

## **The Dynamics of Mainstream and Internet Alternative Media in Hong Kong: A Case Study of the Umbrella Movement<sup>+</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

Existing literatures recognise the Chinese government's intention since the handover was to assert political control over Hong Kong's mainstream media by enforcing self-censorship. This is evident by the way politically sensitive news were dealt with, which directly or indirectly relate to the interests of China. Since late September 2014, the Umbrella Movement (or Umbrella Revolution) has become a delicate issue in both China and Hong Kong. For locals, this movement was a student-led campaign to champion universal suffrage without unreasonable political screening; however, Beijing considered the campaign a threat to its authority. So, how did Hong Kong media respond to this political conundrum? This study found that most mainstream media organisations took an anti-movement stance and practise self-censorship so as not to offend the Chinese government. For this reason many Hong Kong people became dissatisfied and turn to the Internet to criticise mainstream media and to support the Umbrella Movement. Overall, online media have created an alternative political space attracting critically minded and democratic-oriented Hong Kong citizens.

**Keywords:** *the Umbrella Movement, media self-censorship, Internet alternative media, mainstream media, Hong Kong and China*

### **1. Introduction**

Existing literatures recognise that the Chinese government has been attempting to control Hong Kong media through inducing media self-censorship since the 1997 handover, which is seen as a threat to press freedom (Lee and Lin, 2006; Ma, 2007). A survey in 2014 showed that 49.1 per cent of citizens believed the Hong Kong media practised self-censorship (HKUPOP,

2014a) and 56.7 per cent believed the media had reservations about criticising the Chinese government (HKUPOP, 2014b). The problem of media self-censorship is especially evident in relation to politically sensitive news topics. These include Taiwan independence, commemoration of the Tiananmen incident, and the legal status of the Falun Gong in Hong Kong, because they either directly or indirectly challenge the legitimacy and authority of Beijing (Lee and Chan, 2009). Thus, media treatments of these topics are also what most academics and commentators make reference to when evaluating media self-censorship (Cheung, 2003; Fung, 2007). Given this situation, a series of academic works have found that most mainstream media organisations tend to avoid these sensitive matters or use alternative means (inviting external commentaries or employing foreign media reports) to handle these issues in order not to provoke the Chinese leaders (Lee, 2000; 2007).

Since September 2014, the Umbrella Movement has become another politically sensitive topic. It used blocking of main roads as a protest strategy, urging the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPCSC) to retract the framework of the Chief Executive Election method in 2017, and calling for more democracy in Hong Kong. In local eyes, the movement was mainly led by university and secondary school students to fight for a Chief Executive Election without “unreasonable political screening”. However, in Beijing's assessment, this movement was a challenge to its authority. Some argued this campaign was a “colour revolution”, funded by Western governments, in an attempt to overthrow the Chinese regime in Hong Kong. A number of pro-China media even declared this movement is in fact fighting for “the independence of Hong Kong”. It is under this circumstance that news of the Umbrella Movement was intentionally filtered or blocked on the mainland. So, how have mainstream and Internet alternative media in Hong Kong responded to this politically sensitive topic?

By examining the case study of the Umbrella Movement, this article argues that most mainstream media organisations took an anti-movement stance and continuously practised self-censorship whereas an increasing number of Hong Kong people criticised their performance and paid more attention to the Internet alternative media, mostly offering pro-movement information. Thus, the circulation of Internet news expanded alarmingly during the movement.

## **2. Theoretical Review: The Dynamics of Mainstream and Internet Alternative Media**

In the field of media studies, the dynamic between mainstream and Internet alternative media has developed into an important theoretical perspective. By definition, “Internet alternative media” refers to media organisations with their

own news reporting team (e.g. editors and journalists) and news reports which mainly rely on the Internet (e.g. Facebook or webpage, etc.) for message delivery (Morone, 2013) while “mainstream media” refers to the traditional media organisations (e.g. TV, newspaper and radio, etc.) that capture the attention of the majority of society and hold the symbolic power to present and define “social reality” (Couldry, 2000). With the Internet having become popular in recent decades, the production and distribution cost for operating alternative media organisations has decreased, thus facilitating people’s participation in coproduction of alternative media content and reaching a wide audience. More importantly, Internet alternative media provide more options to audience instead of only relying on traditional media (Bennett and Iyengar, 2008). Correspondingly, there are increasing numbers of studies which are interested in the overall impact of online alternative media usage on mainstream media.

Some studies adopt an “inclusive approach” and argue that Internet alternative media can facilitate the activation and expression of viewpoints which are excluded from mainstream media (Bareiss, 2001; Dahlberg, 2007; Kenix, 2011). They believe mainstream media may ignore voices of the marginal or minority groups (e.g. animal rights, LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) or ethnic minority issues) while the Internet offers an “alternative public realm” (Downing 1988) which reinforces the views of the “particular interpretative communities” (Manning, 2001, p. 226). The ultimate aim of Internet alternative media is to supplement mainstream media by offering more angles to explain issues. Hájeka and Carpentier (2015), for instance, applied the case of the Czech Republic and argued that the existence of online alternative media helps in the promotion of media diversity.

However, some other studies take an “exclusive approach” and argue that Internet alternative media aim to challenge the “hegemonic power” of mainstream media (Couldry and Curran, 2003). Mainstream media have long been criticised for being too pro-establishment (Boykoff, 2006) which reflects the conservative values (McChesney, 2000) and defends the interests of authority (Coyer, Dowmunt and Fountain, 2007). But, it captures the attention of the social majority and frames “social reality”. As mainstream media organisations tend to rely on advertisements from private companies and official information sources for funding, the phenomenon of “selective exposure” becomes common, especially for sensitively political issues, in order not to offend the power holders such as the government and major business corporations (Stround, 2008). As a result, it creates a sense of media scepticism, which refers to the public perception that media organisations are not objective in their reporting and sacrifice their professionals for personal gains (Kohring and Matthes, 2007). Tsfati and Cappella (2003) found that intense scepticism and erosion of trust in mainstream media could contribute

to Internet alternative media usage. Currently, this school of thought has further developed into two aspects to examine this argument.

The first is an audience perspective. Tsfati (2010), for instance, conducted a quantitative survey regarding the case of the United States and found that Americans who trust the media read more mainstream news whereas those who mistrust mainstream media read more news information from the Internet. Studies of the Internet have also covered Hong Kong. Leung and Lee (2014) found that Hong Kong people who perceive media self-censorship as a series problem are more likely to be Internet alternative media users.

The second is a content-provider perspective. Larsson (2014) conducted a qualitative interview study in Sweden and argued that many Internet alternative media producers and citizen opinion writers started or participate in online media organisations due to the dissatisfaction with mainstream media. The findings show that many expressed counter-hegemonic ideas and oppose the dominant ideas of media and politics. In light of the rapid increase of Internet alternative media usage during the Umbrella Movement, this paper also applies the content-provider angle to validate this theory.

### 3. Research Methods

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed in this study. In order to evaluate the performance of mainstream media, content analysis and case study were adopted. Seventeen newspapers were selected due to their significance in the media scene in Hong Kong to analyse their political positions from headline stories and editorials during the Umbrella Movement from 29th September to 15th December 2014. The original data set was mainly obtained from Wisenews search engine. Tabulations have been compiled to analyse the empirical patterns that underline the political stance during the movement. “Pro-movement” refers to the position in support of the movement, condemning the government and police forces whereas “anti-movement” means the position criticising the movement as well as supporting the government and police (for details see Table 1). “Neutral” refers to balancing the interests of both sides. For television and radio news, a series of case studies was chosen to examine their performance.

For the sake of gaining a primary understanding of the rise of Internet alternative media, in-depth interviews were conducted with content-providers (e.g. founders, Chief Executive Officers and journalists) from online alternative media. An interview guideline was designed to ask some standard questions about their organisational and personal experience. The study focused on why they found or joined the online alternative media, their personal perception towards mainstream media, attractiveness of their news reports, their daily operations and the prospects for future development.

#### **4. The Challenge of Media Self-censorship in Hong Kong**

Since the official agreement on the transfer of sovereignty of Hong Kong from the United Kingdom to China in the early 1980s, the future of press freedom in Hong Kong has attracted global and local concern. In general, many scholars believed the political change after the handover would bring new state-media relations (Chan and Lee, 1991; Lee and Chu, 1998). Some predicted that the new sovereign government would continue the strategy of co-option, like the colonial government did (Fung and Lee, 1994). Others assumed that the power transfer was accompanied by shifts in “journalistic paradigms”, referring to the mass media with a critical attitude towards the Chinese government incrementally shifting to a more centrist position (Chan and Lee, 1989). As the Chinese government had to demonstrate to the British government and the world that it respected the “One Country, Two Systems” principle and freedom of the press in Hong Kong, media control was not obvious during the transition (Lee and Chan, 2009). However, the Chinese government had a bad record of suppressing press freedom so Hong Kong people, journalists, and academic experts generally believed that with more control and repression from China, media self-censorship would gradually be practised after 1997 (Lee, 1998; Vines, 1999).

In line with the earlier studies, current literature has long agreed that self-censorship is an omnipresent threat for Hong Kong media (Holbig, 2003; Lee and Lin, 2006; Ma, 2007). Media self-censorship refers to “a set of editorial actions committed by media organisations aiming to curry favour and avoid offending the power stakeholders such as the government, advertisers and major business corporations” (Lee and Chan, 2009, p. 112). In Hong Kong, unlike on the mainland, there was no formal pre-publication censorship system imposed and the Chinese government had no institutional power to remove journalists or close down media organisations. But, in fact, they have issued reporting directions to “guide” the Hong Kong press (Chan, Lee and So, 2012). Since the handover, the Chinese government has displayed certain “bottle lines”, known as the “three no’s” policy for Hong Kong, to limit acceptable coverage (Lee and Chu, 1998). Under the policy, the mass media have to pay careful attention to or refuse to report three politically sensitive topics, namely (1) no advocacy for Taiwan or Tibet independence, (2) no engagement in subversion activities, and (3) no personal attacks on national leaders. Obviously, the three-no areas are all concerned with national issues and interests. However, in recent years, the policy has shifted to local matters: media treatment of news topics, including Taiwan independence, commemoration of the Tiananmen incident and the legal status of the Falun Gong in Hong Kong, which have been regarded as the top sensitive stories for the Chinese government (Lee and Chan, 2009). As the Chinese government

does not want to openly constrain freedom in Hong Kong or formally punish the “violating” media organisations, it turned to inducing media self-censorship by adopting strategic interactions between the media organisations and power holders (Lee, 2007).

To begin with, the Chinese government influenced the media organisations through co-opting media owners and executives, especially those with close economic ties on the mainland (Ma, 2007). For the Beijing leaders, indirect paths to control local media were more feasible and operational. Certainly, operating business in China heavily relies on *guanxi* while the success of business depends very much on the policy or ad hoc regulations issued by the Chinese authorities with close ties. Thus, businessmen with huge investments in China tend to create harmonious relations with the authorities by giving “gifts” or avoiding offending the leaders while the Chinese government might offer political and presumably economic benefits in return (Chan, Lee and So, 2012). Numerous researches pointed out that most owners of Hong Kong’s mainstream media organisations were either nominated from high-level government institutions, usually members of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Committee or the NPC, or tycoons with extensive business relations on the mainland so this special political and economic status forced the media organisations to report news in a “careful” manner (Fung, 2007; Ma, 2007). With regard to “radical” and “stubborn” media, the Chinese government ordered pro-China companies to withdraw their advertisements from them (Ching, 1998). The *Apple Daily*, a pro-democracy newspaper and also “problematic newspaper” in Beijing’s eyes, had long faced an advertising boycott by pro-Beijing figures such as developers and banks as a form of punishment since the 1997 handover (Hong Kong Journalists Association, 2007).

Secondly, norms of “political correctness” were also set up and exercised by Chinese officials through their criticisms of the Hong Kong media (Lee, 2007). From 1999 to 2000, Chinese officials criticised Hong Kong media’s standpoints on the question of Taiwan. Wang Feng-chao, deputy director of China’s Liaison Office openly warned the media not to report views advocating independence for Taiwan (Hong Kong Journalists Association, 2000). Then, after the 1st July demonstration in 2003, in which 500,000 citizens protested against the national security legislation, Chinese officials criticised a number of local media organisations as major mobilisers behind the movement. In March 2013, the Liaison Office was discovered to have made direct calls to individual journalists. One journalist of a television station said that he received a warning from an official in Beijing about not conducting sensitive interviews related to the Tiananmen incident and claimed that he was “being watched” (Hong Kong Journalists Association, 2014). Thus, some journalists tend to report news according to the norms of

professional “objectivity”, preferring not to criticise the authorities, so as to avoid responsibility, trouble or punishment. Lee (2007) regarded this kind of “objectivity” as also a means of “self-censorship”.

Thirdly, the Chinese government further constrained the entry permissions to Hong Kong and Macao journalists. In February 2009, Beijing announced new reporting rules to replace the previous ones, the so-called seven regulations, made in the wake of the 4th June 1989 crackdown. The new rules required journalists to apply in advance to the State Council’s Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office for permission to report on the mainland. Before this, most journalists could travel freely to the mainland on reporting duties (Hong Kong Journalists Association, 2009). For “friendly” media, permission could be obtained from the Chinese officials easily. But, for “hostile” ones, travel for reporting was severely restricted. The *Apple Daily*, for example, was for several years banned from reporting in China (Hong Kong Journalists Association, 2001). In order to maintain access to China, the media organisations had to coordinate their strategy. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that the Chinese government controls Hong Kong through co-opting media owners, setting up the norms of “political correctness” and exercising “reporting restrictions on the mainland”. Hence, Ma (2007) summarised that the state-press relationship after the handover was under the dynamics of “constant negotiation amidst self-restraint”.

## **5. New Politically Sensitive Topic in China: The Umbrella Movement**

In the context of comparative studies, Hong Kong is an interesting hybrid regime. People enjoy a high level of civil liberties such as freedom of the press and rule of law, but Hong Kong is still far from being a full democracy because of its limited electoral system. Today, half of the seats in the Legislative Council are not chosen by universal suffrage and the Chief Executive is still handpicked by an Election Committee comprising 1,200 members, mainly made up of businessmen and controlled by Beijing. In December 2007, the NPCSC officially announced that the election method for the fifth Chief Executive in 2017 may be implemented by universal suffrage. The whole debate since has concentrated on how to remove or maintain the political screening before the election.

In order to advocate the elimination of “unreasonable screening”, Benny Tai Yiu-ting, together with Reverend Chu Yiu-ming and Chan Kin-man, formally called upon a group of people to occupy Central, the most important business district, as a method to fight for democracy. Although “Occupy Central” held a series of activities, including deliberation days, protests and a referendum in an attempt to attract public attention and gain their support, but the NPCSC ignored all of them and announced the framework for the

election method of the Chief Executive in 2017 on 31st August 2014. The framework expressly declares that (1) the future Nominating Committee will be formed “in accordance with” the make-up of the 1,200-member Election Committee from the 2012 election, (2) the Committee will be divided equally between four sectors (business, professional, labour and political sectors) and largely controlled by pro-China forces, as well as (3) each candidate will need the endorsement of at least 50 per cent of the committee’s members (only 12.5 per cent of nominations was needed for each candidate in the 2012 election) (*South China Morning Post*, 2014a). These decisions were denounced as “shutting the gate on Hong Kong’s political reform”, resulting in condemnation by pro-democratic legislators, Occupy Central and student representatives.

On 22nd September 2014, students, including those from university and secondary school, started a week-long class boycott to draw public attention to democracy outside government headquarters. On 28th September, thousands of demonstrators attempted to block the road in Admiralty; then, the police fired 87 canisters of tear gas and used pepper spray and batons against them. Protesters finally occupied the main roads outside the government headquarters complex in Admiralty and many joined in to block a section of Causeway Bay and Nathan Road in Mong Kok. As the protesters held umbrellas to protect themselves against tear gas and pepper spray, international media, for example, the CNN, BBC, and Reuters, called this campaign the Umbrella Revolution while local media portrayed it as the Umbrella Movement. Overall, the whole campaign blocked main roads in Hong Kong for 79 days from 28th September to 15th December 2014.

For most locals and international media, the Umbrella Movement was a student-led campaign for “an election method for the Chief Executive that ensures their rights of choosing”. However, the interpretation of the pro-Beijing leaders was entirely different. They portrayed the Umbrella Movement as attempts to overrule decisions made by the NPCSC and challenge the authority of the Chinese government. President Xi Jin-ping stated that this movement was a direct challenge not just to the authority of the Hong Kong government but Beijing (*The Standard*, 2014). In addition, some Beijing leaders such as Wang Yang, the Vice Premier, and Zhang Xiaoming, the director of the Central Government’s Liaison Office in Hong Kong, regarded this as a “colour revolution”, which referred to a protest funded by Western governments to create chaos (*South China Morning Post*, 2014b). Even worse, the *People’s Daily* linked the Occupy movement to seeking Hong Kong’s “self-determination” and even “independence” (*South China Morning Post*, 2014c).

Because of the political sensitivity, news related to the Occupy movement was strictly blocked on the mainland and only pro-China opinions and

news could be released in China. The Chinese government's worry was that the Occupy movement (such as the protest tactics, issues and mobilising methods) might have repercussions on the mainland, creating a potential threat to the mainland's stability (*Ming Pao Daily News*, 2014a). Then, the Chinese government published a series of news reports and commentaries through its three mouthpieces (Central China Television, the *People's Daily* and the Xinhua News Agency) for several days continuously, highlighting the disruption caused, emphasising that any attempt to force the Chinese government to accept "unreasonable demands" was futile and restating its high-profile support for the Hong Kong government administration. Overall, the Umbrella Movement has become a politically sensitive topic, and for this reason the media treatment of this issue can be considered significant in the evaluation of the phenomenon of self-censorship.

## 6. Performance of Mainstream Media during the Umbrella Movement

In Hong Kong, people traditionally rely on newspapers, television and radio as the main source of news. In 2014, 53.2 per cent of citizens depended on newspapers, while 77.8 per cent and 26.2 per cent relied on television and radio respectively (HKUPOP, 2014c). The influence of mainstream media still prevails and framing power is still exercised. However, the pro-China stance and media self-censorship are quite obvious when facing this politically sensitive issue.

Hong Kong newspapers used to be classified in terms of their political stance towards China and democracy (Lee and Lin, 2006). During the Umbrella Movement, for example, Hong Kong people classified the pro-China newspaper as "anti-movement" in contrast to calling a pro-democracy paper "pro-movement". In general, the pro-China papers tended to take an anti-movement stance, which (1) urged the protesters to stop occupying, (2) put more emphasis on the social disturbance, illegal practices and economic destruction, (3) supported the police with regard to road clearance and (4) encouraged the Hong Kong people to accept the framework of universal suffrage set out by the Chinese government. On the other hand, the pro-movement papers tend to present empathy for the protesters, which (1) urged the government to make concessions, (2) reported the beauty of the protesters, (3) focused on the police's and gangsters' violence in attacking the protesters and (4) emphasised that Hong Kong need democracy without political screening. The Western media generally took the pro-movement side and supported Hong Kong protesters to protect the rights of democracy. *Time Magazine* (2014), for example, used the Umbrella Revolution as a cover story with the headline "The Umbrella Revolution: Hong Kong's fight for freedom is a challenge to China". *The Independent* (2014) released an

editorial entitled “Hong Kong grows up – and scale of protests is a warning to Beijing”, highlighting the bravery of protesters and expansion of Beijing’s intervention in Hong Kong affairs. However, most local newspapers took a different stance in their reporting.

Table 1 summarises the political positions of 17 major newspapers (including free and paid ones) through analysing the headline stories and editorials during the Umbrella Movement. In regard to the headline stories, which were used to attract readers, the findings show that most newspapers took an anti-movement stance. More than half of them (53.01 per cent) tended to describe the Umbrella Movement as chaotic (*Oriental Daily*, 2014), a battlefield (*Sing Tao Daily*, 2014), illegal (*Hong Kong Commercial Daily*, 2014a) and violent (*Wen Wei Po*, 2014a). On the other hand, only a few newspapers (14.86 per cent) took a pro-movement stance and portrayed the movement as brave (*Apple Daily*, 2014a) and condemned the violent suppression by the police (*Hong Kong Economic Journal*, 2014a). The “neutral” position (32.13 per cent) attempted to balance the interests of both sides. Table 2 shows the headlines of major newspapers on 29 September 2014.

Besides showing that most headlines were anti-movement, the analysis of editorials, representing the position of the newspaper organisations, indicated a similar pattern. The anti-movement newspapers (66.49 per cent) tend to condemn the movement and urge the protests to stop occupying areas of Hong Kong. Their core messages included damage to the competitiveness of Hong Kong (*Hong Kong Commercial Daily*, 2014b), the movement being funded by the United States (*Ta Kung Pao*, 2014) and support for the police in the clearance (*Wen Wei Po*, 2014b). The pro-movement newspapers (16.29 per cent) attempted to frame the protests as rational and peaceful ones (*Apple Daily*, 2014b) and urged the government to solve the political conflicts actively (*Hong Kong Economic Journal*, 2014b). Also, the neutral editorials (17.22 per cent) tried to balance the powers on both sides and urged the government and protesters to solve the political conflicts through conversation. Overall, most newspapers reported the Umbrella Movement in a pro-China light whereas only a few media organisations took the pro-movement side to support the protest.

Indeed, the *Apple Daily*, a major local newspaper openly supporting the Umbrella Movement, faced a series of political suppression attempts by pro-China camps. A group of anti-movement protesters (suspected of being mainlanders and gangsters) blocked the entrances of the newspaper’s headquarters and obstructed newspaper delivery trucks and staff buses for more than a week. The protesters claimed that they wanted to voice their anger against the newspaper’s favourable coverage of the movement (*South China Morning Post*, 2014d). In addition, the *Apple Daily* came under a soy sauce attack: groups of masked men approached delivery staff in three

**Table 1** Political Stances of Major Newspapers Headline Stories and Editorials (29th September to 16th December 2014)

Name of Newspaper	Usage Rate (Mean)	Headline Stories (Number of piece)			Editorials (Number of piece)				
		Pro-movement	Neutral	Anti-movement	Total	Pro-movement	Neutral	Anti-movement	Total
Apple Daily	4.75	54	5	0	59	66	0	0	66
Headline Daily	3.65	0	22	26	48	0	0	41	41
Oriental Daily	3.22	0	9	55	64	0	4	50	54
Ming Pao Daily News	3.20	18	36	5	59	10	16	23	49
AM730	3.14	5	20	6	31	-	-	-	-
Metro Daily	2.92	11	24	1	36	-	-	-	-
Sing Tao Daily	2.92	0	15	32	47	0	9	56	65
South China Morning Post	2.48	5	43	0	48	7	12	6	25
The Sun	2.22	0	2	28	30	0	4	45	49
Hong Kong Economic Times	2.19	0	6	11	17	4	23	14	41
The Standard	1.98	4	20	8	32	10	9	18	37
Hong Kong Economic Journal	1.75	3	7	4	14	21	18	2	41
Wen Wei Po	1.59	0	0	69	69	0	0	67	67
Sing Pao	1.42	0	4	42	46	0	6	29	35
Ta Kung Pao	1.40	0	0	71	71	0	1	65	66
Hong Kong Daily News	1.30	11	26	2	39	4	21	21	46
Hong Kong Commercial Daily	1.26	0	1	36	37	0	6	61	67
Total		111	240	396	747	122	129	498	749
(Per cent)		(14.86%)	(32.13%)	(53.01%)	(100%)	(16.29%)	(17.22%)	(66.49%)	(100%)

Notes: Headline stories and editorials which are unrelated to the Umbrella Movement are excluded.

Pro-movement = Supporting the movement, condemning the actions of government and police forces, and urging the government to make political concession; Anti-movement = Criticising the movement, emphasising the economic and social damage as well as, supporting the police for clearance; Neutral = Balancing the interests of both sides.

Source: Author's analysis, based on the information obtained from the WiseNews electronic database and the usage rate is from Online Communication Research Centre (2011).

**Table 2** Headlines of Influential Newspapers on 29th September 2014

<i>Name of Newspaper</i>	<i>Political Stance</i>	<i>Headline</i>
Oriental Daily	Anti-movement	Chaos! The wave of protests: Use of Tear Gas
Ta Kung Pao	Anti-movement	Chaos of Occupy Centre Central, the Financial Centre, faced to be paralysed: Shame on Benny Tai
Headline News	Anti-movement	Chaos of Occupy Central
Ming Pao Daily News	Neutral	Police fired tear gas endlessly: Occupy expanded to Hong Kong Island and Kowloon
Apple Daily	Pro-movement	Not Scared! 60,000 participated in Occupy Central and urged Leung to resign

Source: Author's analysis and translation, based on the headlines obtained from the WiseNews electronic database.

locations. They threatened the staff with knives and poured sauce on stacks of newspapers, hitting 15,200 copies of the *Apple Daily* (*South China Morning Post*, 2014e). Even worse, Jimmy Lai Chee-ying, the founder of the *Apple Daily*, came under physical attacks at the occupy site in Admiralty after which three men were arrested because they were suspected of hitting him in the face with stinky animal organs (*South China Morning Post*, 2014f). The case of the *Apple Daily* demonstrates how the pro-Beijing forces have suppressed press freedom and attacked “hostile” media organisations. In order to get out of trouble, the other newspaper organisations tend to be conservative, forcing media reports to toe the line of China's stance.

Apart from newspapers, TV stations also faced the criticism of being “harmonised”. As mentioned above, Hong Kong people mainly rely on television for news. Although there are two free-to-air stations, TVB's market position is so dominant that it captures more than 90 per cent of the television audience (Chan, Lee and So, 2012). However, the self-censorship of television news is also remarkable. TVB has close economic ties in Guangdong Province and Charles Chan Kwok-keung, the chairman, has extensive business operations on the mainland (*Sunshine Magazine*, 2013). When the protests had continued for almost three weeks, protesters decided to surround the Chief Executive's Office and conflicts between the police and protesters were sparked off on Lung Wo Road in Admiralty. TVB news aired video showing a group of plain-clothes police officers carrying out violent and sustained attacks on an unarmed and restrained protester, Ken Tsang

Kin-chiu, in a dark corner. The original report on the alleged attack, aired on TVB on the morning of 17th October, said the officers had “carried the protester to a dark corner, put him on the ground, and punched and kicked him”. But that part of the voiceover was removed for a few hours and then replaced with another one at noon saying that officers were “suspected to have used excessive force” (*South China Morning Post*, 2014g). In a separate incident, more than 140 staff from TVB’s news department joined a sign-in and expressed their disagreement with the station management’s judgement on that report while, at the same time, the Office of the Communication Authority received more than 1,500 complaints due to the “deleted voiceover” (*Ming Pao Daily News*, 2014b). Yuen Chi-wai, the TVB’s news Director, called an internal meeting with his staff, which was secretly recorded. The audio clips were posted anonymously on YouTube and Yuen criticised the staff “On what grounds can we say (officers) ‘dragged him to a dark corner, and punched and kicked him’? Are you a worm in the officer’s stomach (to know the police) deliberately did this?” (*South China Morning Post*, 2014g). This case clearly showed the media self-censorship within the TVB news, the leading news organisation in Hong Kong. The management tries to avoid negative reports on police officers, which might provoke the Chinese leaders. After this incident, several staffs, who had handled this incident or joined the sign-in, were transferred and demoted (*Ming Pao Daily News*, 2014c).

Even though radio news has become less influential among the public, the pro-China legislators also criticised radio stations’ political stance. Tam Yiu-Chung, the chairman of the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong, accused Commercial Radio intentionally or unintentionally of having mobilised people to join the occupy movement while the hosts banned the anti-movement sentiment, suggesting that its licence renewal should be declined. Ng Leung-sing, another anti-movement legislator, criticised both RTHK and Commercial Radio for spending too much airtime on discussing the movement, thereby causing social conflicts (*Ming Pao Daily News*, 2014d). However, Wong Yuk-man, a pro-movement legislator, condemned the pro-China camp for harming the freedom of the press and editorial independence (*Apple Daily*, 2014c). Overall, the pro-China side used licence renewal as a weapon to force the radio stations to lessen their focus on the occupy movement, compelling them to perform self-censorship, or at least not be pro-movement.

## 7. Expanding Influence of Internet Alternative Media

As aforementioned, Hong Kong people who perceive mainstream media self-censorship as a serious problem are more likely to be Internet alternative media users. The Umbrella Movement created an opportunity to push more

Hong Kong people to pay attention to the Internet alternative media. A recent survey showed that people who support the movement were relatively more Internet- (85.43 per cent versus 65.48 per cent) and Facebook- (43.84 per cent versus 23.62 per cent) active than the opposition. In terms of primary source of information, the supporters relied more on social media (30.86 per cent versus 5.85 per cent) than TV (19.16 per cent versus 46.82 per cent) (Wong and Chan, 2015). The gap between supporters and the opposition is reflected by their media usage. In particular, the number of “Likes” on several online news media was recorded as a “blooming increase”. Table 3 indicates the number and growth rate of “Likes” on several major online news media since the Umbrella Movement commenced.

The findings show that nearly all of the online media recorded considerable increases in terms of the number of “Likes” within 79 days. The most significant is for the *Passion Times*, which established their Facebook page in December 2012, which originally had around 60,000 “Likes” before the movement but reached more than 286,000, a growth rate of more than 375 per cent. The second most popular one is the *SocREC*, which started its Facebook page in September, 2010, receiving about 50,000 “Likes” before the movement which grew to more than 200,000 with a growth rate over 79 days of more than 300 per cent. This study further analysed the reasons for the rapid expansion of circulation from a content-provider perspective.

**Table 3** Growth Rate of “Likes” on Facebook Pages of Major Internet Alternative Media

	<i>Joining date of Facebook page</i>	<i>Number of “Likes” before the movement (28 Sep. 2014)</i>	<i>Number of “Likes” after the movement (15 Dec. 2014)</i>	<i>Growth rate within 79 days (%)</i>
Passion Times	26 Dec. 2012	60,000	286,000	376.67
SocREC	27 Sep. 2010	50,000	200,200	300.40
Local Press	23 Apr. 2014	12,500	29,200	133.60
In-media HK	8 May 2011	180,000	410,800	128.22
Memehk	25 Apr. 2013	37,000	75,700	104.59
Speak Out HK*	14 Jan. 2013	70,000	132,000	88.57
United Social Press	26 May 2013	12,000	22,000	83.33
852 Post	13 Nov. 2013	30,000	42,600	42.00

Note: \* Speak Out HK is an anti-movement Internet alternative media.

Source: Author’s analysis; based on figures provided by each Internet alternative media and their Facebook page.

Firstly, disappointment with mainstream media resulted in the rise of online media. Internet media users believed that mainstream media were taking a pro-government stance while online media presented the truth within the occupy sites. Wong Yeung-tat, founder of the *Passion Times*, admitted that mainstream media are politically conservative due to the business connections with China. According to him, “there are a lot of cases showing that mainstream media aim for ‘stability maintenance’. For example, we have a video to show how the police officers actively attacked the protesters in Mong Kok on 5th November, but TVB news framed it as the protesters actively clashing with the police from their voiceover and video cut. Another example is the case of Jimmy Lai under attack. We had a full video capturing the whole process of how the gangsters attacked Lai but TVB news devoted a lot of airtime to capturing how these gangsters were caught by the pickets, creating a perception that the pickets used excessive violence. But, these witnesses’ act was only for self-protection. Mainstream media have close business connections with the mainland so it tends to act like this. I think that Hong Kong people do not trust mainstream media and that is the main reason for them paying more attention to the *Passion Times*” (personal communication, 16 November 2014). Anthony Lam Yue-yeung, the Chief Executive Officer of *Memehk*, denounced mainstream media for working like a “propaganda machine” by delivering anti-movement messages instead of reporting the facts to the public (personal communication, 10 December 2014). Therefore, the people’s distrust in mainstream media is the main reason why they now pay more attention to online news reports.

Secondly, the need for rapid information delivery is important for Hong Kong people and why they prefer online media. As the Umbrella Movement was an unprecedented incident, many people needed to keep updated on the latest information, leading to the huge attraction of online media. Wong Yeung-tat commented that the public had paid huge attention to this unprecedented movement, so they might want to keep checking their Facebook frequently; online media can fulfil this expectation (personal communication, 16 November 2014). According to Daniel Cheung, a journalist of the *SocREC*, “most journalists in our team have the login name and password of our Facebook account so we can update what we have captured directly on our Facebook page without the editors’ approval. In other words, we are journalists and editors as well. That is the reason why we can provide immediate news without a long editing procedure” (personal communication, 17 November 2014). Antony Lam also explained that in their reporting procedure journalists can directly upload information to the Facebook page about breaking news. He believed that “rapid information is the most important attraction of online media but mainstream media may not

do this” (personal communication, 10 December 2014). As a result, flexibility of online media is the second reason why online media attracts circulation.

Thirdly, online media offer more alternative perspectives which are not available from mainstream media. Because of the limited airtime and anti-movement political stance, some news may be ignored by mainstream media but this is not the case for online media. According to Wong Yeung-tat (personal communication, 16 November 2014), “we have two to three journalists on standby 24 hours a day in each occupy site so they can film immediately when any incident happens. But, the journalists in mainstream media mostly stay in the ‘journalist zone’: they tend to capture the news when something has happened already”. Then, he shared the case of “Ah Lung” and declared he was hospitalised due to the torture by police, but mainstream media did not report this. “Maybe mainstream media did not know him or avoided reporting the violence of police officers, but he is one of the protesters and means a lot to us”, Wong added. Anthony Lam (personal communication, 10 December 2014) also found that providing alternative angles was vitally important for online media. He shared that *Memehk* reported a case of developing environmentally friendly electronics in the study room in Admiralty with more than 800,000 views on their Facebook page which was certainly “unreported” by mainstream media. According to him, “we try to present the ‘pureness’ of the protesters which is seldom captured in mainstream media”.

## **8. Theoretical Implications on Online Alternative Media Development: Credibility, Professionalism and Official Recognition**

This study examined the public distrust in mainstream media leading to the growing attraction of online alternative media. The findings are in line with the current literature that most active online alternative media have a clear political stance of pro-movement and attempted to mobilise people to join the campaign. In fact, online alternative media have long pointed to the increasing potential in informing and politically mobilising people (Atton, 2002). Hence, some scholars have labelled online alternative media as “critical media” (Fuchs, 2010) or “radical media” (Downing, 2001), because many politically oriented alternative media have close connections with social movement organisations (Atkinson, 2010). Through the case study of the Umbrella Movement, this study further highlights some theoretical implications concerning the (1) credibility of online media, (2) professionalism of the journalists of online media, and (3) official recognition.

Firstly, credibility has long been at the centre of online media studies (Golan, 2010). This study found that Internet alternative media put great emphasis on covering political gatherings and protests or even mobilising

their audiences to participate in events so media credibility may not be the first consideration. According to Wong Yeung-tat, “we post our news reports based on ‘factuality’ while we want to present the true story to the audience with video and images” (personal communication, 16 November 2014). Antony Lam said that “our reporting principle is based on emergency” and admitted that “online media have a gap in terms of credibility in most people’s eyes when compared with mainstream media. But the Umbrella Movement provided an opportunity for Hong Kong society to compare the performance between mainstream and online media and we found that our credibility has improved in many locals’ eyes” (personal communication, 10 December 2014). Thus, online media put less emphasis on their credibility but more on “factuality and emergency”. The Umbrella Movement created room for online media to promote and improve their program and credibility.

Secondly, media professionalism of Internet alternative media has become an important academic debate (Skjerdal, 2011). The editors and journalists from Internet alternative media always criticise mainstream media for displaying “professional hegemony” while mainstream media question whether Internet alternative media are “unprofessional”. This kind of conflict between mainstream and online media journalists was clearly reflected during the Umbrella Movement. In fact, online media stressed that they were one of the protesters, sparking off criticisms by mainstream media. On the other hand, traditional media emphasised their objectivity and neutrality in their content while their staff received professional training; thus, they challenged the political stance and professionalism of online media. Some criticised online media journalists for confusing the identities between “protester” and “journalist” and accused them of yelling slogans and filming at the same time. Also, they emphasised that professional media should persist in “independence” as their top priority and report like “a third party” and condemned the journalists of online media for not undertaking professional training, leading to the criticism of low credibility (*Ming Pao Daily News*, 2014e). Conflicts arise when mainstream media challenge the political stance of online media and the Internet media criticise mainstream media for practising self-censorship.

Thirdly, the issues of official recognition are another important theoretical question on Internet alternative media literature (Wall, 2012). Some Hong Kong police officers do not recognise online media as media organisations but regard them as protesters with cameras, disturbing the police operations. Although many online media journalists possess “press cards”, they are not officially recognised by the Hong Kong Journalists Association and the government, for this reason police officers sometimes prohibit them from reporting. Wong Yeung-tat explained that the *Passion Times* had been registered according to the “Local Newspaper Ordinance” but its journalists

cannot attend the government's press conferences, because their "press card" is not officially recognised (personal communication, 16 November 2014). Anthony Lam also found that police officers do not recognise online media journalists as "registered journalists" and commented that "the police give better treatment to mainstream media but my colleagues sometimes face disrespect from the police, depending on the officers and operations" (personal communication, 10 December 2014). Worse still, Daniel Cheung, a journalist from the *SocREC*, claimed he was tortured by police officers even though he had shown his "press pass" (personal communication, 16 November 2014). As online media have a close connection with the social movement organisations, the police regard them as protesters rather than journalists.

It should be remembered that although audiences are increasing, the size of online alternative media remains relatively small. All my interviewees admitted that inadequate funding and manpower were two main challenges for operations, because of limited business advertising and donations. Most journalists from online media are part-timers or volunteers. In addition, online alternative media relies heavily on the Internet, including their official websites and Facebook, for news delivery. Thus, cyber-attacks are key weapons to threaten online media. The *Passion Times* has been the victim of cyber-attacks since the Umbrella Movement where the hackers used the techniques of Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) to make a website unavailable by overwhelming it with traffic from multiple sources. Thus, their website was shut down for more than a month during the movement.

## 9. Conclusion

Existing literatures have long recognise that the Chinese government is attempting to control Hong Kong media through co-optation of media owners, setting up a norm of political correctness and building on restrictions on reporting on the mainland, pressuring mainstream media to practise self-censorship. The problems of media self-censorship are especially obvious in relation to politically sensitive topics namely Taiwan independence, the Tiananmen Incident, and the Falun Gong. However, since the birth of the Umbrella Movement, it has become a politically sensitive topic, with pro-Beijing media portraying it as a threat to the authority of the Chinese government. This article examines the case of the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong and exposes the problem of mainstream media self-censorship. With increasing public distrust in mainstream media due to tightening political control, many Hong Kong people are paying more attention to online alternative media.

However, as Hong Kong's status as a Special Administrative Region under Chinese sovereignty has made its regime distinctively resilient,

the strong political control of Beijing is very unlikely to collapse in the foreseeable future. While mainstream media have exhibited a pro-China stance, online alternative media aim to challenge their symbolic power. More importantly, the audiences of Internet alternative media are expected to be more politically informed and active, with many of them being more critical toward mainstream media with increased negative evaluation of the Hong Kong government. In other words, the Internet alternative media have captured an alternative political space attracting the critically minded and liberal-oriented citizens of Hong Kong. It is expected that Hong Kong will be trapped in a growing state-society conflict if the Chinese government does not promise a generally acceptable democratic reform proposal.

It is important to note that online media can have great political impact because freedom of expression on the Internet is still relatively free from political intervention, unlike on the mainland, as the government has not imposed systematic Internet censorship in Hong Kong. But with the rising threat of online media informing and mobilising people politically, it remains to be seen if political control and interference will be expanded to the Internet, affecting the development of online media in Hong Kong.

## Notes

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