Dissenting media in post-1997 Hong Kong

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The de-colonization of Hong Kong took the form of Britain returning the territory to China in 1997 as a Special Administrative Region (SAR). Twenty years after the political handover, the "one country, two systems" arrangement designed by China to govern the Hong Kong SAR is facing serious challenge: Many in Hong Kong have come to regard Beijing as an unwelcome control master; and calls for self-determination have gained a substantial level of popular support. This chapter examines the role of media in this development, as exemplified by key political protest actions. It proposes the notion of "dissenting media" as a framework to integrate relevant academic and journalistic studies about Hong Kong. From the discipline of media and communications study, it suggests that operators of dissenting media are enabled to put forth information and analysis contrary to that of the establishment, which, in turn, help to form an oppositional public sphere. In the process, the identity and communities of dissent are built, maintained, and developed, contributing to the formation of a counter public that participates in oppositional political actions.

Studies on the impact of media, mainly conducted in stable Anglo-American societies, tend to consider mainstream media as institutions that index[1] or reinforce the status quo,[2] and alternative media as forces that challenge established powers.[3] In Hong Kong, the 1997 political changeover was accompanied by a reconfiguration of power relationships in line with China's one-party dictatorship. The change runs counter to the political aspirations of the people of Hong Kong, and has bred a political movement for civil liberties, public accountability, and democracy. In this context, some journalists, newspapers, and the de facto public service broadcaster have been found to act like rebels of resistance[4] among the mainstream media, which have been co-opted.[5] In addition, some recent online-only news media run by media professionals have taken an uncompromisingly independent editorial position to champion media freedom. These online-only media startups differ from alternative media in their financing, background of practitioners, and routine production of content, but tend to operate on a smaller scale than mainstream media. To examine the role played by media in the growth of political dissent in post-1997 Hong Kong, I propose the notion "dissenting media" to discuss selected (1) rebellious elements in the mainstream media, (2) politically focused alternative media, and (3) uncompromising online media startups in relation to major political events and protests.

Unlike most similar studies, which try to identify the most influential media, this discussion starts with the premise that the three sectors of dissenting media, although operating according to different business models and cultures, impact political dissent in concert with each other. They provide repressed information, which constitutes an information world shared by potential dissenters.[6] They provide alternative commentaries about events and issues, hence offering diverse representations of the world as resource for individuals' formation of analytical perspectives. The impact of the media is strongest when acted through interpersonal networks.[7] Interactions in offline and increasing online

channels—including chat forums and more recently social media—provide the basis of the formation of identity and communities of dissent, which resonate with calls for political action.[8] Networked communication on digital social networks has been suggested as the connective mechanism of organization of social movement actions in which individuals become self-mobilized through forming and sharing their personalized interpretations of public affairs.[9] Dissenting media also provide an alternative platform for the creation of public opinion leaders.[10] Where political activists and politicians are operators, media and politics become so intertwined that the two cannot be analyzed as separate spheres impacting one another. In the following, the various ways in which dissenting media connect to the politics in Hong Kong are discussed with reference to key political events from 2003 through the present.

2003: REBELLIOUS MAINSTREAM MEDIA MOBILIZE PROTEST

The year 2003 marked a turning point in the relationship between Hong Kong and Beijing. On 1 July—the anniversary day of the return of the ex-colony to the "motherland"—half a million people took to the streets in the territory to protest against a proposal released by the Hong Kong government (with support from Beijing) to implement Article 23 of the Basic Law (the mini-constitution of Hong Kong) via local laws to prohibit "treason, secession, sedition, subversion against the Central Government," "theft of state secrets" and "ties with foreign political organizations."

The huge turnout at the 2003 demonstration reflected widespread disapproval of the performance of the Hong Kong government and fear about the erosion of freedom of information and expression; but only pockets of the mainstream media expressed opposition to the proposed legislation. They included: the *Apple Daily* and its sister, *Next Magazine*; the *Hong Kong Economic Journal*; the government-run but editorially independent Radio Television Hong Kong; and several commercial radio phone-in talk shows.[11] The *Apple Daily*, one of two best-selling newspapers in Hong Kong and the most read newspaper by demonstrator participants,[12] for example, played the role of activist media by calling upon its readers on 1 July 2003 to join the demonstration, using the frontpage headlines "No to Tung Chee-hwa" (the then Chief Executive of Hong Kong) and "Take to the streets; we won't disperse without seeing you." The 1 July demonstration was abundantly publicized beforehand by the rebellious elements of the mainstream media, such as the top-rated phone-in program *Teacup in a Storm*, hosted by Albert Cheng King-hon on *Commercial Radio*. Mobilization by popular mass media served to legitimize and normalize dissent, which was particularly influential for those who had not participated in protest demonstrations before.

In a survey conducted among participants of the 2003 demonstration, more than 60 percent of respondents considered mobilization information from the mass media to be "very important." Above all, however, peer mobilization was more important (67.5 percent). At that time, online information was growing, and 53.5 percent of respondents reported it as important in mobilizing their participation.[13] Young people were sharing information and connecting on online newsgroups and chat forums about their intention to participate.[14] However, the information shared among peers came, in the first place, from the mass media.

POST-2003: ALTERNATIVE RADIO PROVIDES ALTERNATIVE VIEWS, BREEDS POLITICAL PARTIES

Even before the 1 July demonstration, other developments were brewing that led to a significant expansion of alternative media in the following years. Just over two weeks before the demonstration, Albert Cheng received a warning from the government broadcasting regulator that views presented on his program were partial. At the time, *Commercial Radio* was applying for renewal of its broadcasting license, and news reports said the government was inclined to grant a renewed license for only a short three years.[15] In the wake of public pressure exerted through full-page newspaper advertisements collectively placed by groups of individuals, the government eventually renewed the license of *Commercial Radio* for 12 years, as before. Nonetheless, in 2004 Cheng and two other prominent hosts of *Commercial Radio* quit their programs, citing political pressure as the reason.[16]

These developments brought home the urgent need to defend freedom of expression, and led to rapid growth of alternative media on the web after 2003. Within a couple of months of the departure of the radio hosts, a dozen politically oriented web radio stations emerged.[17] The better-known ones included *Radio-45*, formed by a political group that was to become the Civic Party in 2006, *Radio 71*, the *People's Radio*, and *DIYHK*—the latter three formed by a mix of activists and entrepreneurs.

One radical member of the main opposition Democratic Party, Tsang Kin-shing, extended independent radio beyond the Internet and began broadcasting *Citizen Radio* by microwave in 2005 without a license. Its repeated applications for a sound broadcasting license have been unsuccessful, with different reasons given by the government on different occasions. Through the time of this writing, *Citizen Radio* has continued to broadcast with occasional seizures of equipment and arrests by police, in addition to streaming its programs on a website. Tsang became a founding member of the League of Social Democrats (LSD), formed in October 2006, which then launched *My Radio* in 2007, which has become the strongest Internet radio service in Hong Kong (excluding the mainstream ones) with a growing 58,655 subscriber base on its YouTube channel in January 2018.

These alternative radio stations gave voice to center-left politicians and social activists as hosts of talk programs to monitor and challenge the establishment. They also offered opportunities for community groups to submit programs. The challenging and alternative voices together served to circulate a diversity of views in Hong Kong at a time when most of the mainstream news media refused to give pro-democracy political parties any significant coverage. While politicians and activists built their influence on the alternative web media, they bonded and formed new political parties.

The newly formed political parties—the Civic Party and the LSD—represented different class interests with different political positions: The Civic Party was an organization of barristers and elite professionals taking a liberal democratic stance, while founding members of the LSD were grassroots-oriented radicals, one of whom was Trotskyite Leung Kwok-hung, nicknamed "long-hair." However, they were united in the fight for greater democracy in Hong Kong, and in January 2010 five legislators from the Civic Party and the LSD resigned ahead of a decision to be made by Beijing about the method of selecting the Chief Executive and members of the Legislative Council in 2012, forcing a by-election as a de facto referendum about the public will regarding direct elections.

The Democratic Party did not join the resignation, but its leaders held a meeting with the deputy director of the Central Government's Liaison Office in Hong Kong—the first of its kind in the Democratic Party's history—one week after the by-election.

During the electioneering for the by-elections, the Internet radio stations formed an alliance to stage a series of campaign debates among candidates when the dominant television station, TVB, refused to do so. According to Leung and Lee, this is evidence that Internet radio contributed to the development of "transgressive contention" in the politics of Hong Kong.[18] However, the low turnout for the by-election (17 percent in contrast to the usual 50 percent), despite calls on the Internet radio from dissenting political parties on electors to cast their votes, suggests that the impact of the Internet radio was limited. Although the five resigned legislators were re-elected to the Council, this was probably because pro-establishment political parties boycotted and did not field any candidates to the by-elections.

2006 AND BEYOND: ALTERNATIVE ACTIVIST CITIZEN MEDIA BUILDS LOCAL IDENTITY AND PROTEST CAPACITY

Between 2006 and the 2014 Umbrella Movement, a new text-based web news media outlet focused on news reporting, *In-Media Hong Kong*, became the central mobilizing force of a series of protest movements targeted at preserving cultural heritage sites threatened by urban development. Unlike the alternative radio stations, which focused on talk programs, *In-Media Hong Kong* (launched in 2005 with collective donations from academics and activists) developed along the concept of citizen journalism emerging at the time. Soon after its establishment, *In-Media* spear-headed the first of six protest movements of expanding scale and increased resistance during this period.[19] In 2006, *In-Media*'s editorial team called for action to protect the Star Ferry Pier from planned demolition. At one point, five of its editors broke into the cordoned-off area and, with 12 other young people, chained themselves to the pier to try to stop its demolition.[20] The occupation drew heavy coverage from the mainstream media, and propelled the voice of protesters into the public arena.

The Preserve the Star Ferry Movement bred the political group Local Action, which was to fight for democratic participation in the territory's land-use planning. The planned demolition of the Queen's Pier in 2007 became Local Action's first issue of engagement. For the first time, the political fight for democracy became directly linked to the cultural heritage of the city and the economic issue most fundamental to the people's livelihood in a metropolis rated as one of the most expensive real estate markets in the world. The concern about land use was shared by V-Artivist, a group formed in 2007 that aims to "give art back to the people." It produces videos about communities affected by government land planning projects, which are disseminated online and screened in local communities. It also runs community-based art events, and co-organizes a social movement film festival and video training program.

The concern about land use and the desecration of Hong Kong's heritage and culture by mainland China flared up again in 2009–10 when Choi Yuen Village was earmarked to be demolished to make way for the construction of an express rail link between China and Hong Kong. It culminated in a protest involving almost 10,000 people encircling

the legislative chamber on the day the issue was debated in January 2010.[21] Opponents were angry that Hong Kong's heritage and natural environment would be sacrificed for the profit of land developers, and were concerned about the further subsuming of Hong Kong's way of life under mainland China's.

As in the Preserve Star Ferry and Queen's Pier Movements, *In-Media Hong Kong* played a central role in recruiting and mobilizing participation in the anti-express rail link movement. Eddie Chu, one of the five *In-Media* editors in the Star Ferry Pier occupation, mobilized participants in a citizen reporter workshop organized by *In-Media* to report stories about the express rail link.[22] Content published by *In-Media* on the movement covered neglected issues, rebutted mainstream media's perspectives, gave voice to the weak minority against more powerful actors, and provided space for contributors to discuss forms of expression used in social movements.[23] Other Internet alternative media also covered the movement comprehensively.[24] Together they provided alternative information and opinion about the express rail link proposal. The Preserve Choi Yuen Village Movement gathered political force for Eddie Chu to form the Land Justice League in July 2011, which would fight against the government's North-East New Territories Development Plan in 2012–14. Chu's work won him such popular support that he was elected as District Councillor in 2015 and Legislative Councillor in 2016.

POST-2009: SOCIAL MEDIA FACILITATES ALTERNATIVE MEDIA ACTIVISM

Since June 2008, content published by the alternative media was made even more accessible when Facebook became available in Chinese.[25] Facebook, which would become the most used social media in Hong Kong, together with WhatsApp (which came in 2009), encouraged information sharing and made conversation about public affairs a part of daily life. The interconnection and interactivity provided by these communication technologies rode on the waves of escalating political grievances and helped radicalize the young people of Hong Kong. Eddie Chu himself cited Facebook as a space of mobilization over the anti-express rail link movement, as well as in his later election campaign in the 2015 District Council election.[26] Joshua Wong Chi-fung, who was to lead the fight against the moral and national education curriculum in 2011–12, and became one of initiators of the Umbrella Movement in 2014, said he became interested in social issues when he came across information about the anti-express rail link movement on social media.[27] He said that since the de facto referendum in 2010, he had spent one-and-a-half hours every day reading news and editorials,[28] and then publishing short commentaries, discussing, and debating with others on Facebook.[29]

When the government proposed in early 2011 to implement a compulsory moral and national education curriculum in schools, the radicalized young generation rose up. Joshua Wong founded the student group Scholarism in May 2011 to fight against what many saw as propaganda that brainwashed the young with "patriotic" pro-China values. A poll conducted in June 2011 found that those with a positive appraisal of Beijing's policy towards Hong Kong plummeted to 34 percent from 53 percent in the previous year.[30] A public demonstration held on 29 July 2012 against the proposed curriculum drew 90,000 protesters, and eventually forced the government to postpone implementing the

proposal as planned. During the Anti-Moral and National Education Movement, core members of Scholarism depended almost entirely on Facebook for communication. They also used social media heavily for mobilization in the movement.[31]

After the Anti-Moral and National Education Movement, Scholarism started a website and Facebook public page, Dash, in 2013 (which closed in May 2016 when the group transformed into a political party). Meanwhile, a new wave of alternative activist media sprang up. Left 21, involving some who published earlier Trotskyite political magazines,[32] was formed in 2011, prompted by the observation that many young people had participated in the anti-express rail link movement. Some of the new outlets appearing around this time include: in 2011, *SocREC*; in 2012, *Our TV*, *Keyboard Frontline*, *VJ Media* and *Passion Times*; and in 2013 *Dash* web radio, *Workers News*, *Polymer* and *Hong Kong Peanuts*. *SocREC* and *Workers News* focus on communities of the underprivileged and social movements. For example, *SocREC* aims to air alternative voices that contradict the "main melody of harmony of the central [government]," mostly using photographs and videos.[33] *VJ Media* started with a radical position supportive of local autonomy;[34] but, at the time of writing, its website contains mainly lifestyle and entertainment pieces. *Polymer* was formed by a group that split from an online forum to call for resistance against Chinese colonization. *Our TV* aims to be a citizen-initiated, even-handed public service media, while *Keyboard Frontline* focuses on issues of freedom of expression.

Among the alternative activist media, *Passion Times*, launched in October 2012 by the political group Civic Passion (formed early in the same year), stood out by being published as a free-of-charge hard-copy newspaper distributed in mass transit railway stations in addition to its web version, while others relied on inexpensive websites or even merely a public Facebook page. In November 2012, *Passion Times* also started an Internet radio station—which played a major role in recruiting Civic Passion's supporters—and later produced other cultural products including comics, novels, and theatre performances.[35] Wong Yeung-tat, founder of Civic Passion, claims his political position to be localist left-wing; but many describe Civic Passion as "rightist" because of its antagonism towards the (nominally communist) mainland Chinese government and encouragement of a personality cult of its leaders.[36] *Passion Times* distinctly differs from other alternative activist media in its explicitly vitriolic stance towards the Chinese communist regime. Something of an antidote to *Passion Times*, *Hong Kong Peanuts* is an Internet radio station that provides commentaries from liberal democrats using a similar style of language.

Alternative media had a new issue to face in 2013 when the government announced on 17 October the rejection of the application of Hong Kong Television Network (HKTN) for a free-to-air license. HKTN had applied for a license in January 2010 on the invitation of a government official; the government's final decision was widely seen as politically motivated, as by then HKTN had been broadcasting television dramas via broadband Internet whose portrayal of the political reality of Hong Kong had drawn strong interest from the audience and whose production standards had won high praise even from critics. The government's decision led to a large-scale Support HKTN Movement involving media professionals, pro-freedom activists, politicians, and, above all, ordinary television viewers. The first protest rally held on 20 October eventuated in the creation of the public Facebook page "Ten thousand people supporting!!! Issue a license to HKTN now!!!," which has continued to be active on political issues, with over 405,000 followers as of January 2018.[37]

POST-2011: UNCOMPROMISING ONLINE-ONLY MEDIA STARTUPS

While alternative media boomed, since 2012 independent online-only media run by media professionals have constituted the third sector of dissenting media. The most eye-catching, and also the first, was *House News*, launched in June of 2012. D100, run by Albert Cheng, the former *Commercial Radio* host who by then had finished one term of being a legislator, came in December of the same year. Their appearance in 2012 was partly the result of frustration arising from decreasing press freedom in mainstream media, and partly of encouragement from heightened political activism in society.

House News followed the same model as the *Huffington Post* in the US, aggregating content from other sources and following up with its own reports. Created as a business following principles of rationality and tolerance, it also published a rich array of blogs written by pro-democracy liberals. It was highly critical of the government, with 30.6 percent of its editorials criticizing the personal conduct and governing style of the then Chief Executive of Hong Kong, Leung Chun-ying, and 45.9 percent criticizing principal officials and members of the government's highest advisory body, the Executive Council.[38] It became a popular online news website and had 300,000 unique visitors every day when it closed down in July 2014 ahead of the occupation event on 1 October 2014 planned by the Occupy Central Movement with Love and Peace (OCLP). Proprietor Choi Tung-ho cited political fear as the main reason.[39]

The OCLP had been in planning since March 2013 in anticipation of a decision made by Beijing in 2014 about the methods of selecting members of the Legislative Council and Chief Executive of Hong Kong in 2017. What was not anticipated was Beijing's release of a White Paper on Hong Kong in June 2014, which stated that the central government has "comprehensive jurisdiction" over Hong Kong, and that it has the "power of oversight over the exercise of a high degree of autonomy in the HKSAR." The document was read as an expansion of the central government's power beyond what was stipulated in the Basic Law that had been agreed upon prior to the handover. The decision of China's National People's Congress Standing Committee (NPCSC) on 31 August 2014 to affirm, in effect, a Beijing veto over who can stand as a candidate for Chief Executive in the future shattered the hope for democracy of several generations of people in Hong Kong—from those who had started fighting for direct elections in the 1980s, to the most recently radicalized young generation. In response, students pre-empted the OCLP by occupying the square in front of the government office headquarters on 26 September. Police attacked with pepper spray and tear gas; occupiers defended themselves with umbrellas, and earned the name the Umbrella Movement. Occupation spread to the main thoroughfare and other districts and lasted 79 days.

DISSENTING MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE UMBRELLA MOVEMENT

An inter-connected array of digital media provided informational resources, communications infrastructure, and mobilization capability to the Umbrella Movement, which involved the participation of 18–20 percent of the adult population in Hong Kong.[40] Core

members of Scholarism, one of the student organizations that initiated the 26 September occupation, used WhatsApp, Telegram, and SMS to communicate among themselves. Scholarism also used the Facebook public pages of the group, Dash, and Joshua Wong's to communicate with the public.[41]

A deep divide was found between supporters and non-supporters of the Umbrella Movement in the media they used, indicating the existence of two rather separate worlds of news information. About 40 percent of supporters relied on websites and social media as their main source of information about current affairs, while more than 40 percent of non-supporters relied on television.[42] A network analysis of the number of posts shared by followers of Facebook public pages related to the Umbrella Movement found that the *Apple Daily* was the only heavily shared mainstream media Facebook page.[43]

The news information world on social media accessed by supporters of the movement was formed by inter-connected dissenting media—consisting of rebellious mainstream media, alternative media, and professional media startups. As part of the network, the *Apple Daily* was in one of the clusters of pages that also included (among others) the *United Social Press*, *Dash*, and *Keyboard Frontline*. With followers of the *Apple Daily* sharing its posts with followers of these other activist media pages, *Apple Daily's* "one person, one photo, support the students" campaign received a strong response from Facebook users.[44] *In-Media Hong Kong*'s Facebook page had the most shares among pages relevant to the Umbrella Movement; it was most connected with the Hong Kong Federation of Students, Scholarism, the OCLP, and the *House News* bloggers, among others, in another cluster. The *Apple Daily* and *In-Media* clusters were well connected to each other, but they had few links with *Passion Times*, which formed a separate cluster with other pages.[45]

Those who obtained political news through social media tended to support the Umbrella Movement and distrust the Hong Kong SAR and Chinese central government. This suggests the formation of an "insurgent public sphere" on social media during the Umbrella Movement.[46] Prior to that, it has been found that inter-connection on social media increases the chance of even those who hold differing attitudes using alternative media; thus, social media usage drives alternative media use. In turn, usage of online alternative media is a significant predictor of participation in protests.[47] This can be explained by the finding that frequent use of alternative media has a significant effect on the user's identification with the pro-democracy movement,[48] hence facilitating the formation of a counterpublic.[49]

POST-UMBRELLA MOVEMENT: ALTERNATIVE MEDIA AND ONLINE MEDIA STARTUPS MUSHROOM

The failure of the Umbrella Movement brought grave disappointment to many, but the spirit lived on in the several new political parties—the Hong Kong Indigenous, Youngspiration, and Demosisto (replacement of Scholarism in 2016)—and a diverse spectrum of activist alternative media formed afterwards. In 2014, *Singjai* web radio, which seeks to fight for freedom in Hong Kong and features liberal democrats as program hosts, was launched.[50] *Truth Media Hong Kong* was started by a former member of *SocREC* in April 2015, and aims to provide impartial reports in text, in addition to visuals

with its small team of volunteer journalists.[51] *Radical Hong Kong* was formed by citizen journalists in August 2015 to promote marginalized voices and the development of civil society through its news reporting. *Channel-I*, which provides programs mainly hosted by members of the Hong Kong Indigenous, was launched in December 2015.

More professional media startups have cropped up in the same period. The *Local Press*, launched in April 2014, is the only one that highlights its advocacy for local autonomy. The *Stand News*, a revival of *House News* with additional co-founders, started in December 2014. An English-language venture, *Harbour Times*, headed by a former diplomat and targeting the international political community, appeared in 2014. *Initium* and *Fact Wire*, both launched in 2015, have won a reputation for high-quality in-depth and investigative reports. The English-language *Hong Kong Free Press* (2015) is an aggregator of translated stories with commentaries and some original reporting. *Hong Kong Citizen News* was formed in 2017 by senior journalists long associated with fighting for press freedom.

Professional media startups tend to focus on press freedom and stress editorial independence. The *Stand News*, for example, explained its appearance this way on its website: "We overlooked the challenge of operating independent media in this era in Hong Kong. We under-estimated the pressure cracking down on autonomous media. We . . . have not given up the dream of independent autonomous media. . . . The *Stand News* is the answer." Most of the above-mentioned professional media startups include commentaries critical of the mainland regime, although *Initium* and *Harbour Times* highlight their neutrality.

On the other side, several pro-establishment media operations were also launched around the time of the Umbrella Movement. They include: in 2013, the *Bastille Post*, *Speak Out Hong Kong*; in 2015, *Hong Kong Good News* and *Hong Kong G Pao*; and in 2016, *Dot Dot News*. Their commentaries focus on discrediting the democrats, particularly those advocating self-determination. Their news, where provided, portray the central Chinese government from a positive angle. *HK01*, launched in 2015, is more even-handed.

CONCLUSION

Studies of alternative media inevitably arrive at the conclusion that despite their agitational and mobilizational effects, the counterpublic formed around them is small in scale.[52] This is usually the case, as suggested by the low impact of the web radio alliance during the de facto referendum in Hong Kong in 2010. However, if rebellious mainstream media and independent professional startups are included under the banner of dissenting media, as justified and proposed in this analysis, the aggregate implications of dissenting media become substantial. The inter-connection among them afforded by social media further amplifies their effects.

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