Interpreting Mainstream and Alternative Media Accounts of Hong Kong's 2019 Protests

On the morning of November 12th 2019, Hong Kong awoke a city divided. Division was hardly new in a region that, since June of that year, had been the site of large-scale civil unrest. This unrest could, in the simplest terms, be described as a clash between pan-democratic and pro-establishment interests. What had begun as peaceful protests against an extradition bill proposed by the HK Government, quickly became a movement against police brutality. Ultimately, the movement morphed into one which sought to protect the autonomy of the HK region and define (and in many ways, redefine) its relationship with Mainland China. It was on November 12th, as reports of the previous day's events circulated, that these divisions reached a climax. That previous morning in Sai Wan Ho, a 21-year old student was shot by a policeman. The image of the of the shooting went viral. That same morning, in Ma On Shan, a construction worker was doused in petrol and set alight during a verbal confrontation with a group of protesters. In the media, two entirely different representations of the events of this day emerged, each portraying a different group as the antagonist. As this essay will explore, much of the polarised nature of this reporting can be attributed to the differences between mainstream and alternative media. This essay will investigate these two types of media in HK, drawing attention to the systems of power that work to influence their reporting. Then, recognising the polarised nature of reporting during the 2019 protests, this essay will argue that a rejection of the binary opposition logic employed by media organisations will allow observers to more responsibly interpret and consume these evidently contradictory narratives.

Mainstream and alternative media

The arrangement of capital within mainstream media organisations lead them to inherently represent institutional interests. Using a media ecology framework, Wang (2018, p. 3709) positions mainstream media within broader social, economic and political constraints. Ownership serves as one of the major constraints on a media organisation's reporting freedoms, functioning as an institutional affiliation to a prescribed power arrangement (Wang 2018, p. 3709). In HK, media ownership has become increasingly concentrated in the hands of rich tycoons with ties to China's political elite (Wang 2018, p. 3709). Advertising revenue also serves as a similar constraint on journalistic freedoms. Since the handover of HK in 1997, the Chinese Government has used its influence over Chinese-owned or Chinese-dependant companies to control the flow of advertising payments to media outlets. In 2014, at the direction of the Chinese Government's Liaison Office, Standard Chartered, HSBC and Hang Seng banks ceased advertising with *Apple Daily* after the newspaper published dissenting views (The Economist 2014, p. 40). The HK government also uses its control over information channels to influence reporting. Increasingly, mainstream media is not a profitable venture in HK and those who do operate in the region rely on subsidised information and news material from the government (Wang 2018, p. 3714). Media organisations are essentially enticed to avoid criticism in order to maintain favour with the government. Because mainstream media outlets operate in an ecosystem linked to capital and political favour, they invariably serve to protect institutional power arrangements.

This institutional power inherent in HK's mainstream media manifests in the form of self-censorship. Lee and Chan (2009, p. 112) define self-censorship as "a set of editorial actions committed by media organisations aiming to curry favour and avoid offending the power stakeholders". In 2014 the HK Journalists Association labelled the preceding twelve months as the "darkest for press freedoms in several decades" (The Economist 2014, p. 39). In a survey of

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local journalists, 79% believed that self-censorship amongst fellow journalists had risen in the region since 2005, and 36% reported having witnessed it or practised it themselves (The Economist 2014, p. 39). Such behaviour was particularly evident during the 2014 Umbrella Movement. For example, HK's major free-to-air TV network originally aired a report that accused police of 'dragging a protester into a dark corner and punching and kicking him', but the voiceover for this segment was quickly changed to report that 'officers may have used excessive force' (Kwong 2015, p. 285). This increase in self-censorship would ultimately coalesce with the rise of street politics in HK to bring about major change in the media landscape.

Alternative media emerged in HK to fill a void left by the failure of mainstream media to represent the increasingly diverse views of the population. If mainstream media is characterised by its ties to institutional power structures, then alternative media operates outside of such constraints and seeks to actively challenge them. As Wang (2018, p. 3711) writes, "alternative media production accumulates symbolic resources to subvert hegemonic powers and creates a space for the cultivation of resistance". Alternative media often has a rebellious attitude, as Downing (2001, p. xi) neatly summarises, "If alternative media have one thing in common, it is that they break somebody's rules". It typically takes the form of online broadcasting, underground press and citizen journalism. These three types of media were to become crucial during the 2019 protests.

Coverage of 2019 protests

An understanding of mainstream and alternative media in HK helps to explain why reporting of the 2019 protests was so very polarised. In broad terms, the views of the pro-establishment camp were represented by mainstream media organisations, and the views of the pan-democratic movement were represented in alternative media. This is simply a reflection of the origins of each media-type. Mainstream media is largely tied to the power structures that the pro-establishment camp seek to protect. Similarly, alternative media developed to represent subversive views that would ultimately become the foundation of the pan-democratic movement. This essay will now explore how, during the 2019 protests, mainstream and alternative media advanced two very different narratives through the use of language, self-censorship and selective reporting.

One of the most visual ways that reporting of the protests became polarised was in the language used. The HK Government consistently referred to those taking to the streets as 'rioters'. This language was echoed in much of HK's mainstream media, even by the supposedly 'neutral' South China Morning Post (SCMP). SCMP's coverage was certainly more objective than that of its mainstream counterparts, but even it had to make decisions over its use of language – decisions that ultimately revealed editorial preferences. The front page of the October 6th 2019 edition of the newspaper carried the headline, "Lam calls on public to condemn rioters", with a by-line referring to "emergency measures in the fight against lawlessness" (Chung 2019, p. 1). The language here insinuates that the protesters are in the minority, and do not represent the will of the 'general public. This article was written under a section titled 'social unrest', with similar articles featuring in the day's newspaper that used language emphasising the disruptive impact of the protests (*Sunday Morning Post* October 6 2019, p. 3-4). Media outlets in mainland China used even stronger language to position the protesters as the antagonists. The state-backed Global Times (2019a; 2019b) often referred to the 'terrorists' and 'black terror' that had engulfed the city. In contrast, alternative media such as HK Free Press (HKFP), Post 852 and InMediaHK used the terms 'protesters' and 'freedom fighters' and other language that stressed the emancipatory and representative nature of the movement (Sham-Shackleton 2019). The use of language played a key role in shaping the polarised narratives that emerged from the 2019 protests.

Self-Censorship has previously been discussed in this essay as the primary way in which the power of ownership manifests in mainstream media. Traditionally, self-censorship enforced by the Chinese state could be characterised by a list of three 'no's' (Kwong 2015, p. 277). Don't talk about Taiwanese or Tibetan independence; don't encourage subversion; and don't insult leadership. In 2019, this list expanded to include the protest movement. It was a little hard for mainstream media in HK to completely ignore the existence of street protests, yet this was much easier across the border in China. Chinese media ignored the protests for a month before finally reporting their existence in its own ideologically driven manner (BBC 2019). This was significant for two reasons. First, there is a flurry of movement across the HK-Mainland China border every day. People who consume their news within the closed-off Chinese media ecosystem then arrive in HK with similarly narrow views of the unfolding conflict and contribute to the

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divide at street level. Second, some Chinese diaspora use Chinese media networks. This has seen divided representations of the protests extend far outside of China and HK and led to confrontations such as what occurred at University of Queensland in 2019 (Hamilton-Smith 2019). In HK, China and abroad, self-censorship practised by mainstream media has contributed to the polarisation of narratives represented in public space.

This essay argues that another major contributor to the polarisation of media narratives in HK has been selective reporting. Selective reporting is similar to self-censorship in that they both involve a selective approach as to which incidents to acknowledge. Yet the two differ because whilst self-censorship is practised to gain favour with higher powers, selective reporting is practised to advance one's own ideological position. In this sense, both mainstream and alternative media are guilty of such behaviour. It would be a mistake to conflate the independence of alternative media with neutrality. Alternative media carries subversive elements by nature of its development (Fuchs 2010, p. 188; Silverstone 1999, p. 103). The line between media and civilians also became increasingly blurred in HK in 2019 as citizen journalism proliferated (Vukovich 2019, p. 203). This is not to suggest that journalistic standards are being compromised. But rather that the media is certainly used as a tool to advance ideological interests.

From a pro-establishment perspective, a narrative was constructed that accused Western powers of interfering in Chinese domestic politics by inciting riots and violence. The illustration of this was made all the easier by the sea American flags that would invariably feature in street protests. Portraying the protesters as representing a minority was key in the development of this narrative. Also key, was the portrayal of police as peacekeepers in a city ravaged by violent anarchists. However, largely absent in this narrative was any attempt to meaningfully acknowledge any human rights abuses inflicted by police or authorities.

From a pan-democratic perspective, the narrative advanced by alternative media positioned peaceful protesters as victims of police violence and constitutional overreach from the Chinese and HK Governments. There were many visually striking and confronting images of street protests and clashes with police that served to support this version of events. Absent, however, was any engagement with the responsibility born by the protesters for acts of violence and destruction. Also absent, was the acknowledgement of the xenophobic elements of the protests that Vukovich (2019, p. 201) alludes to.

Rejecting binary opposition logic

The final part of this essay acknowledges the difficulties that individuals faced in responsibly consuming and interpreting media coverage about the protests. This essay will suggest a way of constructing events that helps observers to arrive at a conclusion that is least-influenced by the ideological agendas of other parties. It begins by rejecting the binary oppositional logic that D'Cruz (2020, p. 17) argues humans have been conditioned into interpreting the world through since early childhood. Indeed, this article is guilty of such behaviour through its use of a pro-establishment/pan-democratic dichotomy. But in reality, this does not embrace the complexity of the conflict, nor acknowledge the entire spectrum of interests represented. Such a binary approach allows the media (both mainstream and alternative) to use the most extreme representations of each 'side' to categorise its entirety. Evidently though, the workers joining in genuinely peaceful protests during their lunch breaks were not the same protesters who were burning down train stations and vandalising Mainland-linked businesses at night. Similarly, not all who condemned the nightly violence were supportive of the actions of police, nor were they mouthpieces for the Chinese Communist Party. To conclude, if we can reject the binary oppositional logic of media organisations, it allows us to critique the way in which they use the most extreme representations of the opposition to paint them in their entirety.

Conclusion

This essay has explored mainstream and alternative media in Hong Kong and the systems of power that work to influence its reporting. It has then reflected on the way in which this led to the polarised nature of media reporting during the 2019 protests. Finally, this essay has suggested that an approach that rejects the binary opposition logic of media organisations will help observers to develop convictions that are least-influenced by the ideological agendas of others. In the 12 months since the 2019 protests reached a climax, press freedoms in HK have been further

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constrained, not least by the imposition of the Hong Kong National Security Law. This law has both posed a threat to the freedoms of alternative media, but also made it all the more important in a region where the narratives propagated by the mainstream media increasingly do not reflect the values of the general population.

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