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## **Mass Media and Politics in Hong Kong**

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## INTRODUCTION

Mass media are a very significant component in the political system of contemporary societies. Since the seminal work on The Passing of Traditional Society by Daniel Lerner, students of political communication have found substantive, positive yet subtle relationship between mass media and political development.

The sheer size of the mass media in Hong Kong, coupled with the opportunities offered by the non-elective bureaucratic polity, "should" have magnified their role in the political process. Nevertheless, development in Hong Kong in the past has suggested otherwise. To date, neither the communications model of democratization in the West nor the nationalistic model of independence movement in the Third World has been repeated in Hong Kong.

The experience of Hong Kong was a result of the minimal integration between the political and the mass media systems. While the minimally-integrated media-political system has been in decline for some time, it is the 1997 issue that has provided the momentum for a restructuring of the system. Such a restructuring is no easy task, as it has to take place under the pressure of time and in the midst of several impending crises.

It is the aim of this paper to chart the relations between the political and the media systems in Hong Kong. Emphasis will be given to the print media in recognition of its importance in the realm of political communication. Data are drawn from a variety of sources, including findings from a survey conducted by the authors in Kwun Tong in 1985.

### **The Minimally-Integrated Media-Political System**

Jay G. Blumler and Michael Gurevitch have suggested a set of dimensions, along which the interactions between media institutions and political institutions may vary.<sup>1</sup> These dimensions are: (1) degree of state control over mass media organizations; (2) degree of mass media partisanship;

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1 "Towards a Comparative Framework for Political Communication Research," in Steven H. Chaffee ed. Political Communication: Issues and Strategies for Research (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1975), pp.171-184.

(3) degree of media-political elite integration; (4) the nature of the legitimizing creed of media institutions. In line with this analytical scheme and Lau Siu-kai's findings on the relationship between society and polity in Hong Kong,<sup>2</sup> we can characterize the system in Hong Kong as a minimally-integrated media-political system wherein interactions between the mass media and the local political institutions have until recently been restricted. There is neither the transmission-belt journalism as in communist societies, nor development journalism as in the Third World nations.

To begin with, there is no integration between the media and the political elites. The media elites, especially the owners of the media, are old guards of Chinese journalism. Government officials, especially top decision-makers, are on the other hand British expatriates. They are two distinct types of people. They do not speak the same language, do not go to the same clubs and do not mix up with each other. Neither is there any local political organization such as a political party that can serve as a linkage between the media and political elites.

Structural linkage between media and political institutions is also weak. All media institutions are privately owned, except Radio Television Hong Kong which operates five radio channels and produces, but not broadcasts, television programs. Thus, the government does not, by virtue of ownership, enjoy any control over the appointment of media personnel or over the financing of media operation. As the government has never played an interventionist developmental role, it need not secure operational control over the mass media for the sake of socio-economic transformation.

On the other hand, for the sake of system maintenance and social stability, the government did legislate to secure ultimate control over the press or the broadcasting institutions by means of registration, franchise conditions (applicable to television stations only), prohibitions and emergency powers. All in all, these provisions are quite restrictive. However, they have been rarely used. Therefore, the high degree of media freedom is a result of the government's exercise of self-restraint.

Chan Tao-man and Yau Sing-mo have argued that instead of the

<sup>2</sup> Society and Politics in Hong Kong (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1982).

liberal-democratic tradition of the British, it is the pressure from China that has socialized the Hong Kong government into self-restraint.<sup>3</sup> Here we have one version of the China factor in the shaping of the media-political system in Hong Kong. According to Chan and Yau, the precedent was set in 1953 when Ta Kung Pao, an orthodox leftist newspaper controlled by Beijing, was found guilty of incitement by reproducing an editorial of the People's Daily (Beijing) on the confrontation between the police and the rioters. The confrontation appeared after the Hong Kong government denied entry to the colony a delegation from China, which intended to console fire victims in Tung Tau Village in Kowloon. The said newspaper was ordered to suspend publication for six months. Its proprietor fined and its chief editor jailed. Following protest from the Chinese Foreign Ministry, the newspaper, which had been suspended for eleven days, was allowed by the court to resume publication. Since then, the Hong Kong government is said to have refrained from using its statutory powers of media control except during the 1967 riots which was induced by the Cultural Revolution in China. Even then, restrictions were imposed only on the less "official" leftist newspapers, rather than the more "official" ones such as Ta Kung Pao, Wen Hui Pao and New Evening News.

The above-mentioned precedent is certainly instructive. It may well have reminded the Hong Kong government of the presence of China as a check and balance factor whenever Chinese interests are at stake. Nevertheless, the political system in Hong Kong would have been extremely unstable had the presence of China to be invoked frequently. Therefore, a more fundamental factor that has contributed to the development of media freedom has been the relative absence of the need for media control, as the authority of the Hong Kong government has rarely been challenged by the mass media. In a study of the newspapers between 1951 and 1966, Robert E. Mitchell found that editorials critical of the Hong Kong government were rare indeed.<sup>4</sup> Does it mean that the mass media in Hong Kong have been apolitical? Not quite. In fact, it has been the preoccupation with Chinese affairs that has acted as a suppressor of their concern with Hong Kong politics.

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<sup>3</sup> "The Prospect of Press Freedom in Hong Kong: A Power Approach," in Ming Pao Monthly, May 1987, p.12.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Edward Mitchell, "How Hong Kong Newspapers Have Responded to 15 Years of Rapid Social Change," Asian Survey, Vol.9, No.9 (July 1969), pp.673-678.

For the past century, Hong Kong society was a society of Chinese immigrants who cared more about China than Hong Kong. It is no wonder that the mass media in Hong Kong have been intensively involved in Chinese, but not in Hong Kong, politics. Especially before the late 1960s, the mass media in Hong Kong were extroverted in their operation. For an extroverted newspaper, news on China enjoys priority over local news. Its editors prefer reporting on Chinese, rather than Hong Kong, politics. Columnists produce their critiques or satires mostly with reference to the Chinese government. Media partisanship does exist, but basically with an external reference, as there is no local party in Hong Kong. Party newspapers are thus externally controlled from Beijing or Taipei and extroverted in their publications. Political ideology is divided along the China-Taiwan continuum, not on issues relevant to Hong Kong. As Lee Chin-chuan succinctly puts it, the press-party parallelism grows not out of local politics but is "a residual extension of modern Chinese politics."<sup>5</sup>

The China orientation of the press in Hong Kong has thus significantly reduced its relevance to the local political system. Unlike their counterparts in many other colonies, mass media in Hong Kong have contributed only minimally to changes in the political system where they belong. The politically oriented newspapers in Hong Kong have preoccupied themselves with serving their respective absentee masters, with effecting changes in China, or with serving overseas Chinese communities. Thereby, they have succumbed to an indifferent approach to local politics. Also, as a secure base for media operation with an extroverted goal, Hong Kong has become a boat too invaluable to be rocked. Finally, political division of China herself into two mutually hostile regimes has prevented nationalist sentiments in Hong Kong from being aroused and united. Therefore, there has been no sustained effective nationalist movement. It has led to what Paul S.N. Lee called a strange press ideology of "nationalism without nationalist goal," by which he means "to identify with a nation but not to be a member of the nation."<sup>6</sup> The less politically oriented newspaper, on the other hand, have focused their attention on social and economic issues, but rarely subjecting them to political analysis.

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<sup>5</sup> "Partisan Press Coverage of Government News in Hong Kong," Journalism Quarterly, Vol.62 (1985), p.771.

<sup>6</sup> National Communication and Development: A Comparative Study of Four British Colonies - Nigeria, Guyana, Singapore and Hong Kong (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1986), p.304.

All in all, the indifference of the mass media to local politics has spared the Hong Kong government of any meaningful challenge, thus it can afford to grant them a substantial degree of freedom of expression, which has been mostly exercised with reference to Chinese politics. This modus vivendi between the government and the mass media constitutes a significant rule of the game in the minimally-integrated media-political system. It has in turn buttressed the colonial status quo of Hong Kong.

### **Trends Toward System Reform**

It is amazing that the minimally-integrated media-political system has survived almost a century of political turbulence in China, including the Revolution of 1911, the Second World War and the Communist Revolution of 1949. In all likelihood, the unsettled nature of the immigrant society and the practice of minimal governance by the colonial regime have together served to sustain the anomaly of separation between media and politics.

As the immigrant society gives place to the indigenous society and as the government adopts an increasingly welfarist role, the media-political system has been subjected to rising social pressure to change. New vistas seem to have been opened up for the mass media to take up a more positive and locally oriented role in the political process.

The passing of the immigrant society has been intermittent, largely because of incessant tides of immigration. As time passes by, however, the proportion of locally born and educated in society increases. They are more locally oriented than their parents and tend to take Hong Kong as their permanent home. In the wake of this demographic change, which seemed to have made itself felt for the first time in the 1966 riot, the demand for more locally oriented mass media is raised. For the older generation of immigrants, their interest in Chinese politics may linger on. Yet, as their desire for returning home has practically faded, Hong Kong would become a de facto permanent home for them. As a consequence, even they may not support those media that remain indifferent to local affairs.

Since the late 1960s, the government has increased its commitment to

deliver social services. The introduction of the ten-year housing program and the expansion of free and compulsory education are prime examples. With the weakening of the Chinese family system and the traditional intermediate organizations as informal social security systems, the increase in the welfare functions of the government cannot help but enhance the salience of politics to the general public. Concomitantly, the mass media take on additional importance as a channel of communication between the government and the people.

The 1966 riot is a significant event for the media-political system. It erupted out of protest against the increase in ferry fares by the young people. A commission that was set up to inquire into the causes of the incident found the major culprit in the communication gap between government and people. It accordingly advised the government to henceforth pay more attention to public relations at all levels.<sup>7</sup> From the perspective of this paper, the mass media in Hong Kong also cannot be absolved of the blame in the matter, for its performance has lagged behind its potential role.

After the 1966 riot, the government took the initiative to improve its communication with the public at large. Its Government Information Services (GIS) was restructured and expanded. With a portfolio to disseminate government information, the strengthened news division publishes the Daily News Bulletin to become the main source of news in Hong Kong. The publicity division coordinates government campaign efforts, such as the Keep Hong Kong Clean campaign. The public relations division monitors press opinions and compiles them into Gist for reference by department heads. On the other hand, government departments are staffed with information officers seconded from Government Information Services which, as we shall see, acquired practical monopoly on dealing with the press in due course.

The mass media also began to change in the late 1960s. We can observe the introversion of hitherto extroverted newspapers and the emergence of commercial and locally oriented newspapers. The introversion process has been protracted and recursive and is not yet complete. It started with the rightist newspapers first and followed by the leftist ones recently.

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<sup>7</sup> Kowloon Disturbances 1966, Report of Commission of Inquiry (Hong Kong: Government Printer, 1967), pp.126-31.

It is difficult for the media establishment to reform themselves. Hence it is relatively easier for new players with new ideas to enter the market. Start-up costs for the print media were low before the 1980s. The opportunities thus afforded for enterprising journalists were readily utilized. The peak in newspaper publication was reached in 1977 with a total of 121 newspapers for a population of 4.5 million. Particularly successful was the Oriental Daily News which topped the list of 13 most popular newspapers, followed by Sing Pao. They together captured 40 percent of the reader market.<sup>8</sup> Ming Pao was a rising star. With its strong China orientation but centrist proclivity, it managed to occupy the fifth rank. The established newspapers were in decline, with the rightist Sing Tao Man Pao, Sing Tao Yat Pao and Wah Kiu Yat Pao pushed down to the 3rd, 4th and 7th place respectively. All the orthodox leftist newspapers (Ta Kung Pao, Wen Hui Pao and New Evening News) even found themselves out of the list.

The emergence of commercial and locally oriented newspapers was not an unqualified blessing for the development of the media-political system in Hong Kong. Its main contribution was in the rise of entertainment journalism, rather than in facilitating political communication. The newspapers did not have any clear political role and they tended to commercialize political events. Still, they did represent a trend toward local identity, by providing more coverage to local news, putting them in the front page, introducing reader service by reporting on citizen complaints against administrative misdoings and transmitting them for redress to the government departments concerned.

With all these changes initiated by the government as well as by the mass media, media-political interactions had multiplied. But the critical question about the functions of the mass media in the political process remained unclear. It was ultimately the emergence of the 1997 issue in 1982 that took the mass media in Hong Kong to task.

For one thing, the major weakness of Hong Kong journalism in the past was vividly exposed, because suddenly the biggest ever political event had to be covered by a bunch of politically inexperienced reporters and editors. In the following years, reporting on the Sino-British negotiations and then the discussions on the draft of the Basic Law for the future Special Administrative

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<sup>8</sup> SRH Media Index 1977, Interim Media Owners' Report, (Hong Kong: Survey Research Hong Kong, June 1977), Table 1A.

Region of Hong Kong provided the best training ground for young Hong Kong journalists.

For another, in face of tight-lipped Sino-British negotiators and the news-thirsty general public, the mass media in Hong Kong were bestowed the mission of uncovering the truth. Journalism became a meaningful academic subject of study for aspiring school leavers. Public expectation for the mass media soared.

Last but not least, the onset of the 1997 issue highlighted, more clearly than ever, the great potential the mass media may have in influencing the public mood in a crisis situation. Instead of reporting or commenting on Chinese politics at the doorstep of China or disseminating information on Hong Kong current affairs as the extended arm of the Government Information Services, the mass media encountered a new operative environment, in which they became one of the power centers from whom all other political players vied for support.

It was also an environment in which the sense of local identity was played up by both the Chinese and the British/Hong Kong governments in their scramble for public opinion support. For the first time, the general public was called upon to express their wishes about their own fate, amidst promises of the introduction of "representative government" and the quarantees of "Hong Kong people ruling Hong Kong." In an environment in which the various political authorities concealed their political intentions, while forces for interest articulation were let loose without the assistance of proper channels such as a representative assembly, political parties, or respected political leadership, the mass media became a surrogate for organized political expression, influential in the shaping of political attitudes and behavior under great political uncertainties.

Thus, in the run-up to 1997, the media-political system will face an unprecedented challenge to perform properly and effectively. All parties concerned are involved in this period of readjustment. The government as the major supplier of information, the mass media as its transmitter and the citizens as its consumers are particularly critical to the formation of new relationships. Each of them has specific dilemmas to solve, before a more proper media-political system can be redefined.

### **Governability and Information Control**

Since the appearance of the 1997 issue, the Hong Kong government has been increasingly confronted with a serious dilemma in dealing with the mass media. The question of the degree of control of the mass media in a time of rapid and uncertain changes is a particularly taxing one for an outgoing government. Different forces are at work here.

Firstly, to the extent that the government does purport to develop representative government as was promised in the Green Paper of 1984, a more open policy toward the mass media seems to be in order. Representative government usually goes with open government and an active press in the political process. This requires a relaxation in the control of information and the repeal of statutory provisions restricting freedom of the press.

Secondly, a projection into the future may invite the thought that press freedom may not be guaranteed by governmental self-restraint alone, since the succeeding government will be a different and untested government. Should the Hong Kong government be concerned with the maintenance and development of freedom of the press in the future? If so, what kind of structural arrangements should and could be made at this critical juncture?

Thirdly, an outgoing government is bound to be particularly concerned about the problem of governability. Since the signing of the Sino-British Agreement, the Hong Kong government has suffered several setbacks in the exercise of its authority. It has therefore the imperative to demonstrate credibility to the public and to compete with the Chinese government (or its local representatives) for influence and prestige. Under such circumstances, can it afford to tolerate freedom of the press, the exercise of which may manifest itself in relentless critique of the incumbent authority?

Fourthly, with the scheduled return of sovereignty from Britain to China, Hong Kong is undergoing a difficult and delicate period of adaptation. The upsurge of public opinion politics and pressure activities directed at the government has escalated the level of mass mobilization hitherto unknown in Hong Kong. In addition, mass reaction to sensitive news can be unpredictable. The panic in response to the news about the possible breakdown in the Sino-British negotiations in September 1983 is a case in point. The maintenance of stability thus "requires" a certain degree of mass media control.



So far, the government has reacted to these cross-pressures with indecisiveness: a cautiously open policy of information combined with over-ordination by the Government Information Service; an overture to improve quality and responsibility of the mass media but without the will to push it through; legislations to liberalize the previously restrictive but anachronistic media provisions but with the retention of film censorship on political grounds and prohibitions against publication of false news.

The government is becoming circumspect in its information policy. As compared with the past, the government has certainly become more open to the public, but chief reporters of the mass media all tend to share the impression that the government has not been enthusiastic in providing information. The Government Information Service has acquired a de facto monopoly of the flow of government information, not only through the publication of the Daily News Bulletin, but also through manipulating reporters' enquiries at departmental levels. In the earlier days, a few government officials (e.g. John Walden) were forthcoming in supplying reporters with information. Nowadays, information officers who specialize in dealing with the press control the flow of information from government departments to the public. In a study based on in-depth interviews with nine chief reporters of leading newspapers, Yu Ding-bor found that government departments did not welcome sudden visits by reporters.<sup>9</sup> No information would be provided on the spot. The reporter concerned would be asked to leave his name card and his questions. Later, the information officer of the department would call the reporter back with an official answer to the enquiry.

As a major gatekeeper of political information, the government can influence the agenda of the press. It has been commonly held and also believed by GIS officials that the mass media rely heavily upon the Daily News Bulletin for their news stories. This dependence on the government varies substantially according to a variety of factors, such as political ideology and financial strength of the press, nature of topics, etc. The government's influence over the press agenda is however not an assured one and may dissipate rapidly.

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<sup>9</sup> The Role of Newspaper in Political Communication, A Case Study in Hong Kong (Unpublished M.Phil. Thesis, Department of Journalism and Communication, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1981), pp.43-44.

In a political situation where pluralistic forces have begun to set in, the government can no longer monopolize the sources of news. In no uncertain terms, China has become a major factor in local politics. Increasingly, the reformed and more "representative" Legislative Council, pressure groups and opinion leaders also command public attention. In a content analysis of eight newspapers for 1981 and 1982, press coverage of GIS news amounted to no more than 14.9 percent of total news in terms of items and 12.2 percent in terms of space.<sup>10</sup> Past studies of press dependence on GIS news have not taken account of the nature of issues. With the expansion in the political arena, the nature of issues may seriously challenge the gatekeeping role of the government. A prime example is the 1997 issue, the coverage of which extends far beyond the activities of the Hong Kong government. Another case is the Daya Bay Incident. Content analysis of the news coverage of the Daya Bay issue revealed that government source comprised no more than 12.4 percent of all the sources of news, second to the Legislative Council and not much more than China.

It is then apparent that control of the flow of government information will no longer suffice to subject the mass media to governmental manipulation in the critical period of transition. How to define the rules of the game for the new political situation is a difficult if not impossible task. A compromise seems to consist in relaxing legal restrictions against the mass media while encouraging professional self-control by the media bodies themselves. The suggestion by the then Attorney General on the set-up of a media council was therefore well-intentioned but was inopportunistically timed, ambiguously presented and grossly unsupported in prior consultations with media professionals. It was greeted with great suspicion by the public as a ploy to restrict press freedom. The idea was then dropped.

At the other end, the legislative package to repeal the restrictive provisions in the Control of Publications Consolidation Ordinance was successfully passed, despite strong protest from the public against the retention of a clause (with modification) that made anyone who published false news liable for punishment. In a similar vein, the government legislated on film

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<sup>10</sup> So York-kee, Dialectic of Journalistic Attitude: A Study of Hongkong Press's Treatment of Government News (Unpublished M.Phil. Thesis, Department of Journalism and Communication, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1983), Table 4.6.

censorship with the primary aim to fight pornography and violence. It was attacked however for prohibiting the showing of films with a potentially damaging effect on Hong Kong's relations with a neighboring country (especially China).

The above examples of the government's actions taken in recent years to "reform" the media system demonstrate not only the ambivalent nature of the government's policy or determination, but also the lack of consensus between the government and the media professionals. The redefinition of the media-political system requires the collaboration of all concerned. But the government is caught in a situation where its motives may easily be interpreted as sinister by opposing camps in the political scene. The government is thus caught in an unenviable situation.

#### **Legitimizing Creed and Political Engagement**

The dilemmas the mass media are experiencing are no less taxing than those haunting the Hong Kong government. As noted above, the mass media in Hong Kong were apolitical, at least as far as Hong Kong politics was concerned. Besides, they were seldom politicized by local events in the past. But social and political changes in the 1970s ushered in a process of introversion, which has been strengthened by the momentum of the 1997 issue. The new environment calls for more than just introversion. It involves soul-searching for a more meaningful role of the mass media in a period of political uncertainties.

It seems easier for the partisan media than for the non-party ones to adapt to the new political reality. The former have the official lines from their mother governments to toe. What they have to do is to change their tactics and approaches, since Hong Kong is no longer a foreign and hostile environment.

For the non-partisan media, a creed is required to legitimize a political role, if any, so that the facts they report can be grounded on enduring beliefs, and their editorials and commentaries be informed with convincing values. It is no easy task. Under normal circumstances, the mass media reflect the perspective of the dominant centers of power, which is a relatively comfortable

operation.<sup>11</sup> To be critical in normal times or to participate in the cultivation of a new perspective in an age of transformation requires much greater initiative and efforts. It is particularly difficult for the China-oriented press. Leftist newspapers have played a critical role under the colonial umbrella of press freedom. Now that China is in and with Hong Kong, should the established role be continued? As Emily Lau has bitterly complained, some newspapers have introduced a kind of self-censorship.<sup>12</sup> For those which have been commercially oriented, it is a decision about political engagement. Accordingly, a sense of public interest and commitment is needed. At any rate, the politicization of the mass media in the 1980s is by no means a straightforward process. The requirements are perceived differently by different media, with or without a sense of urgency. It is a difficult soul-searching exercise and inertia may provide more comfort.

There are several constraints for the development of a legitimizing creed: the underdevelopment of professionalism of the mass media in general, the profit motive of media owners in a highly competitive market and the perception about the apolitical nature of the media consumers.

Professionalism is a commonplace legitimizing creed of the mass media. It is grounded on the enduring values of truth, liberal democracy and the belief in mass media being the fourth branch of government. In Hong Kong, professionalism is higher in the elite press than in the others, higher with the younger, locally trained journalists than with their older, Chinese immigrant counterparts. Because of poor terms of service, the profession has found it difficult to attract and retain better educated and motivated young people.<sup>13</sup> The attendant ills, such as high rates of labor turnover, impossibility

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<sup>11</sup> C.N. Olien, G.A. Donohue and P.J. Tichenor, "Structure, Communication and Social Power," in Mass Communication Review Yearbook, Vol.4 (Beverly Hills: Sage 1983), pp.455-462.

<sup>12</sup> "Threat to Press Freedom from Outside and Within," Far Eastern Economic Review, 25 October 1984, p.56.

<sup>13</sup> For more information on manpower development in the mass media, consult the bi-annual Mass Media Manpower Survey commissioned by the Trade Development Council, Hong Kong, since 1981.

of accumulation of experience and skills, lack of specialization, and the low social status and prestige of journalists have seriously retarded the development of media professionalism in Hong Kong.<sup>14</sup>

The pursuit of profit by media owners has often been lamented upon by chief editors when interviewed by researchers. Since political information is unlikely to bring in more profit, it has to be, at worst, suppressed, or, at best, commercialized. Lee Yuet-lin reported that even the partisan leftist newspapers had to depoliticize their content in a bid to widen readership, while the commercial and rightist papers chose to report on political events uncritically.<sup>15</sup> As a good case in point, the first ever election of the Legislative Council in 1985 was handled as social rather than political news, in the manner of horse-race reporting.

We have as yet no serious study of the attitudes, perceptions and beliefs of middle and higher ranking media professionals. Judging from the less rigorous studies by the senior students of the Department of Journalism and Communication at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, who have accumulated quite a mass of data over the past years, there is a common thread among the perception of editors and chief reporters pertaining to the taste of the media consumers. As perceived, the media consumers in Hong Kong are apolitical. They are not interested in politics. Their taste is low and they are not demanding. Since perception of client demands represents one of the most important factors in reporting and editorial policy, there is no wonder that the press in Hong Kong should choose to commercialize political information.

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<sup>14</sup> For a most recent discussion of some of these ills, see Chan Siu-man, "The Mass Media Manpower Survey 1985", Pai Shing Semi-Monthly, February 1, 1987, pp.28-30.

<sup>15</sup> Lee Yuet-lin, Constructing Election Reality: A Newsmaking Study of the First LegCo Election in Hong Kong (Unpublished M.Phil. Thesis, Department of Journalism and Communication, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1987), pp.131-32.

### **The Media Consumers**

As indispensable participants in the media-political system, the consumers of the mass media are not without dilemmas. In the preceding section, we have alluded to the editors' and chief reporters' perception of the taste of media consumers, to the effect that they are not interested in political information. This perception has led to the mass media's reluctance to actively report on political events. In case they do, they tend to report them in a horse-racing mode. Given this reactive policy of the mass media, the nature of media consumers and especially those who are in need of political information is hence a very important subject for study. In this section, we shall therefore clarify whether the mass media consumers in general have a need for political information. Next, we shall explore the relationship between exposure to political information and certain political attitudes. We shall conclude the section with the argument that there is a meaningful role for the mass media in the political process.

Contrary to the perception of editors and chief reporters, the citizens of Hong Kong are not apolitical, at least not in the sense that they are not interested in getting political information. Both theoretically and empirically, they should be very much involved in seeking political information.

Living in an uncertain world and with a lingering immigrant mentality, the people of Hong Kong are understandably inactive in political participation. They however are psychologically very much attentive and alert to politics, because their survival instinct dictates a constant surveillance of the political milieu. They should therefore be much in need of political information.

As a matter of fact, there is a great public need for more political information. According to a social indicator survey conducted in 1986, 44 percent of the respondents held the diffusion of news as the most important function of the mass media, as compared with only 26.9 percent who chose entertainment as the answer.<sup>16</sup> In general, the interviewees in that survey were not satisfied with the existing mass media. Newspapers fared best, with 59.6

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<sup>16</sup> Lau Siu-kai and Wan Po-san, A Preliminary Report on Social Indicators Research (in Chinese) (Hong Kong: Centre for Hong Kong Studies, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1987).

percent of the respondents reporting satisfaction with the general performance of the press, while only 44.5 percent and 45 percent of them respectively were satisfied with television and radio. It is apparent that consumers' satisfaction with the mass media was congruent with their views about the most important function of the mass media, since 58.4 of the respondents found newspaper helpful in providing news, as compared with only 32.7 percent for television and 16.1 percent for radio. In the eyes of the media consumers, television was primarily a vehicle for entertainment.

Nevertheless, even for television the demand of viewers for news and other information on public affairs cannot be underestimated. Findings from a television and sound broadcasting survey in 1984, which was commissioned by the Broadcast Review Board as a support service for policy recommendations, clearly registered a significant demand for more television news (26.3 percent of the respondents), public affairs (21.6 percent) and documentaries (31.1 percent).<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, it is instructive to learn from the statistical breakdowns that demands for political information were not confined to the better employed and educated but also existed with a substantial proportion of the lower class respondents.<sup>18</sup>

In view of the above, the editors and chief reporters' perception of the apolitical taste of the public must have been misguided. As they have taken such a taste for granted for so many years, it seems to imply that they lag terribly behind their changing clients. It also implies that there is no such thing as consumer pressure in the media-political system. Anyway, consumers in Hong Kong are rarely querulous. Demanding mass media consumers can always resort to multiple newspapers or channels. Still, the demanding

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<sup>17</sup> Broadcasting Review Board, Television and Sound Broadcasting Survey (Hong Kong: Census and Statistics Department, 1984), Volume I: Main Report, p.3 and Volume II: Tables 12 and 13.

<sup>18</sup> According to the tables mentioned in the previous note, 27.6 percent, 19.8 percent and 31.3 percent respectively of the TV viewer respondents who were production workers wanted more news, public affairs programs and documentaries; 31.1 percent, 14.0 percent and 17.2 percent respectively of the interviewees who had no formal education or had attained the kindergarten level only wanted more news, public affairs programs and documentaries.

consumers must be in the minority. In political science, they are likely to be the so-called attentive public.

To many Hong Kong Chinese, television represents the main source of information on public affairs. For instance, in our 1985 study of the ethos of the Hong Kong people, 46.5 percent of the respondents obtained their political information from television, as compared with 35.6 percent and 11.4 percent from newspapers and radio respectively. However, it was the newspaper that received more favorable consumers' evaluation rather than television in terms of clear and comprehensive reporting, helpfulness in forming one's opinion on political matters and in understanding other people's concern, and thought-stimulating. Furthermore, since newspaper reading requires a higher level of cognitive skill and involvement, difference in the types of mass media as the main source of political information may be correlated with differences in political attitudes.<sup>19</sup> Findings from our 1985 survey however do not detect any significant differences.

On the basis of Table 1, it is hard to tell whether newspaper readers had, on the whole, a greater sense of political efficacy. This runs counter to the expectation derived from the assumption of a developmental sequence in which the cognitive skills required on the part of television viewers are lower than for print media users.

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<sup>19</sup> Steven H. Chaffee and A.R. Tims, "News Media Use in Adolescence: Implications for Political Cognitions," in M. Burgeon, ed. Communication Yearbook, Vol.6 (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1982), pp.736-58.

**Table 1**  
**Main Source of Information & Political Efficacy**  
 (in percent)

Attitude Items	TV viewers (N = 388)	Newspaper readers (N = 259)
1. Politics & government difficult to understand:		
Strongly Disagree	-	0.8
Disagree	18.4	16.9
Agree	71.2	74.8
Strongly Agree	10.4	7.4
2. Ability to influence government policy:		
Quite a Lot	1.4	0.9
Not Much	14.3	17.7
Very Little	94.4	81.4
3. Ability to take action against unfair legislation:		
Definitely Yes	0.3	-
Yes	34.4	49.6
No	51.7	44.9
Definitely No	13.6	5.6
4. To really take action to fight against unfair legislation:		
Yes	10.8	11.3
May be	41.1	46.4
No	48.1	42.3

Table 2 refers to trust as a major aspect of political culture. There is no great difference between newspaper readers and television viewers, although the former had greater trust in governments than the latter. A bigger difference between the two types of media consumers can be found only with respect to trust in political personalities. The reason why more newspaper readers trusted political leaders than television viewers is not known. Perhaps political leaders gain better visibility through newspaper columns than through television broadcasts, because their viewpoints can be better presented in the former channel of communication. It can also be attributed to a greater sense of sympathy of newspaper readers for pressure politics in Hong Kong. When asked whether it was a healthy sign that there were increasingly more protest actions against the Hong Kong government, 35.5 percent of television viewers agreed or strongly agreed, as compared with 40.7 percent of newspaper readers. As newspaper readers were more inclined to support unconventional political actions, they were more trustful of the community leaders behind those actions.

Table 2

Main Source of Information and Trust  
(in percent)

Attitude Items	TV viewers (N = 388)	Newspaper readers (N = 259)
1. Trust in Hong Kong Government:		
Very Low	1.7	0.9
Low	15.0	12.9
High	79.9	80.0
Very High	3.4	6.2
2. Trust in British Government:		
Very Low	5.3	4.5
Low	41.6	41.2
High	50.6	51.3
Very High	2.4	3.0
3. Trust in Chinese Government:		
Very Low	11.4	11.3
Low	47.8	46.3
High	37.6	39.9
Very High	3.3	2.5
4. Trust in Community or Political Leaders in Hong Kong:		
No	74.4	58.2
Yes	25.6	41.8
5. Trust in Pressure Group Leaders:		
No	84.7	77.4
Yes	14.3	22.6

With regard to the types of mass media, the upshot of the above discussion is that except in some isolated areas, there is not much difference in their relationships with political attitudes.

Our next step is to inquire into the relationship between the extent of media exposure and political attitudes. We shall concentrate on newspapers. The reason is that, as alluded to earlier, television is mainly an entertainment vehicle for the masses. Thus more exposure to television broadcasts is unlikely to have more influence on political attitudes.

To gauge the extent of public exposure to political information carried in newspapers, we have constructed an index by combining the responses to five questions on "reading newspapers yesterday" in our survey conducted in 1985. The questions refer to the extent they read about international, Hong Kong and district news, economic news and editorials. The respondents are then grouped into low, medium and high exposure groups. For the sake of convenience, we shall from time to time refer to the exposure concerned as news or media exposure although it does include editorials.

Who were the most exposed? As expected, they were likely to be male, better educated and employed, and with higher income. Contrary to our expectation, we found that there was a greater proportion of housewives and unemployed among the least exposed than among the most exposed. It suggests that housewives and the unemployed did not necessarily have more leisure, or they did not spend it on reading newspapers. One can also expect a larger proportion of old people among the most exposed group, for they may have a lot of time for reading newspapers. It turns out the other way round, as only 8.2 percent of respondents aged over 60 belonged to the most exposed group and 15.6 percent to the least exposed group. As a matter of fact, age was rather evenly distributed among the least exposed group, whereas it was the younger generation (those aged between 21 and 40) that constituted the majority (59.2 percent) in the most exposed group.

Apart from the youthfulness of the most exposed group, there are also two other distinct characteristics. As revealed in Table 3, a substantial number of the most exposed readers read more than one newspaper. In addition, they relied less on popular commercial newspapers (e.g. Oriental Daily News and Sing Pao) and more on elite newspapers (Ming Pao and Sing Tao Yat Pao)

**Table 3**

**Newspapers Read Yesterday by Extent of News Exposure**

	Low %	Medium %	High %
Oriental Daily News	40.0	40.6	25.2
Sing Pao	19.4	18.5	18.9
Sun Pao	8.4	6.4	4.2
Ming Pao	4.5	5.2	9.1
Sing Tao Yat Post	2.6	1.2	5.6
Others	13.5	13.6	16.0
More Than One Paper	11.6	14.5	21.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
(N)	(160)	(262)	(147)

The first effect of extent of exposure that can be easily observed refers to the degree of readiness to have definite opinions on matters raised in the interview, which can be measured by the proportion of missing values, i.e. "don't know/no answer" responses, for all relevant data items. It is found that with regard to 175 questions on social, economic and political attitudes, the average proportions of "missing values" for the three exposure groups of interviewees (low, medium and high) are 13.4 percent, 9.4 percent and 9.5 percent respectively. With respect to the 92 political questions, the average "missing values" are 11.3 percent, 8.5 percent and 8.6 percent respectively.

The difference in the ability to form opinion between the least and the most exposed is especially marked with respect to certain important but controversial topics of the day, such as the desirability of democracy or party politics. For instance, there are between 8 to 13 percentage points difference between the two groups in the proportion of "don't know" or "no answer" among the responses to the questions on whether democracy will bring about

self-seeking leaders to harm the public, whether the chance for democratic development in Hong Kong is good, what is a democratic government, and whether the political system in Hong Kong can be improved with the emergence of political parties.

Apart from the readiness to form an opinion, news exposure seems also to be related to different political mentalities. To begin with, as summarized in Table 4, people with more exposure to political information were more likely to exhibit certain fundamental traits characteristic of modern, active and participant citizens. As such, they had greater trust in other people as well as in social leaders. More importantly, they recognized the existence of "public interest." These people were not only least fatalistic but also suffered least from a sense of political powerlessness. It follows that they were more assertive, more ready to opine and less fearful of those in power. Equipped with the above-mentioned orientations, it is no wonder that they were more active participants in political discussions and were more ready to take action against unfair legislation.

**Table 4**

**News Exposure and Views of Government**

(in percent)

(unless otherwise indicated, answers = "agree" + "strongly agree", or "yes")

Value Items	Respondents' News Exposure		
	Low	Medium	High
A. Trust & recognition of "public interest"			
"Most people are not trustworthy"	52.5	50.0	45.9
"Are there social/political leaders in Hong Kong you can especially trust?"	28.0	36.9	40.7
"Are there pressure group leaders you can especially trust?"	12.4	20.5	20.4
"Is there such a thing called public interest?"	70.5	76.0	78.2

Table 4 (cont'd)

<b>B. General and political efficacy</b>			
"One's success is preordained"	21.1	15.0	7.0
"Long-term planning is unrealistic"	50.3	46.7	39.7
"Do you feel the Hong Kong laws and courts difficult to understand?"	81.9	73.1	65.8
"Politics and government are difficult to understand."	86.9	78.2	77.2
<b>C. An assertive and participant self</b>			
"In face of impending uncertainties, we should submit ourselves to whatever descends upon us."	60.5	55.4	49.3
"We should avoid offending the powerful, else they would harm us."	53.4	41.1	41.1
"A citizen is obligated to offer his views on public affairs."	84.7	91.9	91.9
"How frequent do you discuss public affairs with the following people: (answers = often + very often)			
family members	16.8	29.0	32.0
Relatives	4.6	10.9	11.3
friends	34.9	54.3	56.6
Community leaders"	2.6	5.5	10.7
"Suppose government is about to legislate a law deemed unfair by you and something can be done to change it, will you <u>really</u> take such an action?"	9.6	11.7	12.3

Secondly, people who were more exposed to news were more likely to hold a view of government that is characteristic of the modern time.

Traditionally, Chinese people did not care much about the form of government. Government was usually personified and the best government was the paternalistic government. In Hong Kong today, these orientations are still quite pervasive. In the same manner, the ideal of democracy is still not well understood in Hong Kong, since the majority of the Hong Kong people regard a government that consults public opinion as already democratic. There is

widespread concern with instability which may be brought about by partisan politics. Therefore, support for the introduction of democratic government is lukewarm at best.

Table 5 indicates that those who were more exposed to news were slightly less afflicted by the above orientations. They were aware of the impact of government on their daily life. They knew that in order to have a good government, what mattered more was the "system" rather than "man." Consequently, they showed the least support for the idea of paternalistic government.

Table 5

<b>News Exposure and Views of Government</b> (in percent)			
(unless otherwise indicated, answers = "agree" + "strongly agree", or "yes")			
Value Items	Respondents' News Exposure		
	Low	Medium	High
"Government activities have great impact on my life"	82.5	88.7	89.1
"Rule by the able is better than any reform of the political system."	72.8	67.8	59.4
"The form of government does not matter at all, provided my livelihood is maintained."	71.4	62.7	47.5
"Government should treat citizen as father to son."	87.5	84.1	81.5
"Government officials should set moral examples for citizens to follow."	97.4	95.7	93.2

In addition, the idea of democracy was better understood by a greater proportion of the more exposed than the less exposed. Those who were more exposed to news were also more receptive to orientations favorable to democratic development. On the whole, more people in this group believed in liberal values. These orientations are detailed in Table 6 below.



Table 6

News Exposure and Liberal Democracy

(in percent)

(unless otherwise indicated, answers = "agree" + "strongly agree", or "yes")

Value Items	Respondents' News Exposure		
	Low	Medium	High
<b>A. Democracy &amp; Related Orientations</b>			
"Which one of the following government is democratic:"			
(answer = "one that is elected by the people")	20.8	26.1	25.2
"Democracy easily brings about self-seeking politicians to harm society"	62.6	54.6	50.4
"The right to vote should be secured for all, including those voting irrationally"	39.6	53.6	47.9
"Politicians elected by people will rule Hong Kong better than the present government."	57.6	72.7	60.9
"In general, do you think that citizens & community leaders know better than government officials what is good for Hong Kong."	74.2	70.3	78.0
<b>B. Liberal Values</b>			
"Which of the following two attitudes toward the criminals is right?"			
(answer = "all criminals except a few diehards can be rehabilitated.")	77.8	85.0	86.8
"Does government has the right to censor our mail?"	52.3	43.1	42.0
"The purpose of our law should be: (answer = "to protect citizens' right to choose any moral standards.")"	77.9	81.7	87.7
"Rights we enjoy are neither in-born nor inalienable, but social rewards for our good deeds."	84.4	74.2	69.5
"Everyone should have freedom of speech."	96.9	97.7	96.9
"He who talks nonsense should be forbidden to talk in public."	74.2	70.7	73.4
"A newspaper that falsifies facts should be banned."	78.8	76.1	69.6
"An assembly promoting unorthodox causes should be prohibited."	66.4	65.7	73.2

High exposure to news is also related to high expectations of the government, as may be suggested by Table 7. It implies that the old days have definitely gone when people wished to be left alone by the government. It is a bit surprising though that the government is expected to solve even personal and family problems. This is in sharp deviation from the "traditional" ethos of familism in Hong Kong.

Table 7

News Exposure and Expectation for Government

(in percent)

(unless otherwise indicated, answers = "agree" + "strongly agree", or "yes")

Value Items	Respondents' News Exposure		
	Low	Medium	High
"Government has major responsibility to solve social problems."	90.3	94.9	92.4
"Can government solve your personal or family problem?"	60.7	62.9	68.0
"Do you think the government will help you solve your problems?"	44.2	49.1	57.0

Finally, let us turn to the relationship between news exposure and the evaluative and identity dimensions of political culture, which is summarized in Table 8.

**Table 8**

**News Exposure and Affective Orientations**

(in percent)

(unless otherwise indicated, answers = "agree" + "strongly agree", or "yes")

Value Items	Respondents' News Exposure		
	Low	Medium	High
<b>A. Evaluative Orientations</b>			
"Is Hong Kong (1) a stable and orderly society or (2) one full of problems and crimes?" (answer = 1)	45.7	49.8	54.7
"Is Hong Kong an unfair society?"	47.1	40.3	33.4
"The Political system in Hong Kong is the best under existing circumstances."	79.4	79.9	85.2
"The Hong Kong government is a good government."	71.3	74.1	75.0
<b>B. Sense of Local Identity and Related Items</b>			
"When thinking about your identity, do you consider yourself a Hongkongese or a Chinese?" (answer = Hongkongese)"	67.5	62.7	66.2
"I share the same fate with all other Hong Kong people."	78.6	82.7	82.4
"How much do you feel you belong to Hong Kong." (answer = "a lot" + "quite a lot")	88.6	82.8	80.4
"Those Hong Kong people with a foreign passport shall not be allowed to become political leaders in the future."	43.0	51.6	56.5
"Hong Kong people share many common traits that make them difficult to get along with the Mainland Chinese."	75.7	73.9	71.6
"Given a chance, will you migrate?"	41.8	51.6	56.7

As to the first dimension, the picture as shown in Table 8 is quite clear. The more news exposure, the more positive were the evaluations of the government, the political system and society. On the other hand, the sense of identity did not yield a consistent pattern. More news exposure was not necessarily associated with a greater sense of local identity. But it was related to a greater willingness to emigrate. When the Chinese nationalistic sentiment is introduced into the identity questions, the pattern becomes more puzzling. Somewhat unexpectedly, those who were more exposed to news were more likely to be (Chinese) nationalistic than to be localistic (identified with Hong Kong). Thus, exposure to mass media is not conducive to the development of identification with Hong Kong. In fact, while the Hong Kong Chinese prefer it as a place to make a living, they are unwilling to commit themselves to its future nor tie their fate with that of Hong Kong. Undoubtedly many factors can be alluded to to explain the dominance of the instrumentalist or utilitarian component in the sense of local identity, the limited function of the mass media (in view of its devotion either to partisan conflict between the two warring Chinese regimes or to the lucrative provision of informational materials deficient in political or civic content) to forge the linkage between the individual Hongkongese and Hong Kong as a socio-political collectivity is definitely an important factor. The detrimental effects of the lack of a strong sense of local identity have already manifested themselves in the indifference of the masses to political reforms (which hurts particularly the protagonists of democratization) and the continuous emigration to other places. If the sense of local identity is not strengthened, it will persist to threaten Hong Kong's viability in the run-up to 1997 and beyond.

The injection of elements of (Chinese) nationalism into the local identity in order to strengthen it certainly is a tempting idea. Upon closer scrutiny, nevertheless, it is less than practicable. The difficulty of de-coupling nationalism and communism on the one hand and the socialist regime and China as a nation on the other would detract from the appeal of nationalism as an ideology. And it is precisely because of the difficulty of articulating nationalism as a "pure and simple" doctrine, uncontaminated by past and current negative political experience, that even the partisan press (leftist and rightist newspapers) has perforce to base its appeal on what Paul S.N. Lee aptly called "nationalism without nationalistic goal." The restoration of Chinese sovereignty over Hong Kong without the participation of the Hong Kong Chinese, or ironically in spite of their opposition, has further undermined the potential appeal of nationalism to the Hong Kong Chinese since one of the major goals of nationalism as an all-encompassing ideology - national

unification - has already been achieved and is thus out of the nationalist agenda.

As 1997 approaches, still it would be inevitable that nationalistic and patriotic feelings will increase, particularly if China's development and Chinese policy toward Hong Kong are favorably perceived by the Hong Kong people. In view of the difficulties mentioned above, we do not expect an upsurge in nationalistic sentiment and the concomitant actions. The injection of a modicum of nationalism and patriotism into the local identity might not be enough to overcome the dominance of the instrumentalist component in it. As a result, developments internal to Hong Kong are more critical to the formation of a sense of local identity with a strong affective element.

The mass media certainly have an influential role to play in fostering the rise of a local identity more founded upon affection for Hong Kong. This role will hinge upon better provision of political information and civic education. It would be a historic role for the mass media if they could, by adopting an active strategy of political communication and civic education, contribute to the development of a political consensus which the Hong Kong people will endorse and identify with. A possible strategy will require more active reporting, rather than waiting for press conferences, more emphasis on the nature of issues rather than the appeal of personalities, more focus on the analysis of situations, dilemmas and choices rather than the presentation of pure "facts," sidelines and entertaining gossips, more stress on reasoning and objectivity rather than emotionalism and sensationalism.

### Mass Media and Political Groups

In a media-political system, the political relationship between the mass media and the media users may assume an indirect form. The famous hypothesis of "two-step flow of communication" is a prime case in point. The hypothesis posits that influences arising from the mass media first reach the leaders who, in turn, transmit what they have received to their associates.<sup>20</sup> It

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<sup>20</sup> For a good review see Elihu Katz, "The Two-step Flow of Communication: An Up-to-Date Report on a Hypothesis," in Robert O. Carlson ed., Communications and Public Opinion (New York: Praeger, 1975), pp. 344-61.

is not the intention here to apply or review the hypothesis. The major contribution of the hypothesis to political science is its stress on interpersonal communication through intermediary networks, local organizations or community leadership.

In relative terms, Hong Kong is a lowly organized society. There are few effective intermediary organizations. The traditional ones have declined in importance for some time, while the new ones have not yet established themselves. Effective leaders are equally in short supply, while the demand for them is soaring. Concomitantly, effective political organization with mass following is not yet on the horizon, although politicization since 1982 has brought about a number of new leaders as well as political groups. Most of these new leaders and groups started up with only limited resources and their further ascendance has to depend on either co-optation by the incumbent authorities or popular appeal through the mass media. An important structural issue thus ensues as to whether permanent political organization(s) with mass following may arise to become major political actors in Hong Kong.

The relationship between the mass media and political groups in Hong Kong is a virgin field of inquiry. We have neither the literature nor sufficient data on which to base meaningful arguments. Theoretically speaking, there are several possibilities. First of all, mass media and political leaders/groupings are interdependent. The former count on the latter for news-worthy materials, whereas the latter rely on the former for image building.<sup>21</sup> Secondly, mass media and political leaders/groupings are competing with each other. It is a competition between mass communication on the one hand and interpersonal or small group communication on the other. If a community is well organized, the influence of the mass media on its members may be less and vice versa. From the viewpoint of the citizens, if the mass media are perceived as influential in the policy-making process, there is arguably less immediate need for any political organization. We have no answer to the above questions, but some discussions are in order.

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<sup>21</sup> Morris Janowitz, "Mass Media: Institutional Trends and Their Consequences," in Morris Janowitz and Paul Hirsch eds., Reader in Public Opinion and Mass Communication (New York: Free Press, 1981), pp.303-21.

Table 9

Public Affairs Information Sources  
(in percent)

Source	Tuen Mun (N=288)	Tai Hang Tung (N=109)	Kwun Tong (N=330)	Sai Ying Pun (N=226)
Family members	1.9	3.9	2.3	5.0
Friends	8.2	1.3	2.3	5.0
Neighbors	10.8	26.3	13.6	10.0
Mass Media	46.3	22.4	61.3	52.8
Community leaders or organizations	3.4	14.5	1.0	1.1
More than one	12.3	2.6	6.3	3.9
Others/Don't Know/ No answer	17.1	29.0	13.2	22.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

From Table 9, we observe great variations among districts in Hong Kong in the use of mass media as the main source of information on public affairs. The data are taken from a four districts survey on local politics, conducted in 1982 (before the Sino-British negotiations over the future of Hong Kong). The four districts were chosen in order to maximize the socio-economic differences among them. For the present purpose, Tai Hang Tung can be fruitfully contrasted with Kwun Tong. The former is a small community under the long-term influence of pressure groups. It is better organized than all other communities. Kwun Tong on the contrary is a much bigger, industrial new town much less influenced by pressure groups. People in Tai Hang Tung were then less dependent on the mass media for political information. Community leaders and organization instead played a more substantial role. In contrast, people in Kwun Tong were more dependent on the mass media, while community leaders and organization had a lesser role to play.

The lesson from this study of four districts is as follows. Mass media are more influential where political organizations are weak. Hong Kong as a whole is more like Kwun Tong than Tai Hang Tung. Hence, the power of mass media to inform should be considerable.

An emergent political organization may try to build up its power through toiling at the grass-roots and interpersonal levels or through appealing to the masses. In the latter case, success hinges upon the assistance of the mass media as well as the perceived relevance of political organization to the mass public.

The mass media need stories and political organizations are story-makers. In this sense, there is a common interest between them. In general, therefore, the mass media are inclined to report on the activities of political organizations and their leaders. In specific situations, reporting is, however, constrained by several factors, such as the significance of the issue at hand, the reputation of the organization concerned, the characteristics of readership, and the political ideology of the press itself.

At present, interest articulation is largely ad hoc and fluid, without any overwhelming political organization to perform the aggregating function. The relevance and importance of any political grouping or organization as perceived by the mass media varies from issue to issue.

The overall relationship between the mass media and the political groupings is thus not an institutionalized one, but one which is situationally contingent. In no case is there a guarantee of publicity for the image-seekers and there is as yet no evidence that any local political organization has secured a permanent access to (or political control of) any particular media.

The perceived relevance of political organization to the mass public is an even more complex problem. Hong Kong Chinese are known for their strong attachment to their families, but equally strong attachment to political organizations is rare. The mediating role of the mass media in the political process has so far been more geared to the relationship between the public and the government, rather than to that between the public and any political organization. Without further politicization or the availability of institutional opportunities to form powerful political groups, the mass media are not likely to promote the relevance of political organization in the eyes of the mass public.

On the other hand, the pragmatic and weakly organized people of Hong Kong might prefer using the mass media for political appeals to the arduous process of organization-building which demands continual and long-term commitment. To the extent that citizens' needs are piecemeal and hence unaggregated, the social (or reader) service provided in the popular commercial newspapers may have a "substitute" effect that renders political organization redundant.<sup>22</sup> The reader who brings a complaint against the government to the press has nothing to lose, as the social service offered by the press is free of charge, without any commitment, and occasionally effective. Some newspapers are delighted to offer such a service, as citizen complaints are good stories which can be investigated and reported as if they were normal news. The social service provided by the press is at the same time another channel for redress of grievance as well as for oversight of the government, especially its lower-ranking employees. In this sense, there is some competition between the mass media and political organizations.

The competition between the mass media and political organizations can be probed at a more general level. Suppose the mass media were perceived by the public as generally influential in the policy-making process, would their perception of political organizations be affected? According to our 1985 survey, the mass media were perceived by the majority of Hong Kong people to have a lot or quite a lot of impact on government policies. Further statistical analysis does not reveal any significant relationship between the degree of perceived media influence and attitudes on the following items: (1) the political effects of political parties in Hong Kong, (2) the respondent's preference for using political parties or other political organizations as the most effective means to influence the policy of the Hong Kong government, (3) the respondent's trust in pressure group leaders, (4) ability of pressure group leaders to reflect on public opinion, as compared with members of the Legislative Council and the Executive Council, and (5) the saying that pressure group activities are harmful to prosperity and stability in Hong Kong. However, the relationship between the degree of perceived media influence and evaluations of pressure groups are modestly significant and positive. It is

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<sup>22</sup> For an analysis of the contents and functions of this service, see Kenneth W.Y. Leung and W.K. Fung, "Some Observations of the Social Service Page in Chinese Newspapers in Hong Kong," paper presented to the 19th Annual Meeting of the World Association of Chinese Newspapers on November 7, 1986.

found that the more the mass media were perceived as influential, the more the pressure groups were held to be successful (Chi square = 9.64, d.f. = 2, p = 0.008) and the more they were seen to have contributed to improving the living environment in Hong Kong (Chi square = 15.44, d.f. = 6, p = 0.017). We may therefore conclude that in a general sense, mass media do not have any effect of replacing political organizations as a vehicle to influence government policies.

### Conclusion

In this paper, we have observed the passing of the minimally-integrated media-political system and the potential problems accompanying the transformation.

In the context of 1997, the mass media's instrumental role in the rise of public opinion politics and pressure tactics in the political system is bound to acquire even greater political significance in the coming years.

The Hong Kong government has made vigorous efforts, though with varying degrees of success, at restructuring the legal and institutional environment of the mass media. The results are mixed because it simultaneously but vacillatingly pursues the dual goals of enhancing press freedom for the sake of post-1997 Hong Kong as well as ensuring governability in the pre-1997 period.

The media institutions on their part are also examining the risks and opportunities unleashed by the transition toward a new political system. There are great variations in their reactions as the media themselves are heterogeneous. Among them there is one thing in common, that is they are still at a loss in their search for a legitimizing creed to undergird a proper political role. By assuming negative reactions of the future political master to the politicized press and by non-empirically postulating the needs of their clients, some media either try to avoid politics as far as possible or commercialize political information by giving it the flavor of entertainment. This political avoidance posture of the mass media is functional in maintaining the unruffled coexistence of a monocratic bureaucratic government largely unencumbered by powerful political forces and a large mass media system which is more or less uncensored and widely utilized.

The people of Hong Kong is however not as apolitical as generally assumed. There is at least a significant "attentive public" who follow political development closely and whose political attitudes are to a certain extent related to the degree of their media exposure. Even if most people were apolitical, the political role of the mass media is still undeniable. As B.K. Berelson et al. have pointed out,

The effective audience for politics today is a mixture of the minority who have reasons for learning about current political events and the majority who do not but who do learn something because it is there.<sup>23</sup>

There is thus an unmet demand for political information and a far from exhausted potential of media influence in the political process.

## 大眾傳播與香港政治

(中文摘要) 關信基、劉兆佳合著

在現代社會中，大眾傳播和政治有著密切的關係。香港一方面有一個缺乏制衡的政府，另一方面有異常發達的大眾傳播體系。因此，後者的政治角色更應當舉足輕重，甚至有取代其他國家中議會或政黨功能的潛力。

然而事實並非如此。過去幾乎整個世紀中，大眾傳播和香港政治只有低度的整合，香港政府無意利用大眾傳播來達到發展或控制社會的目的；大眾傳播只是有心於中國政治，而不是香港的事務。

六十年代以來，這個低度整合的傳播政治體系面臨著社會變遷的考驗。最後，1997問題的湧現，使這個體系不得不作出調整，來應付過渡期和九七以後的需要。影響這個體系的「中國因素」中過去那「外在」而「消極」的角色轉化為尚有許多未知條件的內在因素，頓然使香港的傳播政治體系難於適應。

對香港政府而言，代議政治的前景或制衡特區政府的慾望產生強化及保障新聞自由的要求；可是，在過渡時期防範政治動盪的施政目標却有賴對政治資訊的傳播慎加控制。

對大眾傳播媒介而言，徘徊於商業利潤和政治投入之間也是一項艱巨的抉擇。大多數媒介還沒有建立起一個有助於政治投入的專業信念。

作為大眾傳播的消費者，相當數量的市民生活於一種政治認同的危機之中，從而加強了他們對政治資訊的需求。這些目前缺乏政治組織的羣眾，不難成為今後政治動員所爭取的對象。在這方面，大眾傳播的輔助作用是必然的。此外，在政治變遷的過程中，大眾傳播對政治共識的建立，也將扮演不可替代的角色。

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<sup>23</sup> Bernard K. Berelson, Paul F. Lazarsfeld and William N. McPhee, "Political Processes: The Role of the Mass Media," in W. Schramm and D.F. Roberts eds., The Powers and Effects of Mass Communication (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, rev. ed., 1971), p.669.