitive. Now the risk is so high that some media companies require reporters to get management's approval before considering doing registration checks, and it has to be done using chief editors or consulting editors' credit cards to check the registry as the company does not want to put their reporters' necks on the line. Registration checks used to be the most common tool for reporters to find leads for their work, but now the threat has become so imminent that media personnel have to evaluate the risk and public interest before using this formerly common tool."

The HKJA argues these measures have "created obstacles by reducing information accessible to reporters and the public, thus making it more difficult for reporters to carry out investigative reporting". (HKJA, 2021) It will make it increasingly more difficult to expose corruption or wrongdoing by government officials or company directors, and to hold public figures accountable.

The dangers of a “fake news” law

To mark Hong Kong’s first “National Security Education Day” on 15 April 2021, the then Commissioner of Police Chris Tang, who is now Secretary for Security, warned that media outlets that publish what he called “fake news” may be violating national security and would be investigated. “Agents of foreign forces disseminate fake news and disinformation to drive a wedge in the community, cause division in society and to incite violence,” he said. ““For those endangering Hong Kong’s security using fake news, we will launch an investigation right away, and when there is evidence, we will pursue a prosecution,” he said. (HKFP, 2021g)

A few days later, on 20 April 2021, in an interview on TVB’s *Straight Talk*, Mr Tang called for a law to criminalise ‘fake news’. (SCMP, 2021) “I think it is good to have such a law,” he said, “for every law that can assist the national security and assist us to make Hong Kong safer.”

The Foreign Correspondents’ Club responded with an open letter to the Police Commissioner on 22 April, seeking clarification on how “fake news” would be defined, what forms of reporting could be affected, and how such a law could be consistent with press freedom. “The term ‘fake news’ is vague, subjective and has been used by public figures around the world to attack coverage they view as unfavourable – and the journalists responsible for it – even when it is factually correct,” the FCC said. “In addition, ‘fake news’ legislation has been used to suppress press freedom and freedom of speech in numerous countries ... Many media experts have stopped using the term ‘fake news’ because it is so ill-defined.” (FCC, 2021b)

Despite the outcry, Mr Tang continued to highlight the issue, warning on 11 May 2021 that journalists publishing “fake news” could be in breach of the National Security Law, saying that the Hong Kong Police Force would respond if reports “incite hatred and divide society”. (RTHK, 2021b)

In February 2022, Radio Free Asia reported that the government aims to complete a study on combating “fake news” within the first six months of 2022. At the time of writing this report, legislation has not been tabled in the Legislative Council, but journalists fear it could be wide-ranging and might target not only mainstream media, but social media and channels such as Telegram, which were widely used in the 2019 protests. (RFA, 2022) Former *Ming Pao* reporter Matthew Leung believes this legislation “is going to be reality very soon” because the government controls the Legislative Council.

“I do not know the details or how tight the knots tying our hands will be, but I think it will be extreme. And they will probably shut down any remaining voices that might be in a position to oppose it before they table it.”

Pressure on foreign correspondents

In November 2018, Victor Mallet, the *Financial Times*’ Asia News Editor based in Hong Kong, was expelled from the city, his work visa renewal denied. His crime? To have chaired an event at the Foreign Correspondents’ Club (FCC), of which he was vice-president, at which a pro-independence activist, Andy Chan, convenor of the Hong Kong National Party, spoke. Mr Mallet had not endorsed Mr Chan’s advocacy of Hong Kong independence, nor had he personally invited Mr Chan to the club – he merely chaired the event. His expulsion from Hong Kong was an early warning sign of further threats to come for foreign correspondents in Hong Kong.

Several foreign journalists have experienced similar treatment since 2019. In July 2019, Hong Kong authorities rejected a visa application for Chris Buckley, an Australian journalist working for *The New York Times* and previously based in mainland China. In August 2020, Irish journalist Aaron McNicholas was denied a visa to work for *Hong Kong Free Press*. In November 2021, Australian journalist Sue-Lin Wong, *The Economist's* correspondent in Hong Kong, was denied a visa. (HKFP, 2021)

In August 2020, it was reported that visa applications for journalists are being scrutinised by a new national security unit within the Immigration Department. (HKFP, 2020c) The Foreign Correspondents' Club has made several statements on this issue, expressing in September "its strong opposition to undermining press freedom by delaying or denying visas to journalists working in the city, using journalists' visas as a weapon in international disputes or taking action against journalists for decisions made by their home countries." (FCC, 2020)

In December 2021, the Hong Kong government wrote to both *The Wall Street Journal* in New York and *The Sunday Times* in London, complaining about editorials these two newspapers had published about the election and the possibility of voter turnout being low or voters spoiling their ballot papers. Hong Kong officials warned that "inciting another person not to vote, or to cast an invalid vote ... is an offence under section 27A of the Elections (Corrupt and Illegal Conduct) Ordinance, irrespective of whether the incitement is made in Hong Kong or abroad."

In addition to these growing threats to foreign journalists, several major international media outlets have withdrawn from Hong Kong since the imposition of the National Security Law. *The New York Times* relocated much of its staff to Seoul, saying that the National Security Law "unsettled news organisations and created uncertainty about the city's prospects as a hub for journalism". (New York Times, 2020)

The security of local Hong Kong journalists working for international media is another concern. In August 2020 Wilson Li, a freelance reporter in Hong Kong for the United Kingdom-based broadcaster ITV News, was arrested under the National Security Law. His arrest was not directly due to his reporting work, but in relation to his involvement with activist groups, but it was nevertheless concerning. (HKFP, 2020b)

Hong Kongers who talk to foreign journalists are also now in significant danger, which has made it extremely difficult for foreign correspondents to find sources and interviewees. Former pro-democracy legislator Claudia Mo, who was arrested and is detained under the National Security Law for her participation in the pro-democracy camp's primary elections in 2020, was denied bail on 28 May 2021 partially on the grounds of WhatsApp conversations she had with journalists from the *Wall Street Journal* and *BBC World*. (Bloomberg, 2021)

While not as restrictive or dangerous as mainland China, many journalists fear the situation for foreign correspondents in Hong Kong is moving in that direction. The Beijing-based Foreign Correspondents' Club of China published a report on media freedom in China in 2021, titled *Locked Down or Kicked Out: Covering China*, which found that 99 percent of foreign journalists

responding to its annual survey said reporting conditions did not meet international standards, with foreign journalists and their families facing increasing surveillance and harassment. (FCCC, 2021) This may develop in Hong Kong as the overall crackdown on media freedom continues.

CONCLUSIONS

From financial coercion to outright censorship, from police violence against reporters to police raids of newsrooms, from draconian legislation leading to the prosecution and imprisonment of journalists and the closure of publications to the weaponisation of visas for foreign correspondents, Hong Kong's media freedoms have been rapidly and dramatically dismantled. Even the sacking of forty journalists at i-Cable TV, Hong Kong's largest pay TV operator, on 1 December 2020 – ostensibly due to the economic impact of Covid-19 – is regarded by many as having been motivated by political reasons. The entire News Lancet team which covered the 2019 protests and was highly respected for its investigative journalism was among the journalists fired. “Given the team's coverage of the police and administration, it is difficult not to see this as minimising sensitive reporting in the name of cost-cutting,” the HKJA said in a statement. (Reuters, 2020)

Yet another measure designed to restrict media freedom in Hong Kong is the decision by the Hong Kong Police Force to redefine who constitutes a legitimate “media representative” or “journalist”, thereby restricting access for those not recognised and accredited with the government's system. (HKJA, 2021) The Hong Kong Police Force told four journalist unions – the HKJA, the Hong Kong News Executives' Association, the Hong Kong Federation of Journalists and the Hong Kong Press Photographers Association – in a letter on 22 September 2021 that the police would no longer recognise those holding press passes issued by media workers' unions such as the HKJA, and would only recognise local media outlets, international news agencies and media groups registered with the Government News and Media Information System (GNMIS). This will have a particular impact on freelance reporters, student journalists, online reporters and citizen journalists.

In early 2022, the situation continued to deteriorate. US-funded broadcaster Radio Free Asia (RFA), which had a studio in Hong Kong, announced the suspension of some of its Cantonese programmes and commentaries in February 2022, “until further notice”, citing concerns about press freedom and the “red lines” of the National Security Law. “Given the dire situation in Hong Kong, locally based commentators and hosts face increasing risks,” a memo from RFA read. “It has been clear over the past year that the ‘national security red lines’ are everywhere in Hong Kong. The freedom of speech accorded to commentators and hosts under Hong Kong's Basic Law is not protected by Hong Kong and Chinese laws.” (HKFP, 2022a)

The role of the pro-Beijing media in Hong Kong

In the absence of pro-democracy media, it is worth pausing here to consider the implications of the erosion of press freedom and how it creates further space for the pro-Beijing media. The major pro-Beijing newspapers are *Ta Kung Pao* and *Wen Wei Po*, with *Sing Tao Daily* and *Oriental Daily*, often taking a pro-Beijing line and they appear to exist to serve two purposes: providing propaganda for the Chinese Communist Party regime and the Hong Kong government, and threatening their critics, both in print and through various forms of harassment.

In March 2022, Hong Kong Watch was targeted by *Ta Kung Pao*, with a full page of five articles denouncing the organisation's advocacy work and the activities of its co-founder and Chief Executive Benedict Rogers.

Ta Kung Pao has regularly attacked pro-democracy politicians, activists, media and judges (HKBA, 2020). In August 2021 Ronson Chan, Deputy Assignment Editor of *Stand News* and chair of the HKJA, was informed he was being tailed by *Ta Kung Pao* and on 29 December 2021 *Ta Kung Pao* published a frontpage story accusing him of soliciting a prostitute. Former pro-democracy legislator Ted Hui Chi-fung claims he was also followed by *Ta Kung Pao* in Hong Kong.

Wen Wei Po behaves in a similar way, and regularly attacked *Apple Daily*, accusing the pro-democracy newspaper of being manipulated by foreign forces and spreading hatred against the Chinese and Hong Kong governments.

On 9 February 2022, Chan Ho-him, a Hong Kong-based journalist with the *Financial Times*, wrote an opinion piece describing the death of media freedom in Hong Kong. He cited recent attacks on *Ming Pao*, not a newspaper regarded as a pro-democracy outlet.

"*Ming Pao*, a centrist outlet where I worked early in my career, also came under attack last month [January], when a pro-Beijing newspaper accused one of its columnists of 'taking over *Apple Daily*'s role to incite' hatred against authorities. At least six young reporters I know at the publication have quit and changed careers over the past six months." (Chan Ho-him, 2022)

In addition to attacking and harassing critics, these newspapers also spread false propaganda. Following the 19 December 2021 'elections' for the Legislative Council, for example, *Ta Kung Pao* described the process as "the most successful election since handover" in which "voters showed unprecedented passion to participate". It announced a "historic turnout of 98%," which was actually just the turnout of the Election Committee constituency of the Legislative Council elections. Statistically, the general population's turnout rate was the lowest in history, with only around 30%. (The Guardian, 2021c) The elections were widely regarded within Hong Kong and in the international community as completely rigged, with pro-democracy candidates and parties excluded and the number of directly elected seats reduced from 35 to just 20, while the total overall number of seats was increased from 70 to 90.

A former senior journalist at *Wen Wei Po* Ching Cheong confirms that *Wen Wei Po* and *Ta Kung Pao* are "100 per cent party organ newspapers", as he told journalist Yuen Chan, "CCP mouthpieces under the direct control of propaganda officials in the CCP's Hong Kong apparatus." In 2015, a *Next Magazine* investigation showed that a company controlled by China's Liaison Office in Hong Kong, Guangdong Xin Wenhua, owned 88.4 per cent of *Wen Wei Po* and 99.9 per cent of *Ta Kung Pao*. In 2016 the two newspapers were merged, according to Yuen Chan, "to pool editorial and technical resources although they continued to publish separate newspapers. In terms of editorial direction, little separates the two titles." (HKFP, 2021j)

Where next for Hong Kong's media?

So where does Hong Kong go from here? Hong Kong has fallen from 18th in the world in 2002 to 80th in 2021, according to Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index. (Reporters without Borders, 2021c) Hong Kong's Chief Executive Carrie Lam was among 37 people in the world to be named as "predators of press freedom" by Reporters Without Borders. (Reporters without Borders, 2021d)

A former *Apple Daily* reporter told Hong Kong Watch that after the closure of *Apple Daily* and *Stand News*, the next step for the government will be to ensure that:

"...the media have the same opinions as the Chinese Communist Party and the government. There will be no more room to challenge the government. Although there remains a little bit of space for covering stories which the government and the Party might not like, we do not know when that will completely disappear. Space will continue to become narrower and narrower."

Matthew Leung, a former *Ming Pao* reporter, told Hong Kong Watch that he left Hong Kong due to the situation.

"Press freedom in Hong Kong is deteriorating. News outlets are being closed down. I do not think I can continue to make a good career in journalism in Hong Kong in the circumstances," he said. "If I stayed in Hong Kong I would not be a journalist anymore. The United Kingdom's British National Overseas (BNO) visa gave me a chance to leave Hong Kong. If I have to switch career, why not go to a country where we can speak freely?"

Since the imposition of the National Security Law, over 50 civil society organisations – including political parties, trade unions and media groups – have disbanded. One of the very few still holding out is the HKJA, but there are real fears that it could be the next target. In January 2022 the Registry of Trade Unions (RTU) launched an investigation into the HKJA, requiring the group to justify how some of its activities are relevant to their objectives. Last year, the Secretary for Security Chris Tang demanded that the group publicise its membership list. (HKFP, 2022b) The HKJA's chair, Ronson Chan, told *The Daily Telegraph*: "I am mentally prepared for more police questioning." (Daily Telegraph, 2022) Several members of the HKJA Executive Committee have already left Hong Kong.

On 10 March 2022, Hong Kong Watch – a United Kingdom-registered organisation – received a letter from the Hong Kong Police Force and an email from the National Security Bureau, alleging that its website posed a threat to China's national security in violation of the National Security Law, and demanding that the organisation take down the website within 72 hours. Failure to comply could result in Hong Kong Watch co-founder and Chief Executive Benedict Rogers facing a fine of HK\$100,000 (US\$13,000) and a prison term of up to three years or potentially life imprisonment. (Financial Times, 2022) The use of the National Security Law's extraterritoriality clause, set out in Article 38 of the law, to threaten a foreign activist and organisation marks a new low and poses a direct threat to free societies and potentially to media freedom well beyond Hong Kong's borders.

Hong Kong's Basic Law, the city's mini-constitution, protects press freedom. Article 27 states: "Hong Kong residents shall have freedom of speech, of the press and of publication; freedom of association, of assembly, of procession and of demonstration; and the right and freedom to form and join trade unions, and to strike."

Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Hong Kong is a party, states: "Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice."

By dismantling media freedom in Hong Kong, the governments of the People's Republic of China and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region are in flagrant violation of Hong Kong's own Basic Law, the ICCPR, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Sino-British Joint Declaration which promised that Hong Kong's basic freedoms, way of life and a high degree of autonomy would be upheld at least for the first fifty years after the handover in 1997. The international community must not allow those responsible for these violations to get away with impunity and without consequence.

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