# HONG KONG CITIZENS' BELIEFS IN MEDIA NEUTRALITY AND PERCEPTIONS OF PRESS FREEDOM

## *Objectivity as Self-Censorship?*

Francis L. F. Lee

## Abstract

Premised upon the argument that the professional norm of objectivity is intricately related to the strategic struggle for press freedom in post-handover Hong Kong, this article examines how citizens' beliefs in media neutrality—a central manifestation of objectivity—relate to their perceptions of media self-censorship and press freedom.

Keywords: journalistic objectivity, media professionalism, press freedom, self-censorship, Hong Kong

## Introduction

Because of a confluence of social and historical conditions, Hong Kong has a "tradition of press freedom" that developed after World War II.[1] The future of press freedom thus became a major concern among local and international observers when the city returned to China in 1997. It was generally believed that the continual existence of press freedom is crucial for maintaining the city's way of life and status as a vibrant international city.

1. For discussions of the history of press freedom in Hong Kong, see Joseph Man Chan and Chin-chuan Lee, *Mass Media and Political Transition: The Hong Kong Press in China's Orbit* (New York: Guilford, 1991).

How has media freedom evolved since the handover? What have been the major challenges and how did the media respond? Almost a decade later, how does the local public evaluate the degree of press freedom currently existing in the city?[2]

These questions regarding press freedom in Hong Kong can be tackled from different perspectives. For example, political economists are particularly interested in how changes in media content correspond to ownership changes and how differences between media organizations reflect the connections between owners and political institutions. Joseph Chan and Chin-chuan Lee's analysis of "shifting journalistic paradigms" in the Hong Kong press in the 1980s is an exemplar of this approach.[3]

However, despite the insights it generates, a political economic approach by itself does not provide a complete picture of the politics of press freedom in a given society. Without denying that owners, advertisers, and the political economic structure at large can heavily influence the media, it is also important to note that journalists are professionals with their own norms and legitimating creed. They are also concerned with their credibility in the public arena. Therefore, they are unlikely to simply succumb to political pressure without putting up some forms and degree of resistance. Recent works on the Hong Kong media thus constructed a framework that sees the dynamic evolution of press freedom as a result of the strategic interaction between the media and the power holders.[4]

The strategic interaction perspective, which this study follows, takes the notion of journalistic professionalism seriously and yet also critically. The perspective points to the role played by objectivity—one of the most important professional norms in liberal journalism—in the struggle for press freedom in Hong Kong. Objectivity is a two-edged sword. It can be a defense for professional news reporting against political pressure, but its practice can also inadvertently lead to the avoidance of responsibilities and even the masking of self-censorship. Based on this argument, to be further explicated in the next two sections, our empirical analysis examines Hong Kong citizens' beliefs in media neutrality—a key and potentially problematic manifestation of journalistic objectivity—and how such beliefs relate to perceptions of media self-censorship and press

---

2. The "press" conventionally refers to the print media. In this article, however, the distinction between print and other media is unimportant. The terms "press freedom" and "media freedom" are used interchangeably.

3. Chan and Lee, *Mass Media and Political Transition.*

4. Chin-chuan Lee, "The Paradox of Political Economy: Media Structure, Press Freedom, and Regime Change in Hong Kong," in *Power, Money, and Media: Communication Patterns and Bureaucratic Control in Cultural China*, ed. Chin-chuan Lee (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2000), pp. 288–336.

freedom. Because journalists are motivated to fight against political pressure partly by their concerns with credibility, public perceptions are also an important aspect of the politics of press freedom in Hong Kong.

This article, therefore, is an attempt to contribute to our understanding of press freedom in Hong Kong by explicating the role of journalistic objectivity. The article does not aim at providing a straightforward answer to the question of how much press freedom exists in the city nowadays. The fast-changing nature of the media scene in Hong Kong makes elusive the answer to that overall question. But by better understanding the ongoing strategic interaction between the media and the political systems and how journalistic professionalism relates to press freedom, we should be better able to track and interpret the continual development of press freedom in the city.

## The Politics of Press Freedom in Hong Kong

Contrary to the bleak picture painted by some international media before 1997, within a few years of the handover most commentators were agreed that the Chinese and Special Administrative Region (SAR) governments had not directly and substantively suppressed media freedom in Hong Kong.[5] The Chinese government was motivated to maintain the credibility of the "one country, two systems" formula. Hence, the system of formal censorship and institutionalized press control existing in the Mainland has not been imposed on the SAR.

Instead, China has resorted to indirect and subtle methods to domesticate the Hong Kong media. First, "pro-China capital" continued its pre-handover infiltration into the local media system. Nowadays, many media organizations in Hong Kong are owned by business tycoons and corporations that either have China backgrounds or strong business interests there.[6] As communications scholars have pointed out, changes in ownership can kick start processes of accommodation and newsroom socialization through which journalists acquire new norms and adjust their practices. Owners can control major allocative decisions such as the basic newsroom setup and the hiring and firing of top level personnel. These decisions effectively define the scope of operational

5. E.g., Ying Chan, "Hong Kong: Still a Window between China and the West," *Media Studies Journal* 13:1 (Winter 1999), pp. 84–89; Chris Yeung, "Hong Kong: A Handover of Freedom?" in *Losing Control: Freedom of the Press in Asia*, ed. Roland Rich and Louise Williams (Canberra: Asia Pacific Press, 2000), pp. 58–73; Heike Holbig, "Hong Kong Press Freedom in Transition," in *Hong Kong in Transition: One Country, Two Systems*, ed. Robert Ash, Peter Ferdinand, Brian Hook, Robin Porter, and Ferdinand Ash (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 196–209.

6. See Anthony Fung, "Political Economy of Hong Kong Media: Producing a Hegemonic Voice," *Asian Journal of Communication* 17:2 (June 2007), pp. 159–71.

freedom of frontline journalists.[7] In fact, since the handover, concerns with press freedom were occasionally raised by dubious personnel decisions of mainstream news organizations.[8]

Norms for appropriate news coverage also derived from Chinese officials' occasional criticisms toward the Hong Kong media. For example, in the immediate years after the handover, Chinese officials more than once criticized the Hong Kong media's handling of views favoring Taiwan independence. After the July 1, 2003, demonstration, in which 500,000 Hong Kong citizens protested against the SAR government and national security legislation,[9] Chinese officials also criticized certain media outlets for mobilizing people to join the protest. The Hong Kong media did not simply succumb to this pressure.[10] Yet, the official messages went out nonetheless and became informal guidelines for media coverage of specific sensitive topics.

In addition, the Chinese government has employed the strategy of ambiguity in giving out warnings to the media.[11] For example, while Chinese officials have repeatedly warned the Hong Kong media not to "advocate" Taiwan independence, the difference between "advocacy" and "objective reporting" has never been clarified.[12] More recently, the conviction in China of Hong Kong resident and Singapore journalist Ching Cheong for "spying" has illustrated once again how key terms such as "spying," "intelligence agency," and "state secrets" are underdefined.[13] By neither giving concrete definitions nor drawing

---

7.  Graham Murdoch, "Large Corporations and the Control of the Communications Industries," in *Culture, Society, and the Media*, ed. Michael Gurevitch, Tony Bennett, James Curran, and Janet Woollacott (London: Methuen, 1982), pp. 118–50.

8.  Among the most prominent cases was the *South China Morning Post*'s decision in November 2000 to relieve Willy Wo-lap Lam, a well-known critic of China, from his role of director of the paper's China coverage. Lam subsequently resigned.

9.  Regarding national security legislation, the Hong Kong government was heavily criticized for not allowing enough time for public consultation. The proposed legislation was also criticized for having an adverse impact on civic liberties.

10.  Lau Tuen-yu and To Yiu-ming, "Walking a Tight Rope: Hong Kong's Media Facing Political and Economic Challenges since Sovereignty Transfer," in *Crisis and Transformation in China's Hong Kong*, ed. Ming K. Chan and Alvin Y. So (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2002), pp. 322–43.

11.  Anne S. Y. Cheung, "Hong Kong Press Coverage of China-Taiwan Cross-straits Tension," in *Hong Kong in Transition*, pp. 210–25.

12.  Before the handover, Chinese officials identified three no-go areas for the Hong Kong media: no engagement in subversive activities, no personal attacks on national leaders, and no advocacy of Taiwan or Tibet independence. See Paul S. N. Lee and Leonard Chu, "Inherent Dependence on Power: The Hong Kong Press in Political Transition," *Media, Culture & Society* 20:1 (January 1998), 59–77.

13.  Ching worked for Singapore's *Straits Times* when he was held by the Chinese government in April 2005. Before the detention, Ching was researching former Chinese leader Zhao Ziyang. He was later charged with passing state secrets, presumably including military intelligence, to a Taiwan foundation over a period of five years. He was sentenced to five years in jail on August 31, 2006.

clear political boundaries, the Chinese government hopes that the Hong Kong media will play it safe and stay back from the unspecified limit for reporting.

It is important to note that the strategies used by the Chinese government to influence the media are backed by a real underlying threat of coercion. Although no journalist working for a Hong Kong media organization has been tried and jailed by the Chinese government since *Ming Pao* reporter Xi Yang in 1994, Ching's case is a reminder for SAR journalists about the risks they face when reporting news in and about China.

Given such Chinese government strategies, to what extent has self-censorship been induced in the Hong Kong media? This question is difficult to answer precisely despite anecdotal evidence[14] because the practice is notoriously hard to pin down. Self-censorship can be defined as "a set of editorial actions ranging from omission, dilution, distortion, and change of emphasis to a choice of rhetorical devices by journalists, their organizations, and even the entire media community in anticipation of currying reward and avoiding punishments from the power structure."[15] But it is almost impossible for an observer to ascertain if a specific editorial action was adopted to avoid punishment or if it represents the journalist's independent judgment, no matter how questionable or poor.

Even the Hong Kong Journalist Association (HKJA), which is among the staunchest critics on the question of press freedom in the city, acknowledges that "the nature of self-censorship is such that it is difficult to determine whether the slant of a story, or its omission, is the result of self-censorship or a justifiable editorial decision, a sense of fair play or a fear of libel action."[16] As one might expect, every publicized case of suspected self-censorship in post-handover Hong Kong has been met by denials from the media outlets concerned.

What can be said with certainty, though, is that there is widespread perception of media self-censorship among both professional journalists and the public. A survey of Hong Kong journalists in 2006,[17] for example, found that 26.6% of the respondents reported self-censorship as being "very serious" in the media, while 47.2% reported that self-censorship existed "but is not very serious." Only 3.2% reported that there was no self-censorship at all. Meanwhile, a series of university-conducted polls has shown that from September

---

14. See Willy Wo-lap Lam, "The Media in Hong Kong: On the Horns of a Dilemma," in *Political Communications in Greater China*, ed. Gary D. Rawnsley and Ming-yeh T. Rawnsley (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 169–89.

15. Chin-chuan Lee, "Press Self-censorship and Political Transition in Hong Kong," *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 3:2 (Spring 1998), p. 57.

16. HKJA and [the institution named] ARTICLE 19, "A Change of Wind: New Challenges to Freedom of Expression in Hong Kong," Annual Freedom of Expression Report, June 2005 (the report is available at <http://www.hkja.org.hk>).

17. The survey was conducted by the present author in collaboration with Prof. Clement Y. K. So and Prof. Joseph Man Chan at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

1997 to June 2006 the percentage of Hong Kong people believing in the existence of media self-censorship has been fluctuating around the 40% level.[18]

Nevertheless, self-censorship is far from the Hong Kong media's only response to political pressure. The Hong Kong media are mostly commercial organizations. They have to compete for audiences and respond to what their competitors have reported. Journalists in mainstream news organizations are professionals who largely uphold the norms of liberal journalism. They understand that the most important roles of the press include giving the public accurate and timely information, providing a marketplace of ideas in which opinions can compete fairly for public approval, and monitoring officials and big businesses to prevent abuses of power. In short, Hong Kong journalists regard themselves as independent professionals serving the interests of the public.[19]

Survey research has shown that a large proportion of Hong Kong citizens also uphold the liberal conception of the press and support media efforts to function as watchdogs monitoring power holders.[20] Given such normative views, it is clear that concerns with market credibility and a sense of integrity have driven Hong Kong journalists to develop methods to handle political pressure without hugely sacrificing their professionalism. This is where objectivity, one of the central professional norms in the liberal conception of the press, enters the politics of press freedom.

## Objectivity as a Strategic Ritual

Following the pioneering study of journalism scholar Gaye Tuchman, the methods developed by the Hong Kong media to simultaneously handle political pressure and their own credibility can be called "strategic rituals."[21] A strategic ritual allows journalists to defend their news reports by referring to widely accepted professional norms of journalism. One concrete example is the Hong Kong media's reliance on international media reports when covering tensions across the Taiwan Strait.[22] By reporting what others have reported, the media can cover political criticism and sensitive issues within their news reports while adopting a posture of detachment. When criticized, they can claim that they are only "objectively" reporting what others have already reported.

---

18. The respondents were asked to indicate only "yes" or "no." The findings are available at <http://hkupop.hku.hk>.

19. Joseph Man Chan, Chin-chuan Lee, and Paul S. N. Lee, *Hong Kong Journalists in Transition* (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 1996).

20. Francis L. F. Lee, Joseph Man Chan, Clement Y. K. So, "Evaluation of Media and Understanding of Politics: The Role of Education among Hong Kong Citizens," *Asian Journal of Communication* 15:1 (March 2005), pp. 37–56.

21. Gaye Tuchman, *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1978).

22. Cheung, "Hong Kong Press Coverage," p. 219.

Other strategic rituals in post-handover Hong Kong media include the increasing use of juxtapositions of competing views, the use of more factual narrative forms, the construction of politically diverse op-ed pages, the reliance on talk radio for critical views toward the power holders, the reliance on polls as "objective" indicators of public opinion, and so on.[23] With these techniques, professional norms—especially objectivity—become weapons for Hong Kong journalists to fight against political pressure.

But objective journalism also has its questionable aspects. If simply juxtaposing competing views means good journalism, journalists would no longer feel responsible for making judgments between right and wrong. When "hard facts" are considered as the cornerstones of news stories, the institutions best positioned to provide such hard facts gain much privilege in media access and influence. In fact, journalism scholars in the U.S., Canada, and Britain have criticized journalistic objectivity for leading to the lack of journalistic responsibility and the privileging of established institutions as the "primary definers" of news.[24]

The crux of the issue is that journalistic objectivity is only an abstract goal that can be articulated with different sets of practices with varying consequences in specific cases. In fact in Hong Kong, where the media span the entire partisan spectrum, journalists tend to endorse the abstract goals of professional norms (e.g., objectivity) but diverge over the concrete ways and means of achieving those goals (e.g., balanced reporting).[25] Moreover, journalistic objectivity can become particularly problematic when the nature of an event requires the media to take on the power holders. As explicated above, speaking on behalf of the public interest and monitoring the power holders are key aspects of the liberal conception of the press. Overemphasis on the posture of objectivity and detachment may lead to failure on the part of media organizations to play their watchdog role satisfactorily.

A recent study on how the editorials of two Chinese-language Hong Kong newspapers responded to the democratic reform debate in 2004 provides a relevant example.[26] The study finds that the *Apple Daily*, which has adopted

---

23. See Lee, "The Paradox of Political Economy," pp. 317–20.

24. Tuchman, *Making News*; Mark Fishman, *Manufacturing the News* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980); Robert Hackett and Yuezhi Zhao, *Sustaining Democracy: Journalism and the Politics of Objectivity* (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1998); Theodore L. Glasser, "Objectivity Precludes Responsibility," in *Philosophical Issues in Journalism*, ed. Elliot D. Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 176–85; Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John N. Clarke, and Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London: McMillan, 1978).

25. Chin-Chuan Lee, Chi-hsien Chen, Joseph Man Chan, and Paul Siu-nam Lee, "Partisanship and Professionalism: Hong Kong Journalists in Transition," *Gazette: International Journal for Mass Communication Studies* 57:1 (January 1996), pp. 1–15.

26. Francis L. F. Lee and Angel M. Y. Lin, "Newspaper Editorials and the Politics of Self-censorship in Hong Kong," *Discourse & Society* 17:3 (May 2006), pp. 331–58.

political criticism of the Chinese and SAR governments as a marketing strategy, posited itself as a defender of the public interest in conflicts between China and the Hong Kong public. Its editorials actively called for quicker democratization and directly criticized Chinese officials for failing to respond to local public opinion. On the contrary, *Ming Pao*, an elite-oriented newspaper that takes pride in its own professionalism, has adopted the rhetoric of objectivity in its editorials. It has posited itself as a neutral commentator on debates between the Chinese government and local democrats in Hong Kong. This resulted in a set of editorials that seems justifiable in professional terms but is also devoid of sharp criticism, even as the Chinese government one-sidedly ruled out the institutionalization of direct elections of the Chief Executive in 2007.

This case study shows that the norm of objectivity and the related postures of neutrality and detachment can become, if inadvertently, an excuse for the media to refrain from providing needed political criticism toward power holders. Even if journalists adopted the objective stance simply out of their own sense of professionalism, for people who believe that the media should take a clear and oppositional stance on an issue the media's posture of objectivity may be perceived as self-censorship in disguise.

Of course, objectivity is an extremely complicated concept. It can be seen as the belief in the possibility of truthfully and accurately representing an external reality that is independent of human senses. In science, objectivity refers to a set of agreed upon procedures which gives rise to replicable results. In journalism, objectivity is also closely linked to neutrality and balancing of viewpoints when covering what journalism scholar Daniel Hallin calls "legitimate controversies,"[27] that is, controversies in which the different sides are believed to deserve a fair and equal chance of hearing. As pointed out earlier, objectivity can also be articulated with other reporting methods and journalistic practices. Hence, the norm itself is not good or bad. It can defend or damage press freedom depending on the characteristics of the event and how the norm is actually practiced.

## Examining Citizens' Beliefs

The following analysis examines Hong Kong citizens' beliefs in media neutrality and perceptions of media self-censorship and press freedom. As mentioned, neutrality is one of the major manifestations of the broader and more complex notion of journalistic objectivity. There are two reasons to focus specifically on media neutrality when analyzing public attitudes. Methodologically, the meaning of neutrality is clearer than objectivity, which can be taken

---

27. Daniel Hallin, *The "Uncensored War": The Media and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Daniel Hallin, *We Keep America on Top of the World: Television Journalism and the Public Sphere* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

by respondents to mean different things. More substantively, neutrality is directly tied to the question of whether the media are willing to take sides when the public believes they should. It is a central problem in the politics of objective journalism in Hong Kong and thus deserves a more focused analysis.

More precisely, the present analysis attempts to substantiate three arguments. First, we contend that *the public is likely to perceive specific limits of the applicability of media neutrality.* If we simply ask people whether they think the media should be neutral in covering political controversies, we can expect a large proportion to give an affirmative answer. The more interesting question is whether the principle is "absolute," that is, whether people would regard neutrality as unimportant in certain situations. Journalism scholars have pointed out that balancing viewpoints is a relevant practice only when an issue falls within the sphere of legitimate controversy in a society. When an issue is within the spheres of consensus or deviance, journalists will tend to reflect the consensus and/or condemn the deviant.[28] Hence, we believe that few common citizens would regard the neutral stance as applicable in all cases and at all times.

Certainly, individuals can have different views about what constitutes a legitimate controversy. Some people may not expect the media to remain neutral when covering conflicts between China and Japan but believe that neutrality is mandated when covering democratic reform in Hong Kong. Others may hold the opposite set of beliefs. Obviously, such differences should be related to the individuals' political attitudes, such as strength of national identification and support for democratization. This is the second argument for the analysis: *beliefs in the limits of media neutrality's applicability are political judgments.*

Third, the analysis aims to establish that *beliefs in the limits of media neutrality's applicability are related to perceptions of media self-censorship and press freedom.* If the practice of neutrality is to be a useful strategic ritual in the sense explicated earlier, news audiences must recognize the justifiability of the neutral stance on specific issues and events. Contrarily, if citizens believe that the media should take up a clear stance against the power holders on an issue, the media's refusal to do so may be taken as a sign of self-censorship and declining press freedom.

## The Limits of Media Neutrality

The data analyzed here come from two surveys (N = 800 in both cases) conducted by the Quality Evaluation Center at the City University of Hong Kong in September 2004 and April 2006, respectively.[29] Both surveys aim at studying

---

28. Hallin, *The "Uncensored War."*
29. In both surveys, residential telephone numbers were selected through systematic sampling from the most updated directories. The last digit of the numbers was increased by 1 to include non-listed numbers. Target respondents were Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong residents over age 15 in

people's attitudes toward the media and political issues. Most relevant to the present article is a set of questions on attitudes toward media neutrality and press freedom. The 2006 survey also includes a set of questions on perceived media self-censorship.

We can first look at the degree to which Hong Kong citizens believe there are limits to the applicability of media neutrality. The surveys asked the respondents whether they believe the media should remain neutral on five issues that may or may not constitute legitimate controversies in the eyes of the public: (1) the Diaoyu Island dispute between China and Japan, (2) Taiwan independence, (3) conflicts of interest between Hong Kong and the Mainland, (4) quickening the institutionalization of direct elections of the Chief Executive, and (5) reevaluation by the Chinese government of the Tiananmen Incident in 1989. It should be noted that issues 3, 4, and 5 all involve conflicts between Hong Kong and China. Issue 3 points to such "conflicts" in general, while on issues 4 and 5 the majority opinion in Hong Kong clearly contradicts the attitude of the Chinese government. Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics. Several findings are noteworthy. First, on all five issues a substantial proportion of Hong Kong people believe that the norm of neutrality does *not* apply. At most, nearly 60% of the respondents in April 2006 expected the media to remain neutral on Chinese reevaluation of Tiananmen. This, obviously, is because of the existence of an overwhelming majority opinion, if not a social consensus, on each of the issues. Most of the people who did not treat media neutrality as applicable believed that the media should support China on the Diaoyu Island dispute, support reunification on the Taiwan question, support Hong Kong when there are local-national conflicts, support quicker democratization, and support reevaluation of the Tiananmen Incident.

The distributions of percentages in the two surveys are largely the same. The largest discrepancies exist on reevaluation of the Tiananmen Incident. The percentage of people believing that the media should support reevaluation has dropped from 37% in 2004 to 29% in 2006. This is probably because September 2004 was only three months after the 15th anniversary of the incident. Public concern was likely to be particularly heightened at that time.

Lastly, what Table 1 does not show is the relationship between the answers to the five questions. Cross-tabulation analysis shows that beliefs in media neutrality on the five issues are significantly related to each other, such that a person who believed in the applicability of neutrality on one issue was more

---

the first survey and over age 18 in the second. The most-recent-birthday rule was used to select a respondent from a household. Response rates were 66.3% and 66.9%, respectively. Both samples were somewhat better educated, younger, and had higher levels of household income when compared with the population. Relatively larger discrepancies exist for age; thus, the samples were weighted according to age in the analysis.

TABLE 1  *Citizens' Beliefs in Media Neutrality on Specific Issues* (%)

| | Diaoyu Island | Taiwan Independence | HK vs. Mainland | Direct Election of CE | Re-evaluating June 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **September 2004** | | | | | |
| Should be neutral | 41.0 | 45.1 | 41.8 | 48.4 | 51.5 |
| Support majority | 54.5 | 48.4 | 44.1 | 43.6 | 37.0 |
| Support minority | 0.7 | 2.7 | 7.5 | 4.1 | 4.7 |
| **April 2006** | | | | | |
| Should be neutral | 38.4 | 49.2 | 43.8 | 52.0 | 58.4 |
| Support majority | 56.7 | 44.3 | 44.3 | 37.7 | 29.0 |
| Support minority | 0.3 | 2.1 | 5.3 | 3.3 | 5.6 |

SOURCE: By author.

NOTE: The questionnaires state the specific sides the media can take. The terms "majority" and "minority" are used here only to simplify the table. On the five issues, the "majority" is "supporting China," "supporting reunification," "supporting Hong Kong," "supporting direct election," and "supporting re-evaluation," respectively. The "minority" is "supporting Japan," "supporting Taiwan independence," "supporting China," "opposing direct election," and "opposing re-evaluation." Percentages do not add up to 100% because of "don't knows" or "no answers."

likely to believe in its applicability on another issue. But the interrelationships are not strong. In fact, only 13.3% of the respondents in the 2006 survey believed the media should remain neutral on all five issues, while 15.3% believed the media should take sides in each case. The corresponding percentages in the 2004 survey are even lower, at 9.4% and 12%, respectively. In other words, most citizens believed that the media should remain neutral on some issues but take a stance on others.

Besides specific issues, the surveys asked respondents if neutrality would become unnecessary when the media are supported by: (1) facts and reasons or (2) public opinion. As Table 2 shows, large proportions of the respondents agreed that when supported by facts and reasons, media neutrality on social and political matters is not necessary. Fewer respondents acknowledged the justifiability of media non-neutrality when supported by public opinion. Of course, sticking to facts is another manifestation of journalistic objectivity. It is plausible that more people would accept media non-neutrality when supported by facts because they do not see the media as deviating from the broader idea of objectivity in this kind of situation. But in any case the highest percentage of disagreement is only 41.4% in the 2006 survey for the statement "the media do not need to remain neutral on political matters when supported by public opinion." The public does not see the principle of neutrality as absolute. In fact, only 18.1% of the 2006 respondents disagreed with all four statements

TABLE 2  *Citizens' Beliefs in the Justifiability of Media Non-Neutrality*

| | Sample | Agree (%) | So-So (%) | Disagree (%) | Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| The media do not need to remain neutral: | | | | | |
| on political matters when supported by | Sep. 2004 | 37.4 | 32.3 | 26.5 | 3.15 |
| facts and reasons | Apr. 2006 | 38.1 | 26.2 | 30.2 | 3.11 |
| on social matters when supported by | Sep. 2004 | 37.1 | 24.8 | 33.3 | 3.04 |
| facts and reasons | Apr. 2006 | 37.6 | 25.6 | 30.8 | 3.10 |
| on political matters when supported | Sep. 2004 | 26.9 | 30.8 | 38.1 | 2.79 |
| by public opinion | Apr. 2006 | 20.7 | 31.1 | 41.4 | 2.68 |
| on social matters when supported by | Sep. 2004 | 28.0 | 29.0 | 38.8 | 2.80 |
| public opinion | Apr. 2006 | 19.8 | 32.5 | 40.5 | 2.66 |

SOURCE:  By author.
NOTE:  "Agree" includes respondents who reported "agree" and "strongly agree." The same applies to "disagree." Percentages do not add up to 100% because of "don't knows" or "no answers."

in Table 2. The corresponding percentage in 2004 was 13.2%. The distributions of the percentages differ substantially neither across the two surveys nor between "social" and "political" matters. Respondents' answers to the statements in Table 2 are positively correlated. Because the statements are relatively abstract—they are not tied to concrete issues—the inter-correlation is quite strong. Reliability tests show that the answers to the four statements can form a single index of justifiability of media non-neutrality (Cronbach's *alpha* = .78 and .85, respectively, in the 2004 and 2006 surveys.) This index will be used in the further analysis below.

## Political Bases of Beliefs in Media Neutrality

The previous section shows that people hold different beliefs about the limits of the applicability of media neutrality. We now examine how such beliefs relate to political attitudes. Given the issues in the survey, two types of political attitudes are highly relevant. The first is support for democratization, which is also likely to relate to support for reevaluation of the Tiananmen Incident and insistence on the media standing by Hong Kong when conflicts between the city and the Mainland emerge.

The second relevant attitudinal variable is identification with China. Since the 1980s, a distinctive stream of research in Hong Kong has analyzed the political implications of Hong Kong people's identity. People who identified themselves as "Hong Kongers" have been shown to hold more liberal and

pro-democracy attitudes, while people who identified themselves as "Chinese" were more politically conservative.[30] In relation to the issues in the present surveys, people with stronger senses of national identity should be more supportive toward China in the Diaoyu Island dispute and regarding reunification with Taiwan.

We expect people with strong attitudes relevant to an issue to be more likely to regard media neutrality as inapplicable to the issue. The stronger a person's attitude, the less likely the person is to believe that the relevant issue is a legitimate controversy. Hence, the less likely the person would believe in the need for the media to balance viewpoints.

Logistic regression was conducted to test this argument. The items in Table 1 were recoded as dichotomous variables with 1 = media should be neutral and 0 = media should support the majority opinion on the issue.[31] The independent variables include four demographics, a 0-to-10-scaled question on identification with Hong Kong, a similarly scaled question on identification with China, and a five-point Likert scaled question on support for quicker democratization. The two surveys provide highly similar results. For clarity of presentation, only the 2006 survey findings are presented here. Table 3 summarizes the findings. Among the demographics, only age has significant impact on more than one dependent variable. Young people are more insistent on media neutrality on four of the five issues, with reevaluation of June 4 as the exception. Better educated people are more likely to support the media taking a neutral stance on Taiwan independence. People with higher levels of income are more likely to support media neutrality on direct elections of the Chief Executive.

More important, in each of the five cases the dependent variable is significantly predicted by at least one political attitude. As expected, people who identified with China more strongly were less likely to support the media remaining neutral on the Diaoyu Island dispute and the Taiwan question. However, these people were also more likely to support media neutrality on conflicts between Hong Kong and China.

Cross-tabulation analyses were conducted to make the findings more concrete. The findings show that only 25.5% of the people who scored 9 or 10 on the Chinese identity variable supported media neutrality on disputes between China and Japan; 39% of them supported media neutrality on Taiwan independence. Among people who scored 5 or lower, the corresponding percentages

---

30. See Lau Siu-Kai and Kuan Hsin-Chi, *The Ethos of the Hong Kong Chinese* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1988); Francis L. F. Lee and Joseph Man Chan, "Political Attitudes, Political Participation, and Hong Kong Identities after 1997," *Issues & Studies* 41:2 (June 2005), pp. 1–35.

31. Respondents supporting the minority view were excluded from the analysis.

TABLE 3  *Political Attitudes and Beliefs in Media Neutrality*

| | Dependent Variable: Media Should Be Neutral On | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *Diaoyu Island* | *Taiwan Independence* | *HK vs. Mainland* | *Direct Election of CE* | *Re-evaluating June 4* |
| Sex | .14 | .21 | .01 | −.24 | −.19 |
| Age | −.48*** | −.42*** | −.19** | −.20* | −.02 |
| Education | −.01 | .12* | .08 | .05 | −.03 |
| Income | .10 | .04 | .07 | .14* | .09 |
| HK identity | .01 | .10* | −.06 | .05 | .12* |
| Chinese identity | −.20*** | −.21*** | .13** | .09 | .03 |
| Support democracy | .05 | .11 | −.33*** | −1.06*** | −.64*** |
| N | 749 | 736 | 702 | 716 | 694 |
| Chi-Square | 114.9*** | 119.8*** | 46.2*** | 165.8*** | 61.8*** |

SOURCE:  By author.
NOTE:  Entries are unstandardized logistic regression coefficients.
* p < .05.
** p < .01.
*** p < .001.

are much higher at 53.8% and 62.1%, respectively. On the contrary, 48.2% of people who scored 9 or 10 on the Chinese identity variable supported media neutrality on conflicts between Hong Kong and China. The percentage goes down to 38.7% among people who scored 5 or below.

Local identity also has some, though relatively limited, influence on belief in media neutrality. Those who identified with Hong Kong more strongly were more likely to support media neutrality on Taiwan independence and reevaluation of the Tiananmen Incident. More significantly, supporters of democratization were less likely to support the media taking a neutral stance on the three issues involving local-national conflicts. Further analysis shows that 41.5%, 39.3%, and 54.2% of the pro-democracy citizens (i.e., who scored 4 or 5 on the variable) supported media neutrality on the three issues, respectively. Among non-supporters of democratization (who scored 1 or 2), the corresponding percentages are substantially higher at 50.0%, 69.0%, and 70.2%, respectively.

Therefore, beliefs in the applicability of media neutrality on specific issues are indeed related to people's political attitudes. But what about belief in the justifiability of media non-neutrality when support from facts, reasons, and/or public opinion is present? Table 4 shows the results of the relevant regression analysis. The dependent variable is the index created by averaging respondents' answers to the four statements in Table 2.

TABLE 4  *Predictors of Justifiability of Media Non-neutrality*

|                       | *September 2004 Sample* | *April 2006 Sample* |
|-----------------------|:-----------------------:|:-------------------:|
| Sex                   | −.06                    | −.10**              |
| Age                   | .05                     | .11**               |
| Education             | −.17***                 | −.13**              |
| Income                | −.01                    | .01                 |
| Hong Kong identity    | −.02                    | −.02                |
| Chinese identity      | .02                     | −.01                |
| Support democracy     | .17***                  | .11**               |
| Adjusted $R^2$        | 5.9%***                 | 5.2%***             |
| N                     | 763                     | 767                 |

SOURCE:  By author.
NOTE:  Entries are standardized regression coefficients.
*$p < .05$.
**$p < .01$.
***$p < .001$.

   In both surveys, the better educated people were more likely to insist on media neutrality. In the 2006 survey, older people and males were more likely to accept the media abandoning the neutral stance when supported by facts, reasons, and public opinion. More importantly, a significant positive relationship between support for democratization and the dependent variable exists in both surveys. The findings are consistent with those in Table 3. Taken together, the results show that supporters of democratization in Hong Kong are less insistent upon the media remaining neutral in public debates, especially when the debates touch upon issues of democratization and local-national conflicts.

## Media Neutrality, Self-Censorship, and Press Freedom

Finally, we turn to the relationship between beliefs in media neutrality and evaluations of self-censorship and press freedom. In the 2006 survey, following the questions on normative beliefs about media stances on the five issues, a set of questions asked respondents the extent to which they regarded the Hong Kong media as having practiced self-censorship on the issues. As the top half of Table 5 shows, perceptions of media self-censorship are rather widespread. Percentages of respondents who perceived the existence of at least some self-censorship ranged from 49.3% to 55.5%. Only 36% perceived no "self-censorship at all" on the Diaoyu Island dispute; the corresponding percentages are all below 30% on the other issues. Perceptions of self-censorship did not seem to be highly issue-specific. Although self-censorship was regarded

TABLE 5  *Beliefs in Media Neutrality and Perceptions of Self-Censorship*

| | Media Self-Censorship On | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | Diaoyu Island | Taiwan Independence | HK vs. Mainland | Direct Election of CE | Re-evaluating June 4 |
| Yes, very serious | 2.4% | 3.9% | 5.6% | 4.7% | 6.7% |
| Yes, but not serious | 13.1% | 16.3% | 19.2% | 18.2% | 17.7% |
| A little bit | 23.8% | 27.4% | 30.7% | 30.3% | 27.2% |
| No | 36.0% | 29.3% | 22.8% | 24.8% | 27.8% |
| Mean | $1.76_{abc}$ | $1.93_{abc}$ | $2.10_a$ | $2.14_b$ | $2.14_c$ |
| Mean scores among people who think media should: | | | | | |
|   Be neutral | 1.75 | 1.98 | 2.02 | 2.00 | 1.98 |
|   Support majority | 1.79 | 1.89 | 2.34 | 2.14 | 2.20 |
|   T-value | 0.55 | 1.21 | −3.06** | −1.81 | −2.59** |

SOURCE:  By author.

NOTE:  Percentages do not add up to 100% because of "don't knows" or "no answers." For overall means, cells sharing the same subscript differ from each other at p < .05 in paired-samples t-tests. **p < .05.

as somewhat more serious on issues involving conflicts between Hong Kong and China, the degree of perceived self-censorship did not differ greatly across issues. When the variables are treated as interval measures,[32] the mean scores range from 1.76 to 2.14. Second, the perceived self-censorship variables are highly inter-correlated, with the correlation coefficients ranging from .31 (between the Diaoyu Island dispute and reevaluation of the Tiananmen Incident) to .59 (between Hong Kong-Mainland conflicts and direct election of the Chief Executive).

Were beliefs in media neutrality related to perceptions of self-censorship? The bottom half of Table 5 shows the results of the independent samples t-tests addressing this question. Belief in media neutrality is significantly related to perceived self-censorship on two issues: (1) conflicts between Hong Kong and the Mainland and (2) reevaluation of the Tiananmen Incident. People who believed that the media should take sides on these two issues were more likely to regard the media as having practiced self-censorship on the issues. In addition, people who believed that the media should take sides on the question of direct

---

32. The variables are measured with ordinal scales, but treating them as interval measures simplifies the analysis. The substantive conclusions remain unchanged no matter what level of measure is assumed.

TABLE 6  *Justifiability of Media Non-Neutrality and Perceptions of Press Freedom*

|  | Declining Press Freedom | Self-Censorship |
|---|---|---|
| Sex | .01 | −.05 |
| Age | −.04 | .04 |
| Education | −.10* | −.09* |
| Income | −.02 | .01 |
| Hong Kong identity | −.01 | .03 |
| Chinese identity | −.13** | −.06 |
| Support democracy | .23*** | .13** |
| Non-neutrality justified | .07* | .08* |
| Adjusted R$^2$ | 8.4%*** | 3.2%*** |
| N | 766 | 692 |

SOURCE:  By author.
NOTE:  Entries are standardized regression coefficients.
* p < .05.
** p < .01.
*** p < .001.

election of the Chief Executive were also more likely to perceive the existence of self-censorship on the issue, though the difference is only marginally significant (p < .10). Taken together, these results strongly suggest that media neutrality on certain issues is taken by some Hong Kong citizens as a sign of self-censorship. This does not mean that being neutral is always undesirable. On the Diaoyu Island dispute and Taiwan independence, media neutrality is not related to perceived self-censorship. The problem arises when the media fail to stand by the local society in conflicts between Hong Kong and the Mainland.

Similar findings are also derived when the justifiability of media non-neutrality variable is used. Table 6 summarizes the regression analysis on how justifiability of media non-neutrality relates to (1) an index of perceived self-censorship created by averaging perceived self-censorship on the three issues involving conflicts between Hong Kong and China,[33] and (2) respondents' agreement with the five-point Likert scaled statement that "there is less and less press freedom in Hong Kong." Other independent variables are four demographics and the three attitudinal variables in Tables 3 and 4. The findings show that supporters of democratization and less-educated people were more

---

33. Perceived self-censorship on the Diaoyu Island dispute and Taiwan independence were not included because beliefs in neutrality and perceptions of self-censorship relate only to the other three issues. The Cronbach's *alpha* of the index is .78.

likely to have perceived the existence of self-censorship and a decline in press freedom. People who identified with China more strongly were less likely to perceive declining press freedom in Hong Kong. Most important, belief in the justifiability of media non-neutrality is significantly, though weakly, related to both dependent variables. The more people believed that the media can abandon a neutral stance when supported by facts, reasons, and/or public opinion, the more they regarded the Hong Kong media as having practiced self-censorship on the three issues involving conflicts between Hong Kong and China—and the more they perceived a decline of press freedom. This is consistent with the argument that for Hong Kong citizens, the media's sticking to a neutral stance even when not required to can be a sign of political submissiveness.

## Discussions

To recapitulate, this article begins with a discussion of press freedom in post-handover Hong Kong, following the perspective of strategic interaction. The discussion points to how media professionalism, and especially the norm of journalistic objectivity, relates to press freedom in the city. The practices and discourses of objective journalism provide the media with a weapon for self-defense against political pressure. However, not all practices of objectivity on all issues are desirable. In some cases objectivity and its related postures of neutrality and detachment can inadvertently lead to the avoidance of responsibility, especially the responsibility to serve as critic and watchdog.

Our empirical analysis focuses specifically on media neutrality, one of the most important aspects of journalistic objectivity. The study demonstrates that the problematic status of objective journalism is observed not only by academics and commentators. Ordinary citizens also recognize the relationship between media neutrality and the questions of self-censorship and press freedom. This is because judgments about the desirability of media neutrality are fundamentally *political* judgments. People understand differently the boundaries of the sphere of legitimate controversy. Hence, they treat the neutrality principle as applicable in some situations but not in others. When people believe that the media should take sides, they may interpret media neutrality as an act of self-censorship.

Critical journalism scholars have long argued that although the *idea* of objectivity is central to professional journalists' self-conception as independent actors performing a public service, the *practices* of objectivity can result in a tendency for the media to privilege established institutions.[34] The case of Hong Kong discussed above partially echoes this view. The practice of taking a neutral stance by itself is not necessarily problematic. But on specific issues the

---

34. Tuchman, *Making News*; Fishman, *Manufacturing the News.*

posture of neutrality may restrict the ability of media to adequately and properly play their role as watchdogs over power holders. It is notable that insofar as public attitude is concerned, the neutral stance is most problematic on issues involving conflicts between Hong Kong and China. Neutrality on such issues often implies a lack of commitment to protecting local interests and to criticizing the Chinese government even when criticisms are justified. In other words, while "established institutions" may refer to various holders of major political and economic power, in the Hong Kong case the Chinese government is the "established institution" that stands to gain most from the local media's practices of neutrality.

More broadly speaking, while most critical studies and discussions on journalistic professionalism have focused on journalists' practices and opinions only, public attitudes toward journalistic objectivity have seldom been systematically analyzed. This study, therefore, adds to the existing literature in journalism studies on the politics of objectivity by demonstrating that the general public is potentially capable of perceiving and understanding the problematic aspects of objectivity.

Of course, this does not mean that all of the findings in this study are necessarily applicable to other countries. There is no strong reason to assume that citizens in the U.S., for instance, would also relate their beliefs in media neutrality and perceptions of press freedom in exactly the same manner. Nevertheless, U.S. citizens are likely to draw the boundaries of legitimate controversies in their own ways based on their political attitudes, basic beliefs about media and politics, and national identity. It is plausible that they would expect media neutrality on domestic politics. But when it comes to foreign issues, especially those heavily tied to national interests, they may expect the media to defend what they see as those national interests.[35] These expectations in turn will affect citizens' evaluations of media performance; such audience expectations may also be a factor that helps to explain the actual performance of U.S. media.

Awareness of the problematic nature of objective journalism can be particularly acute in Hong Kong. This is because for more than a decade residents have had high levels of concern about press freedom and widespread suspicions toward the Chinese government. Moreover, in many democratizing countries the politics of journalistic objectivity is manifested in various ways during political transitions, depending on whether the norm of objectivity itself is rooted in a society's journalism culture, and how—and how much—political pressure is applied to the media.[36] A rigorous comparative analysis is

---

35.  Hallin, *The "Uncensored War."*

36.  See Richard Gunther and Anthony Mughan, eds., *Democracy and the Media: A Comparative Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Peter Gross, *Entangled Evolutions: Media and Democratization in Eastern Europe* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

out of the scope of the present article. But future studies can certainly compare systematically the politics of journalistic objectivity in different countries in order to identify what kinds of roles journalistic objectivity can play and what kinds of problems its practice could lead to under different social and political conditions.

Back to the case of Hong Kong, the findings and arguments of the present study do have a number of important implications for the media and the future of press freedom in the city. First, they illustrate the possible "dark side" of objective journalism. As Chin-chuan Lee states, "The [Hong Kong] media's effort to establish 'strategic rituals' [of objectivity] seems quite paradoxical: These rituals sometimes hide the acts of self-censorship but at other times morally justify media resistance to (or subversion of) perceived censorship."[37] In other words, objective journalism by itself cannot fully reconcile the tension between political pressure and market credibility. Rather, it only leads to a different set of questions: How should journalists practice objectivity? What is the boundary of objectivity's applicability? Who has the power to set this boundary? For the media, the ideal situation would be one in which professional journalists determine the boundary by exercising their independent judgment. But in reality this situation can hardly be achieved even in liberal democracies such as the U.S.[38] Therefore, a key issue for observers and scholars in Hong Kong is the extent to which and the methods with which the power holders effectively determine the shape of the sphere of legitimate controversy for the media.

Yet, the media also have to pay attention to the beliefs of the public, who also draw the boundary of the sphere of legitimate controversy in their own ways. Objectivity does not necessarily promote credibility; it can lead to declining credibility when applied in the wrong way or the wrong place. Objectivity can be used as a "defensive" posture by the media, but such a "defense" is not always accepted by the public. As pointed out earlier, one reason why the Hong Kong media did not completely succumb to political pressure was their concern with market competition and credibility. When one news outlet decides to take sides on an issue, other outlets must decide if they should remain neutral. Crucial to the making of this decision is the estimation of how one's own audiences will respond.

Although the Hong Kong media must respond to how power holders delimit the applicability of objective journalism, they also need to respond to how their audiences define the sphere of legitimate controversy. Therefore, although the practices and discourses of professionalism are undeniably important, Hong Kong media should be more reflective about the ways professional norms are

37. Lee, "Paradox of Political Economy," p. 318.
38. Hallin, *The "Uncensored War."*

practiced. Otherwise, they will lose touch with public sentiment and their credibility will be damaged as a result.

Another important implication of the present study is the fundamental importance of a changing political culture to the question of press freedom in Hong Kong. If the Hong Kong public, the professional media, and the Chinese government all draw the boundaries of the sphere of legitimate controversy differently, it is partly because the three groups have different visions of "common sense." Hence, changes in the political culture will continually redefine the problem of press freedom in the city.

Take the issue of Taiwan independence as an example. This study shows that Hong Kong citizens perceive media self-censorship as being less serious on the Taiwan issue than on issues involving conflicts between Hong Kong and China. This perception contrasts with many observers' comments that Taiwan independence is one of the most sensitive areas of news coverage for the Hong Kong press.[39] But citizens' perceptions are not difficult to understand, given our knowledge about the relationship between political attitudes, belief in media neutrality, and perceptions of self-censorship. Opinion polls have shown that the percentage of the Hong Kong public opposing Taiwan independence has risen from 51% in June 1993 to 81.3% in September 2006.[40] Putting aside what leads to such changes in public attitudes, as long as Hong Kong people overwhelmingly support China-Taiwan reunification, few will perceive the media's downplaying of the pro-independence viewpoint as a problem.

To put it more generally, conflicts between the Hong Kong media and the Chinese government should diminish to the extent that cultural and political differences between Hong Kong and China diminish. The latter outcome could be the result of conscious efforts on the part of the Chinese government to promote national identity and patriotism in Hong Kong. It could also result from a process of cultural co-orientation—one that is concomitant to the increasing interaction between Hong Kong society and the Mainland. Either of these outcomes would imply that Hong Kong culture was losing its distinctiveness. How desirable this would be is debatable, but the degree to which cultural co-orientation occurs between Hong Kong and the Mainland will certainly be one of the most important processes defining the parameters of the city's politics of press freedom in the future.

---

39. HKJA and ARTICLE 19, "Hong Kong Media Face to Face with the Taiwan Factor," Annual Freedom of Expression Report, June 2000 (the report is available at <http://www.hkja.org.hk>); Cheung, "Hong Kong Press Coverage."

40. See <http://hkupop.hku.hk>.