

From mainstream to the margins: Regime-driven delegitimisation of Hong Kong's pro-democracy critical journalistic norms

Media, Culture & Society

1–20

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DOI: 10.1177/01634437261452172

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Abstract

The enactment of the Hong Kong National Security Law on 30 June 2020 provides a case for examining how state power seeks to reconfigure journalistic norms and media legitimacy. Following the NSL, multiple pro-democracy critical news outlets, including *Apple Daily* and *Stand News*, ceased operations or were restructured, and senior staff members were prosecuted under national security-related charges. Soon after, former staff launched new, small-scale news outlets. Drawing on the concepts of legitimacy and delegitimisation, this article examines how legal and discursive power is deployed to redefine the boundary between mainstream and alternative journalism, relegating previously recognised pro-democracy critical journalistic norms to the margins. The analysis demonstrates how news media legitimacy is actively constructed through state intervention, and how “alternative media” emerges as an outcome of delegitimisation rather than oppositional intent. By conceptualising media closure and marginalisation as processes of legitimacy reordering, the article contributes to theoretical debates on alternative media and journalistic norms.

Keywords

delegitimisation, media legitimacy, journalistic norms, alternative media, press freedom, media-state relations, Fourth Estate, Hong Kong

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Introduction

Twenty-two years after China resumed sovereignty over Hong Kong, the 2019–2020 Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) Movement saw the largest anti-government mobilisation since 1997. In response, China's legislature enacted the Hong Kong National Security Law (NSL) on 30 June 2020. Within 24 months, more than a dozen critical news outlets—including *Apple Daily* and *Stand News*—ceased operations (IFJ Asia-Pacific, 2022a), and their executives faced national-security prosecutions. Several previously influential, critical mainstream outlets were restructured, while the Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA) came under intensified political pressure. Yet between June 2021 and May 2022, over 20 news services targeting Hong Kong publics emerged (IFJ Asia-Pacific, 2022b). These small-scale outlets uphold the editorial ethos of their shuttered predecessors but operate as marginal and vulnerable alternatives. This article examines the delegitimisation of Hong Kong's pro-democracy, critical watchdog journalism after the NSL as an outcome of state action. Rather than treating media closure or marginalisation as a direct consequence of repression alone, it conceptualises these developments as the result of an active redefinition of what counts as legitimate journalism. In doing so, the article foregrounds the constructed nature of news media legitimacy and the central role of power in drawing and enforcing the boundary between mainstream and alternative media. It contributes to cross-national debates on media legitimacy by analysing how established journalistic norms are displaced under conditions of democratic backsliding and authoritarian governance.

The study draws on Beetham's (2013) tripartite conception of legitimacy, supplemented by Bar-Tal's (1989) definition of delegitimisation, Hallin's (1986) notion of the sphere of deviance, and Alexander's (2006) theorisation of the civil sphere, which are brought into dialogue to analyse shifts in journalistic legitimacy.

The central research question guiding this study is:

How can the post-NSL reclassification of pro-democracy critical journalistic norms in Hong Kong be understood in terms of media legitimacy and delegitimisation?

The article proceeds as follows. It first outlines the conceptual framework. It then contextualises the study by tracing shifts in Hong Kong's political news landscape since the 1980s, during which China increasingly became the object of pro-democracy critical journalism amid changing China–Hong Kong relations. Drawing on survey data and the cases of HKJA, *Apple Daily*, and *Stand News*, it shows that pro-democracy critical journalistic norms grounded in the Fourth Estate ideal were once jointly upheld by journalists and the Hong Kong public. The article then outlines the methods and analyses the Chinese–Hong Kong regime's delegitimising actions against this tradition. Finally, it examines the continuation of these journalistic norms among newly established, small-scale outlets operating as alternative media.

Conceptual framework

The concept of legitimacy

According to Max Weber (cited in Roth, 1978), a belief in legitimacy is necessary for any system of domination to endure. Beetham (2013: 11), however, rejects the idea that

legitimacy resides in belief alone: “A given power relationship is not legitimate because people believe in its legitimacy, but because it can be justified in terms of their beliefs.” For Beetham, legitimacy is multidimensional and assessable by objective criteria. Power exercised by one actor over another is fully legitimate only when three conditions are met (Beetham, 2013: 16):

- (1) *it conforms to established rules;*
- (2) *the rules can be justified by reference to beliefs shared by both dominant and subordinate; and*
- (3) *there is evidence of consent by the subordinate to the particular power relation.*

At the most basic level, power is considered legitimate if its acquisition and exercise conform to established rules, whether these take the form of laws, rulings, or conventions. This legal–procedural dimension provides rational grounds for compliance. Yet rule-conformity alone is insufficient: the rules must also be justified through shared normative beliefs. The third condition, expressed consent, symbolically affirms the position of the powerful and morally binds subordinates to the power relationship. Because these conditions vary by degree, legitimacy exists on a continuum rather than as a binary state.

Legitimacy of the news media

Applying Beetham’s framework to the news media, the subordinate includes audiences and other social institutions. News outlets influence their audiences through their construction of social reality and decisions about prominence, omission, and timing. They also shape society through interactions with other institutions in cultural production and mediatisation, reproducing existing power structures.

Legitimacy in the news media can be assessed on three levels:

- (1) Conformity to established rules

For news organisations, rule-conformity includes:

- a. legal dimensions such as registration and licencing; and
- b. regulatory compliance with broadcasting or publication requirements.

- (2) Normative legitimacy

This concerns the alignment between newsroom practices and widely shared beliefs about journalism’s proper role among audiences, advertisers, sources, peers, and the state. In liberal–pluralist societies, the Fourth Estate ideal has historically underpinned these shared beliefs (Curran, 2002), positioning journalism as contributing to democracy by reporting objectively, giving voice to citizens, enabling public discussion, and holding

power to account (Boyce, 1978). Such beliefs are reflected in codes of ethics, journalism curricula, opinion surveys, and official acknowledgements of watchdog functions.

(3) Expressed consent

This refers to observable support for particular outlets or practices. Indicators include audience behaviour (circulation, traffic, ratings, engagement, subscriptions, donations), advertiser backing, cooperation from sources, peer recognition (awards, citations), and official endorsements (committee membership, privileged access). Expressed-consent legitimacy varies across outlets depending on perceived credibility and alignment with audience expectations.

Conceptualising delegitimation

Delegitimation is widely discussed but seldom defined with conceptual precision. In social psychology, Bar-Tal (1989: 170) describes it as the “categorization of groups into extreme negative social categories which are excluded from human groups that are considered as acting within the limits of acceptable norms and/or values.”

In political communication terms, this exclusion corresponds to what Hallin (1986) conceptualises as the sphere of deviance. Hallin (1986: 117), analysing US media coverage during the Vietnam War, defines the sphere of deviance as “the realm of those political actors and views which journalists and the political mainstream of the society reject as unworthy of being heard.” It sits alongside the sphere of consensus and the sphere of legitimate controversy, each with distinct reporting standards.

Building on Bar-Tal and Hallin, I define delegitimation as the process through which the legitimacy of an actor is eroded to the point that it is judged to have gone beyond the limits of acceptable norms and recategorised into the sphere of deviance. Since legitimacy exists by degree, criticism that merely weakens legitimacy is not inherently delegitimising. Only when criticism functions to cast the target as outside socially accepted boundaries does it shift from contestation—Hallin’s sphere of legitimate controversy—to delegitimation proper.

Alexander’s (2006) theory of the civil sphere further clarifies how delegitimation operates across different dimensions of legitimacy. Mapped onto Beetham’s (2013) framework, public opinion polls reveal and construct expressed consent or dissent; the media interpret and articulate the civil sphere’s moral codes—the normative dimension; and the law ideally institutionalises and enforces these codes within the legal dimension (Alexander, 2006). However, non-civil institutions—including the state—can intrude into the civil sphere and distort these relationships, disrupting the alignment across legal, normative, and consent legitimacy.

Integrating Beetham’s (2013) framework and Alexander’s (2006) analysis, delegitimation is a multidimensional process in which pressures may operate unevenly across legal, normative, and consent-based dimensions. From this perspective, delegitimation in one dimension does not automatically produce delegitimation in the others, although sustained pressure may erode them over time.

Delegitimisation operates through both discursive and coercive means. Discursively, it appears in speech acts, media representations, and public performances—including judicial proceedings—which signal the moral classification of actors (Alexander, 2006). Coercively, it includes the deployment of legal and regulatory tools. Criminalisation is exemplary: it is simultaneously coercive and performative, publicly communicating deviance through institutional action.

Delegitimisation of the news media

News media legitimacy has recently come under challenge (Broersma, 2019). Digital expansion has fragmented audiences, weakening the expressed-consent legitimacy of mainstream outlets. In the United States and Europe, normative contestation comes both from within and outside civil society. Alt-right actors accuse mainstream media of ideological bias, while mainstream journalists frame alt-right outlets as violators of objectivity or as purveyors of misinformation. This mutual contestation signals a breakdown of shared journalistic ideals that once supported the Fourth Estate model (Waisbord, 2018). Yet alt-right media have expanded their audiences—and thus their expressed-consent legitimacy—through partisan framing and emotional appeals, despite their contested normative standing.

In other contexts, the state is the principal actor of media delegitimisation and possesses the institutional capacity to act across multiple levels. The law may function not as an expression of the civil code but as an instrument of domination. The state can criminalise news organisations, delegitimise the civil norms they articulate, and deter public support. Loss of legal validity diminishes a news organisation's communicative power, although shared civil and professional norms may prevent immediate normative delegitimisation.

Operationally, legal delegitimisation may take the form of prosecution, asset freezing, licencing revocation, or access restrictions. Normatively, it can involve redefining journalism's proper role through official statements, prosecutorial narratives, and state-aligned media campaigns. As for expressed consent, the state may restrict subscriptions, donations, or institutional partnerships, discouraging both public engagement and professional support.

This study examines a case of state-driven delegitimisation of the mainstream news media outside the Western context—Hong Kong, which is rapidly converging with China's authoritarian practices. Legal delegitimisation of major news organisations following the NSL prompted former employees to establish new outlets that carry forward the journalistic practices of the defunct organisations. The emergence of these outlets reflects the endurance of shared journalistic norms among practitioners, while their continued operation indicates that a degree of expressed-consent legitimacy persists among audiences despite sustained state efforts at delegitimisation.

Alternative versus mainstream news media

Earlier definitions of alternative news media typically position them in relation to mainstream media. Drawing on Western scholarship, Cheng (2009) conceptualises alternative (news) media as citizen-supported, democratically organised outlets that amplify marginal

voices. In this ideal type, they diverge from mainstream media across 10 domains—including purpose, audience, revenue and organisational form—differences that historically located them in a position of comparatively low normative and consent legitimacy.

With the expansion of networked digital technologies, the number and ideological orientation of alternative outlets has become more diverse, rendering earlier distinctions between “mainstream” and “alternative” less stable. Holt et al. (2019: 862) define alternative news media as a “self-perceived corrective” to legacy outlets, while recognising that audience and third-party perceptions may also underpin classification. Under this framework, alternative media may be differentiated from mainstream counterparts at four levels: (1) producers; (2) content; (3) organisation; and (4) system.

In more recent formulations, alternative outlets do not necessarily occupy a position of lower legitimacy. Where mainstream media no longer fulfil civil-sphere expectations, alternative outlets may possess higher normative or consent legitimacy among particular publics.

In China, authorities define “mainstream media” as influential Party-run propaganda outlets that promote official values (Gov.cn, 2019). In earlier periods when market-oriented media held greater influence, definitions also incorporated circulation, advertising, and social influence (Yin and Jin, 2012).

Field site

Hong Kong’s news media landscape has been shaped by intertwined political and technological shifts. Between the 1984 Sino–British Joint Declaration and the enactment of the NSL in mid-2020, the political orientation of the Chinese-language sector moved through three broad phases: an initial pro-China turn, a subsequent pro-democracy backlash, and an eventual state-driven recapture.

In the early 1980s, Hong Kong’s print sector operated with minimal regulation, while broadcast news was expected to maintain impartiality. The Chinese-language landscape comprised four main components: (1) commercially oriented newspapers, far more widely read than political titles; (2) party papers affiliated with either the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) or Taiwan’s Kuomintang; (3) commercial television and radio newsrooms; and (4) the de facto public broadcaster, Radio Television Hong Kong (*RTHK*). By the mid-1990s, pro-Taiwan newspapers had closed and commercial outlets increasingly aligned with Beijing (Frisch et al., 2018). A political backlash emerged in 2003 as democratic aspirations met expanding digital communication. The government’s attempt to legislate a national security provision from the Basic Law was opposed by 55.3% of respondents and supported by 16.4% (Public Opinion Programme, University of Hong Kong (POP), 2003), prompting a large protest on 1 July 2003. Only a few outlets—most notably *Apple Daily* and *RTHK*—openly criticised the bill (Nip, 2019). In its aftermath, new digital-native outlets emerged, including web-based radio stations, a citizen-journalism site, and a new online forum. Facebook’s rollout of a Chinese-language interface in 2008 interconnected these platforms into a civic communication network that supported social movements and enabled the emergence of additional pro-democracy digital alternative media, especially during the 2014 Umbrella Movement.

From 2013 onwards, pro-China digital outlets operated by pro-Beijing figures or CCP-linked actors appeared to counter this ecosystem. In the 2010s, mainland capital and pro-China businesspeople also invested in or acquired major legacy organisations, including Television Broadcasts Limited and the *South China Morning Post*. Together, these moves marked the state's attempted recapture of the media sector. At the same time, distrust of the Chinese authorities intensified, culminating in the 2019–20 Anti-ELAB Movement. Concurrently, China-critical outlets expanded in scale and influence. By mid-2020, when China passed the NSL, at least 52 Chinese-language general news providers were active, differentiated by political stance and journalistic norms (Nip and Berthelie, 2023).

Methods

This study argues that in pre-NSL Hong Kong, pro-democracy critical watchdog journalistic norms were shared between the public and the profession, and that after the NSL, Chinese–Hong Kong authorities sought to delegitimise these norms, leading to their marginalisation. To demonstrate this shift, the analysis draws on survey data and the cases of the HKJA, *Apple Daily*, and *Stand News*. *Apple Daily* and *Stand News* were selected because they faced delegitimation at the level of legal validity, beyond the normative and consent-based pressures experienced by other outlets.

For *Apple Daily* and *Stand News*, the study examines: (1) notable coverage as manifestations of journalistic norms; (2) audience indicators; and (3) expert evaluations and formal recognition as evidence of normative legitimacy. For the HKJA, the analysis focuses on its initiatives in setting journalistic standards, advocating press freedom, and promoting public accountability as indicators of its custodial role in the Fourth Estate ideal.

To analyse state-led delegitimation, the study examines: (1) court documents and prosecution statements; (2) official government statements; (3) press releases; and (4) commentaries in CCP-affiliated media. These materials were identified through purposive searches informed by my professional experience as a former Hong Kong journalist and research familiarity with the news sector.

To assess how formerly mainstream norms were pushed to the margins, the study examined news outlets founded between June 2021 and May 2022, as identified by IFJ Asia-Pacific (2022b). Of the 23 outlets recorded, eight produced socially or politically oriented content relevant to the research question. For these eight outlets, the analysis: (1) reviewed mission statements; (2) conducted interviews with one representative from each outlet between 5 October and 7 November 2022 (Human Research Ethics Committee, University of Sydney, 2019/207); (3) reviewed published content and audience interactions on Facebook; and (4) recorded follower counts.

Pro-democracy critical journalistic norms in pre-NSL Hong Kong

Evidence from multiple sources demonstrates that pro-democracy critical-watchdog journalistic norms enjoyed broad professional and public support in pre-NSL Hong Kong.

Hong Kong journalists uphold Fourth Estate ideal

The pro-China shift noted earlier—prior to the digital-era backlash of the 2000s—occurred largely at the level of proprietors, who were incorporated into China’s political–economic networks and imposed self-censorship within their organisations to avoid antagonising Beijing. Among journalists, however, the Fourth Estate ideal remained widely embraced. A 1990 survey found that journalists overwhelmingly endorsed objective reporting (91%), accuracy over timeliness (87%), and the media’s role as a watchdog of government (85%) (Chan et al., 1992). A 2012 survey similarly reported that 80% of journalists considered “monitoring and scrutinising political leaders” to be an extremely or very important role, while 79.8% held the same view about “reporting things as they are” (Lee, 2016). Instances of newsroom resistance to management-imposed censorship (e.g. Ejinsight, 2015) further illustrate the profession’s normative commitment to watchdog journalism. In these cases, HKJA publicly supported the journalists involved (e.g. HKJA, 2014).

HKJA

In 1984, before the Sino–British Joint Declaration was finalised, HKJA surveyed its members and wrote to officials urging the inclusion of freedom of speech, press freedom and freedom to publish in the agreement (HKJA, n.d.). In the same year, it initiated judicial review proceedings against a magistrate’s decision to prohibit reporting of a preliminary hearing concerning fraud and corruption in a public company (HKJA, n.d.). When the government announced in 2002 its intention to legislate a national security provision under Article 23 of the Basic Law, HKJA conducted public education and lobbying against the proposal (HKJA, n.d.).

HKJA has published an annual report on press freedom since 1994, documenting developments in Hong Kong up to its final issue in 2022. From 1996 to 2021, it co-organised the Human Rights Press Awards, which accepted global entries until its cancellation in 2022 due to legal risks associated with national security prosecutions.

HKJA has also helped preserve the factual record of politically sensitive events. Following China’s military crackdown on protesters in 1989, it published two editions of *People Will Not Forget*, comprising eyewitness accounts of the pro-democracy movement by Hong Kong journalists. On the 20th anniversary, it released a reprint; on the 30th anniversary, it published commemorative accounts on its YouTube channel, “I Am a Journalist, My June 4 Story.”

HKJA’s advocacy of the Fourth Estate ideal is shared by Hong Kong journalists, as evidenced by the adoption of the Joint Code of Ethics—formulated on the basis of HKJA’s own Code of Ethics—by four journalist associations in 2000 (Legislative Council, 2000). The Joint Code’s preamble emphasises freedom of speech, press freedom, and the principles of truth, objectivity and fairness. The public-interest clause—justifying the overriding of other principles in order to expose “any unlawful activity, abuse of power, neglect of duty, or other misconduct”—crystallises the watchdog ideal. Notably, one of the adopting associations was the pro-China Hong Kong Federation of Journalists, signalling broad professional acceptance of these norms.

Before 2019, HKJA was widely regarded as the representative body of Hong Kong journalists, and the norms it advocated received official acknowledgement. In 1998, then

Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa attended HKJA's annual ball as a guest speaker. Candidates in the 2012 and 2017 Chief Executive elections all signed the press-freedom charter drafted by HKJA.

Hong Kong public supports Fourth Estate ideal

Survey data likewise show that the public shared journalists' normative commitments. Between 2013 and 2019, journalists perceived press freedom to have declined from 42.0 to 36.2 on a 0–100 scale, while the public perceived a similar decline from 49.4 to 41.9 (HKJA, 2021). Even before the NSL, more respondents rated press freedom as unsatisfactory (54.0%) than satisfactory (32.9%) in March 2020 (Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute (PORI), 2024). Public concern about self-censorship also grew: the proportion of respondents who believed there was no self-censorship in news organisations fell from 40.7% in 2008 to 20.2% in 2019 (Centre for Communication and Public Opinion Survey, Chinese University of Hong Kong (CCPOS), 2020b).

Apple Daily

By 2021, *Apple Daily* was Hong Kong's most-used *paid* news service, both offline and online (Newman et al., 2021). It had the largest Facebook following among all news outlets (2.835 million; Nip and Berthelier, 2023), and its final edition, published on 24 June 2021, sold 1 million copies in the city of 7-million people. These indicators show substantial expressed-consent legitimacy for its journalistic practices.

When launched in 1995, *Apple Daily* became known for sensational reporting (Weisenhaus, 2005). A 1998 scandal involving a staged story prompted a consumer boycott; the paper responded with a front-page apology, acknowledging public expectations for truthful reporting. In 1999, 2 years after the handover, major corporations started withdrawing advertising from *Apple Daily* under political pressure (Leung, 2006; Pulse HK, 2025).

On 1 July 2003, *Apple Daily* ran a prominent front-page call for public participation in a large protest against the proposed Article 23 legislation, resonating with the anti-government sentiment. During the 2014 Umbrella Movement, when localist sentiment gained traction, its "one person, one photo, support the students" Facebook campaign attracted strong engagement (Lin, 2017). In the 2019–20 Anti-ELAB Movement, its founder Jimmy Lai participated personally in multiple rallies. His personal appeals to *Apple Daily*'s readers fetched the news outlet 80,000 paid subscriptions within 3 months (Pulse HK, 2025). A 2021 survey found that respondents clearly identified *Apple Daily*, *RTHK* and *Stand News* as pro-democracy media outlets (Lee et al., 2025).

Consistent with the Fourth Estate ideal, *Apple Daily* produced notable investigative exposés. In 2003, it revealed that Financial Secretary Antony Leung had purchased a car without declaring it prior to announcing a new tax on vehicle purchases. The report prompted a corruption investigation and Leung's resignation. In 2018, the paper uncovered construction irregularities in the Sha Tin–Central rail line, including reports that steel reinforcement bars had been cut. Stories such as these were often based on public tip-offs (Mok, 2011), reflecting audience identification with its journalistic mission.

Apple Daily was the only paid newspaper whose credibility increased between 2013 and 2019, during a period of general decline in trust. Meanwhile, CCP-run newspapers—*Ta Kung Pao*, *Wen Wei Po* and the *Hong Kong Commercial Daily*—were consistently rated lowest in credibility except for one tabloid that later folded (Centre for Communication and Public Opinion Survey, Chinese University of Hong Kong (CCPOS), 2020a). These patterns illustrate public endorsement of critical journalistic norms over more compliant, pro-government norms. *Apple Daily*'s journalism also received expert recognition through multiple awards, including a second runner-up prize for Best News Reporting in the 2003 Best Journalism Award for the Antony Leung story.

Although *Apple Daily* was the most commercially prominent China-critical outlet, it was part of a wider ecosystem that included critical digital-native platforms and critical programmes from *RTHK*, *Cable TV*, and *Now TV*. *Stand News* was a leading example of the digital natives in the ecosystem.

Stand News

After relaunching in 2014 (having previously operated as *House News*), *Stand News* grew rapidly as a small-scale, non-profit digital outlet. By mid-2020, it had become a multi-award-winning platform with Hong Kong's second-largest Facebook following (1.65 million; Nip and Berthelie, 2023). In credibility surveys, *Stand News* consistently ranked as the top online outlet, and in 2019 it was rated third overall—behind only *Now TV* and *RTHK* (Centre for Communication and Public Opinion Survey, Chinese University of Hong Kong (CCPOS), 2020a).

Public support for *Stand News*'s journalism was particularly evident during the 2019–20 protests. Donations increased from HK\$6 million in 2018 to HK\$80 million in 2019 (Mok, 2022), contributed through 135,000 individual deposits (The Standard, 2022). The outlet's live stream of the 21 July 2019 Yuen Long mob attack—in which men in white shirts indiscriminately beat commuters at a Mass Transit Railway station, widely believed to be pro-Beijing rural group members mobilised to punish Anti-ELAB protesters—became emblematic of its role: reporter Gwyneth Ho continued filming despite being physically assaulted, while police failed to intervene and most attackers were later not prosecuted. Ho's coverage won two Human Rights Press Awards in 2020.

Taken together, the cases of HKJA, *Apple Daily* and *Stand News*—supported by survey evidence—demonstrate that the Fourth Estate ideal underpinned shared norms among journalists and the public in pre-NSL Hong Kong. These norms were widely practised, institutionally recognised and publicly affirmed. However, following the NSL's enactment, they became the focus of systematic delegitimation by the Chinese–Hong Kong authorities.

Delegitimation of pro-democracy critical watchdog journalistic norms post-NSL

After the 1997 handover, Hong Kong retained its British-inherited legal framework, enabling pro-democracy China-critical watchdog journalism to persist despite mounting political and economic pressure. This regulatory environment changed fundamentally

with the enactment of the National Security Law (NSL) in 2020 and the establishment of a national security court. A previously dormant sedition law was revived and additional security legislation introduced. Within 2 years, at least 13 critical news providers closed; *RTHK*, *Cable TV News* and *Now News*—each previously regarded as credible—underwent restructuring, and the HKJA came under sustained pressure. This section examines how formerly mainstream critical journalistic norms were delegitimised through the cases of *Apple Daily*, *Stand News*, and the HKJA.

Criminalising Apple Daily and Stand News

Jimmy Lai and an *Apple Daily* senior executive were arrested in August 2020. The newspaper continued publishing until June 2021, when five additional senior staff were arrested and its assets frozen, forcing its closure. On 15 December 2025, Lai and *Apple Daily* were convicted of one count of conspiracy to publish seditious articles and one count of conspiracy to collude with foreign forces to endanger national security. Lai was also convicted of a second charge of conspiring to collude with foreign forces.

Stand News was prosecuted on the same sedition charge. After reporting on the Pandora Papers in October 2021—coverage that included offshore holdings linked to former Chief Executives Tung Chee-hwa and Leung Chun-ying—Leung accused the outlet of acting as a foreign agent. On 29 December 2021, *Stand News* was raided, its assets frozen, and seven editors and directors arrested. On 29 August 2024, former chief editor Chung Pui-kuen, acting chief editor Patrick Lam, and the outlet's parent company were convicted of conspiring to publish seditious articles.

Although the NSL was formally non-retrospective, the court repeatedly emphasised that Lai was not charged for conduct prior to its enactment. This emphasis makes clear that the NSL marked a reset of the legal boundary governing permissible journalistic practices. Enacted by China's legislature rather than Hong Kong's, the NSL provides no assurance that the norms it enforces align with those that had previously been regarded as legitimate in Hong Kong. Through their rulings, the courts reclassified practices that had enjoyed broad public and professional support—argued above—as unlawful, establishing the legal conditions for normative delegitimation.

Normative delegitimation of Apple Daily

In the Lai and *Apple Daily* judgement, the court portrayed Lai as harbouring “deep resentment and hatred for the Chinese Communist Party” and described *Apple Daily* as having “‘metamorphosed’ into a newspaper that opposed the HKSAR and the PRC Government” after Lai assumed active editorial control around the Occupy Central Movement in 2014, using the paper to “encourage people to seek for democracy and to take to the streets to put up resistance” (Between HKSAR, et al., 2025: 13–14).

Lai argued that *Apple Daily's* core values were “freedom, democracy and the rule of law” (Between HKSAR, et al., 2025: 587). The court used this articulation as evidence that Lai used the paper to pursue an “anti-PRC agenda” aimed at “chang[ing] the CCP's values to those of the Western world and counterbalanc[ing] China's influence,” and ultimately to “change the regime of the CCP” (Between HKSAR, et al., 2025: 824).

On the sedition charge against *Apple Daily*, the prosecution relied on 161 articles drawn from Lai's column, the paper's editorials, the Apple Forum, and Lai's live broadcasts as evidence that the outlet had engaged in the following practices:

- expressing persistent “hostility and bias against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the Central People’s Government, and the HKSAR Government,” portraying them as “enemies acting with intent to harm Hong Kong people”;
- ridiculing and derogating officials to a degree said to incite hatred or contempt, including describing former Chief Executive Carrie Lam as “evil,” referring to President Xi as “Emperor Xi,” and labelling the police as “black cops”;
- appealing to the public to resist the HKSAR Government; and
- requesting foreign sanctions against Hong Kong officials, both explicitly before the enactment of the NSL and through “indirect but readily understood expressions” thereafter (Between HKSAR, et al., 2025: 818).

The court rejected the defence that such criticisms were intended to expose policy deficiencies in the hope that they would be corrected—a defence previously available under provisions of the Crimes Ordinance repealed in 2024—holding instead that the articles had far exceeded any legally permissible boundary of free expression (Between HKSAR, et al., 2025).

On the charge of Lai and *Apple Daily* conspiring to collude with foreign forces to request foreign sanctions, the court ruled that Lai had masterminded an agreement with his foreign connections prior to the NSL’s promulgation to sanction China and senior Hong Kong officials, using *Apple Daily*, his personal Twitter account, and his articles published in and interviews with foreign media. While noting that after the NSL Lai ceased making explicit sanction requests and that *Apple Daily’s* senior management attempted to reduce the risk of staff breaching the law, the court held that the campaign nevertheless continued through “a more indirect and subtle strategy” (Between HKSAR, et al., 2025: 829–830).

Evidence relied upon by the court against *Apple Daily* after the NSL included:

- publishing a front-page report headlined “Evil Law Enacted, One Country Two Systems Died”;
- publishing Lai’s opinion articles “Time is a weapon” and “The great era is coming soon”;
- publishing two editorials, “Who is Afraid of CCP Sanctions and Oppressions?” and “Will US Sanction Carrie Lam?”; and
- producing and promoting a series of Lai’s live chat programmes, in which his “anti-China stance” was said to permeate each episode, including statements such as: “If we can’t change China, China, as so big, are going to change us” (Between HKSAR, et al., 2025: 833).

Outside the courtroom, the Secretary for Security, Tang Ping-keung, further normatively delegitimised *Apple Daily* by describing it as “the propaganda machine which endangered national security” (Info.gov.hk, 2022).

Normative delegitimisation of *Stand News*

A similar logic structured the *Stand News* ruling. Conviction was based on 11 articles, comprising two personality profile interviews and nine commissioned commentaries. The prosecution framed *Stand News* variously as “a political platform” and “an advocacy media organisation with a definite political stance” (HKSAR v Best Pencil: 46), citing its launch statement and charter pledging to uphold “Hong Kong’s core values of democracy, human rights, freedom, rule of law and justice.” The court characterised *Stand News*’s political stance as “localism for Hongkongers’ autonomy excluding China,” (HKSAR v Best Pencil: 240), and as “support [for] the anti-ELAB and the protesters” (HKSAR v Best Pencil: 254).

The defence invoked the Fourth Estate role of the press, arguing that media have a duty to monitor government (HKSAR v Best Pencil). The court rejected any normative protection for such a role, stating that while Hong Kong law neither requires compliance with professional codes nor prohibits advocacy journalism: “any speech or publication that endangers national security or public order will be restricted” (HKSAR v Best Pencil: 99). Arguments that the disputed articles constituted less than 1% of *Stand News*’ output, or that the outlet also published interviews with Chinese officials and pro-establishment figures, were dismissed.

The court subordinated all other considerations to national security. Once a publication was assessed as potentially detrimental to national security and intended to undermine state authority, conviction would “as a matter of course” satisfy the proportionality requirement, requiring no further balancing (HKSAR v Best Pencil: 97).

This priority was evident in the court’s treatment of the repealed statutory provision that previously embedded a Fourth Estate conception of the press, which it held to be “clearly not applicable to speeches lacking an objective factual basis but having the intention of seriously undermining the authority of the Central Authorities or the SAR Government” (HKSAR v Best Pencil: 84).

The government has repeatedly asserted that the criminalisation of *Apple Daily* and *Stand News* is unrelated to press freedom, implicitly reaffirming press freedom as a shared value. Both the court and the Secretary for Security nevertheless invoked the “special duties and obligations” of the press—most notably the duty to “safeguard national security”—as legitimate restrictions under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. In practice, however, the post-NSL interpretation of national security is expansive. The court held that once a publication is found to possess seditious intention, there is no need to assess whether it poses any actual risk to national security (HKSAR v Best Pencil (Hong Kong) Limited, et al., 2024).

In assessing such risk, the court highlighted its contextual considerations, describing *Stand News* as “the most credible online media used by almost all young people” (HKSAR v Best Pencil: 149), against a post-2019 backdrop in which surveys showed fluctuating levels of distrust in the Central Government, peaking at nearly 60%.

Taken together, judicial reasoning and official statements indicate that news organisations are expected to assist the state in safeguarding national security and to refrain from the critical watchdog role previously regarded as legally defensible under a liberal-pluralist ideal. By redefining journalism’s appropriate function, the court’s rulings operate both legally and discursively to delegitimise formerly mainstream professional norms.

Normative delegitimisation of HKJA

Delegitimisation extended beyond news organisations to the professional field. HKJA's relationship with the government deteriorated sharply after June 2019, as CCP-affiliated media repeatedly portrayed the association as an anti-China political group destabilising the city. These outlets questioned HKJA's professional representativeness and called for its dissolution. In September 2021, the Secretary for Security accused HKJA of "breaching professional ethics" for recruiting students under the slogan "everyone is a journalist," in a front-page interview with *Ta Kung Pao*.

Such discursive attacks repositioned HKJA within Hallin's (1986) sphere of deviance by recoding its activities as politically subversive rather than professionally grounded. While the association's legal status was not withdrawn, its normative and expressed-consent legitimacy was systematically eroded (Beetham, 2013), discouraging public affiliation and institutional cooperation. This erosion became materially evident by 2025, when five HKJA events were cancelled by hotels, cinemas, and sports venues within 2 months.

Continuation of pro-democracy critical journalism as alternative media

While critical outlets were closed, at least 23 news services targeting Hong Kong publics were launched within 24 months of the NSL. This section examines eight such outlets that continue to practise journalistic norms previously regarded as mainstream but now operate at the margins as alternative media. Four are based outside Hong Kong due to safety concerns. Most interviewed journalists had over 15 years' experience and previously worked for organisations that had closed. These outlets publish hard news, features, and commentary online, with teams ranging from one to eight journalists (Table 1).

Valuing truthful reporting

Across the sample, accuracy and truthfulness remain foundational. *The Witness* continues first-hand, impartial court reporting using conventions long established in legacy media. *The Chaser* and *Commons*, despite operating overseas, continue to include official statements when available. Where access to elite sources is limited, outlets rely more on interpretive analysis. As Carl¹ explained, "We journalists have the ability to see through the news; people need to learn how to read news."

Preserving watchdog journalism

Purpose statements consistently articulated journalism as a watchdog practice. *Commons* states that it serves readers who support democracy and freedom, while *The Chaser* highlights commitments to "protecting press freedom," "safeguarding democracy and human rights," and "connecting Hongkongers globally." These orientations were echoed in interviews. Chris observed that "media has the responsibility and power to expand the space of press freedom," Sue described journalism as a "privilege," and Ben stressed the importance of scrutinising those in power. Editorial priorities reflect this orientation:

Table 1. News outlets interviewed.

Name of outlet	Location	Date of first FB post	FB follower count 12 months after first post ^a	Operation	Content & genre at time of interview
VforVengeance (記者 梁嘉麗)	HK → US → Taiwan	25 Jun 2021	36,081	Solo	Original profile features of anti-ELAB protesters & civil society activists involved in court cases
Reporter Alvin Chan (記者 陳玉明)	HK	26 Jun 2021	35,681	Solo	-HK hard news reporting including political court cases -Reposting others' stories -features of anniversary of anti-ELAB protests
Commons (同文)	Taiwan	23 Oct 2021	39,215	Team	-Domestic & foreign news -interviews with overseas Hongkongers -Commentaries -Various genres -Reposting
The Chaser ^b (追·新聞)	UK	25 Feb 2022	74,479	Team	-UK news related to HK -HK hard news -News on TW Strait -International news
HK City Creation (大城誌)	HK	1 Mar 2022	18,027	Solo	-Stories of individuals especially those in HK social movements -HK hard news -Video stories
ReNews	HK	8 Apr 2022	87,532	Solo	-Hard news -News commentary
Hong Kong Matters/Hong Kong Metas (香港新聞連線 / 香港元宇宙)	Taiwan	10 Apr 2022	4196	Team	News aggregation: -hard news -business news -entertainment news -commentaries
The Witness (法庭線)	HK	15 May 2022	63,145	Team	HK court news reporting

^aThe follower numbers were collected via CrowdTangle on 13 August 2024.

^bThe Chaser merged with another news outlet launched after my interviews were conducted to become Pulse Hong Kong (追光者) in October 2025.

except for outlets focused primarily on international affairs, most concentrate on public accountability and human rights in Hong Kong and among diasporic communities.

Giving people a voice

Several outlets adopt feature-oriented approaches that amplify the voices of ordinary people. Chris described the encouragement derived from readers' responses: "It gave strength to many people. . . ." Leah, who documents anti-ELAB protesters, explained that her work "creates visibility to help others know that many others think the same as they do." Such practices resemble civic journalism, supporting democratic engagement and community-building among Hongkongers locally and abroad.

Legal risks nevertheless shape boundaries. Topics such as police violence, exiled activists, or "liberate Hong Kong" are avoided. Leah paused writing for months due to fear, while Carl refrains from covering diaspora news to avoid allegations of "collusion with foreign forces."

Externally imposed marginalisation

Despite their marginal position, interviewees did not view their journalistic norms as alternative. Informal ties with mainstream journalists persist, including information-sharing and, in some cases, continued submission of questions to the Hong Kong Government Information Services. These interactions signal continuity with pre-NSL routines rather than the formation of a discrete dissident ecosystem.

Operationally, the outlets align with alternative media characteristics—small scale, digital distribution, and unstable funding (Cheng, 2009). Interviewees acknowledged the constraints of marginality. Carl questioned whether a "one-person operation" qualifies as a news organisation, while Lawrence noted the absence of commercial registration. Limited staffing, precarious funding, and institutional exclusion restrict audience reach and weaken expressed-consent legitimacy (Table 1). Although these outlets embody journalistic values once central to Hong Kong's mainstream, they now operate as alternative media within a system increasingly aligned with a state-directed model.

Conclusion

This article has examined how pro-democracy, critical journalistic norms in Hong Kong were displaced from mainstream legitimacy to the margins following the NSL. Through the cases of *Apple Daily*, *Stand News*, and the HKJA—supported by survey evidence—it demonstrated that these norms were widely shared among journalists and the public prior to the NSL. Using the concepts of legitimacy and delegitimisation, the analysis showed how state-led legal and discursive actions withdrew legal validity, redefined professional norms, and discouraged public expressions of support, while elements of this journalistic culture persist through newly established alternative outlets.

Delegitimisation extends beyond the cases examined. Journalists practising critical reporting, both inside and outside Hong Kong, have been subjected to harassment and public warnings that portray their work as criminal or subversive. In mid-2024, journalists from at least 13 organisations reported coordinated dissemination of their personal

information to family members and social networks, rendering association with them hazardous and producing a chilling effect. Such practices are reinforced by routine delegitimising warnings. For example, a 10 January 2022 commentary in *Wen Wei Po* asked, “Does *Ming Pao* want to inherit *Apple Daily*’s seditious role?”.

The November 2025 Wang Fuk Court fire in Tai Po—Hong Kong’s deadliest blaze in nearly eight decades, killing 168 people—demonstrates how these dynamics continue to operate. As newly established alternative outlets raised questions of accountability around substandard construction materials and emergency response failures, the Office for Safeguarding National Security summoned foreign correspondents, warning them against reporting that allegedly smeared the government’s disaster relief work. A student who launched a petition demanding accountability was arrested on suspicion of sedition, and a columnist was detained for critical commentary on the blaze.

As critical journalism is pushed to the margins, CCP-aligned outlets gain privileged access to officials, strengthening a pro-China journalistic model. Whether this reordering will reshape how Hong Kong journalists and publics understand the role of the press remains uncertain. Should it do so, it would mark a reconfiguration of the hierarchy of journalistic norms in Hong Kong.

More broadly, the Hong Kong case illustrates how challenges to journalistic legitimacy unfold under authoritarian conditions. While mechanisms vary across contexts, the underlying struggle concerns who defines legitimate journalism. The Hong Kong case demonstrates that news legitimacy is not an inherent attribute of media institutions but the outcome of power-laden processes of recognition, withdrawal, and redistribution. Boundaries between mainstream and alternative media are therefore not fixed but produced through power relations.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks Professor Kristoffer Holt, Linnaeus University, Sweden for his helpful comments to an earlier draft of the paper, and Mr Edward K.C. Li, PhD candidate, Graduate Institute of Development Studies, National Chengchi University for arranging and co-executing the interviews.

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Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee, University of Sydney (approval no. 2019/207) on May 17, 2019.

Consent to participate

Informed consent was obtained verbally before participation.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Note

1. Interviewees' names have been changed to protect their identity. The names in the "Name of outlet" column in Table 1 are publicly available information.

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