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Press Ideology and Organizational Control in Hong Kong[1]

This survey of journalists shows that in Hong Kong press ideology is a major determinant of its organizational control. The press imposes a stringent control on staff recruitment, resulting in a high ideological consonance between reporters and their respective newspaper organizations. Because of this high ideological consonance, many reporters do not feel subjected to explicit policy guidance in news reporting. Nevertheless, the party-owned press is more likely to interfere with the coverage of social conflicts than the nonparty press. More educated reporters are less compliant at both types of newspapers.

This article aims to bring to the fore how news organizations in the highly politicized environment of Hong Kong exercise institutional control on recruitment and newswork. In sum, there is a lot more variation in newspaper ideology in Hong Kong than in the United States (Breed, 1955; Gieber, 1964; Johnstone, Slawski, & Bowman, 1976; Sigelman, 1973; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986), Britain (Tunstall, 1971), Japan (Kim, 1981) or most other countries where institutional constraints on journalists have usually been studied. This article, based on a questionnaire survey of Hong Kong journalists, comprises four sections: (a) explication of major conceptual issues, (b) survey procedures and measurement of the variables, (c) hypothesis testing, and (d) conclusions and discussion.

In America, the partisan press has declined since the 1830s while media professionalism has developed with the rise of a market democracy (Schudson, 1978). Priding themselves on being professional, American

journalists adhere to canons of objectivity and neutrality with facts rigidly segregated from opinion. Media professionalism is by no means ideologically free. It is premised on an uncritical and generally unarticulated commitment to the established order: political consensus and middle-class liberalism are taken for granted and within these contexts there is a technical concern with how well things are done (Gans, 1979; Gouldner, 1976; Hall, 1977; Said, 1981; Schlesinger, 1978; Tuchman, 1978). Protest movements and "new politics" are often branded as deviant. As Manoff and Schudson (1986, p. 5) demonstrate, "The apparently simple commandment questions of journalism (i.e., the five Ws and one H) presuppose a platform for inquiry, a framework for interpreting answers, a set of rules about who to ask what about what." These frameworks, platforms, and rules can be traced to political and economic structures (Bagdikian, 1983; Chomsky & Herman, 1979; Gitlin, 1980; Hallin, 1986), occupational codes and organizational routines of daily journalism (Fishman, 1980; Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978), and literary forms that journalists work with (Jensen, 1987; Manoff & Schudson, 1986).

In many European and most Third World nations, however, the press makes no secret about its ideological stance and ties with political parties (Seymour-Ure, 1974). Colonial Hong Kong has no formal party system. Politics in this "administrative no-party state" (Harris, 1978, p. 11) are sharply divided on the line of the struggle between the Chinese Communist party (CCP) and the Chinese Nationalist party (KMT), that is, mainland China and Taiwan. The British are content with establishing the rules of the game, granting both the rightist and the leftist groups the freedom to organize trade unions, publish partisan newspapers, distribute propaganda, and engage in party polemics. The press, as an extension of modern Chinese politics, is shaped by the CCP-KMT interparty struggle. Not until the early 1970s did "centrist" newspapers, critical of both Beijing and Taipei, begin to prosper. These profit-motivated commercial papers are beneficiaries of Hong Kong's rapidly expanding economy and advertising. Although devoting significant coverage to Chinese politics, they focus even more on immediate local concerns. The juxtaposition of the partisan press with the "neutral" commercial press spans the full ideological spectrum.

Press ideology is a determining factor of constructed news realities in Hong Kong. Chan and Lee (1985) have theorized that political ideology constructs a "journalistic paradigm," which is a gestalt worldview, a

cognitive map, and a way of "seeing" that defines the entities of journalistic concerns, resulting in patterns of selective coverage, interpretation, emphasis, and exclusion. In examining a civil protest, the rightist press is more likely than the centrist, let alone its leftist counterpart, to support the Hong Kong government's use of force, to attribute an indigenous civil protest to foreign conspiracy, and to denounce such a protest as defying traditional morality. Similarly, Lee and Lee (1986) showed that the ultraleftist press tended to frame the 1967 riot in terms of the PRC's Cultural Revolution, the rightist and the ultrarightist press tended to interpret it from Taiwan's anti-Communist vantage point, and the centrist press stood by the Hong Kong government to maintain the status quo. Press ideology also "sets limits" and "exerts pressure" on the way government information is edited to fit partisan predispositions (Lee, 1985).

Media organizations, like all other organizations, have to face the external and internal constraints that influence social control in the newsroom. Organizational theorists (e.g., Hickson, Astley, Bulter, & Wilson, 1981) have linked intraorganizational relations to the structure of the wider environment. Organizations develop interorganizational relations—through such strategies as forestalling, forecasting, and absorption—to cope with environmental uncertainty (Galaskiewicz, 1985). Interorganizational relations necessitate intraorganizational accommodation and adaptation. The "strategic contingencies theory" attributes organizational power distribution to the division of labor and subunits' capacity to cope with uncertainty, substitutability, and centrality (Hickson, Hinings, Lee, Schenck, & Penning, 1971; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1977). This power structure is determined by the interactions, tensions, and conflicts among hierarchical authority, resource control, and network centrality (Astley & Sachdeva, 1984).

The fundamental dilemma of mass media, as McQuail (1983, p. 108) observes, is one of freedom versus constraints in an institution whose professional ideology places a value on originality and freedom, yet whose organizational setting requires quite strict control. Routinization is a major organizational strategy to establish programs, standard operating procedures, and prior prescriptions for recurrent task activities in an effort to reduce environmental uncertainty. Tuchman (1978) shows that media organizations routinely establish a "news net," distributed in time and space, to maximize the chance of capturing news events when and where

they are likely to occur. Journalists use what she terms "strategic rituals" that emphasize verifiable facticity and involve the attribution of news to authoritative sources.

Furthermore, Sigelman (1973) argues that news organizations exercise controls over selective recruitment, policy guidance, and socialization. Selective recruitment refers to hiring of journalists whose worldviews are generally compatible with those of the news organization. Policy guidance is a formalized form of organizational control that involves the outlining of specific news angles to be followed or avoided. Socialization is an informal form of social control whereby journalists absorb the newsroom norms and the prevailing definition of news through day-to-day contacts (Breed, 1955). These processes of routinization and control are widely found among U.S. and British media organizations and journalists (Epstein, 1973; Gans, 1979; Schlesinger, 1978; Sigelman, 1973; Tunstall, 1971).

This article aims to examine some aspects of organizational control of the press in Hong Kong in relation to ideology. Specifically, the Hong Kong Chinese press is so intensely interwoven with political organizations and partisan goals that it invariably enforces very strict ideological standards in both recruitment and newswork. The CCP and the KMT tightly control their respective press organs' propaganda, staff, finance, and work. It is widely reported that prominent editors of the Communist papers who strayed too far from the approved ideological line had been recalled to and detained in mainland China. These propaganda machines are staffed by party loyalists. Their recruitment patterns consist primarily of personal recommendations by politically reliable sources, and secondarily of requests for interviews by interested job seekers. Party allegiance being a key criterion in the hiring decision, some aspiring job seekers may disguise their ideological color to obtain employment. The papers occasionally have had to relax ideological criteria in order to maintain sufficient staff. In contrast, the centrist press seldom takes pains to sort out the applicant's political viewpoint, preferring to recruit journalists on the basis of technical competence.

Although reporters are ideologically consonant with their press organizations, their age and education may interact with organizational factors. Younger reporters are more inclined toward accepting Hong Kong as their life space. Members of their parents' generation, many of whom were immigrants from mainland China, are more attentive to the KMT-CCP struggle and more thoroughly socialized to the political ideology of the

press. Similarly, education may instill in reporters a Western sense of professionalism at the expense of traditional ideological affinity. This implies that higher-educated reporters are less committed to the KMT-CCP conflict.

Methods and Measurement

The Survey Population

This study is the only questionnaire survey ever administered, under somewhat trying circumstances, to the entire Hong Kong Chinese journalist population. No single roster of journalists could be obtained because newspapers treated such information as confidential. We identified and distributed questionnaires, with the help of student interns, to our entire survey population, which was a total of 329 reporters across 20 Chinese-language dailies in 1981.[2] A majority of the questionnaires were returned directly to our informants; some were sent back by post. We collected 176 questionnaires, for a response rate of 54%. Response rates varied across different types of newspapers: ultrarightist, 58%; rightist, 37%; centrist, 56%; and ultraleftist, 76%. The rightist reporters scored the lowest response rate primarily because we did not have informants in four of the six rightist papers and we had to request assignment desk editors for personal assistance. We made follow-up telephone inquiries to selected nonrespondents, who said their failure to return the questionnaire stemmed not from fear of their editor's reaction but from the logistic inconvenience. There seemed no reason to think the respondents were not representative of the different kinds of newspapers or journalists.

Ideologically, these 20 newspapers can be categorized into the ultraleftist-centrist-rightist-ultrarightist continuum. The criteria we use include the paper's source of financial support and party affiliation, place of registration (in Hong Kong only; in Hong Kong and Beijing; in Hong Kong and Taipei), choice of national day celebration (the KMT—October 10; the CCP—October 1), and ways of addressing the Beijing and Taipei regimes (see Lee, 1985). Briefly, the ultraleftist press is controlled by the CCP, the ultrarightist press is controlled by the KMT, whereas the centrist and the rightist press thrive on market competition. The main political landscape in Hong Kong is right-of-the-center, and there is no "leftist" press in this continuum that can be seen as a counterpart of the rightist press. By these

criteria, this survey includes respondents from five ultraleftist papers, six centrist papers, six rightist papers, and three ultrarightist papers.[3] In the analysis that follows, we also tap the subjective perception of the reporter with regard to his or her paper's location in the ideological spectrum (see below).

The Variables

Political ideology of the reporter is measured by the strength of his or her self-identification with either Taipei or Beijing. Taipei sympathizers (27%) are considered "rightist," Beijing sympathizers (31%) "leftist," the remaining 41% are "centrist," for they display no particular leaning.

Political ideology of the press is measured by the reporter's perceived strength of his or her paper's identification with the CCP or the KMT. Of the papers perceived to be strongly identified with Taipei, 10% are ultrarightists; 23% perceived to be moderately identified with Taipei are rightists; 41% perceived to be neutral are centrists; and 26% perceived to be strongly identified with Beijing are ultraleftists.

The newspapers are categorized into the party press (including the KMT-controlled ultrarightist and the CCP-controlled ultraleftist papers) and the nonparty press (i.e., the centrist and the rightist papers).

A total of 55% of the reporters are college graduates, 45% are not. Of the former, 57% attended the rightist schools, including journalism programs in Taiwan and two other local colleges (Chu Hai, Shu Yan) that traditionally held strong ideological or organizational ties with the KMT. These people constitute the major work force of the ultrarightist, the rightist, and the centrist papers. The other 43% attended nonrightist schools, including journalism programs at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the Baptist College, which not only stay aloof from the KMT-CCP struggle but promote the Western norms of professionalism. These people typically start their careers in the centrist and rightist press. For want of leftist colleges or journalism schools in Hong Kong, the leftist press recruits a smaller pool of high school and college graduates who were radicalized in student movements during the 1970s.

Hong Kong journalists are relatively young, mostly between 21 and 35 at the time of the survey. In view of the age distribution, we classify age 25 and below at the time of the interview as "younger" (45%) and 26 or above as "older" (55%).

Propensity to exercise policy guidance is measured by the following question: "When you report controversial social events, how often does your editor give guidelines as to what news angles to take?" Of all journalists, 33% reported a high degree of interference ("all the time" and "frequently") whereas 67% reported a low degree of interference ("sometimes," "rarely," and "never"). It is likely that recruitment has ensured such a high level of ideological conformity between reporters and their news organizations that there is less need for explicit policy guidance in the actual conduct of news reporting.

Compliance with policy control is measured by the following question: "When your editor's directives or your paper's stance differs from your own views, what would you do?" Six choices, ranging from total compliance to rejection, were given. Of all journalists, 32% reported a high level of compliance (obey policy; voice views but obey policy if views are not accepted), whereas 68% reported a low level of compliance (write views subtly into the story without arguing; argue with the editor but write views subtly into the story if views are not accepted; keep trying to persuade the editor while writing views subtly into the story; hold on to views despite disapproval).

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1. The reporter's political ideology tends to be congruent with the political ideology of the paper for which he or she works.

The hypothesis is confirmed in Table 1a, as the relationship between press ideology and the reporter's ideology is statistically significant (gamma = .65, $p < .01$). The degree of congruence is most striking for the ultraleftist papers (69%) and the ultrarightists (53%). They strictly adhere to partisanship, intent on controlling the ideological purity of their personnel. The rightist press, however, has recruited some left-leaning reporters (10%) who identify with Beijing but are not members of the CCP. The centrist papers show a well-balanced distribution.

Furthermore, as Table 1b shows, the partisan/ideological orientation of reporters' schooling is significantly correlated with press ideology (gamma = .44, $p < .01$). The ultrarightist papers hire all who have a rightist education. Almost 7 of 10 college graduates in the rightist and centrist papers have attended rightist schools, compared with the ultraleftist papers' 15%.

Table 1
Ideology and Schooling of Journalists, Press Policy Control,
and Press Ideology (in percentages)

	Press Ideology			
	Ultrarightist	Rightist	Centrist	Ultraleftist
(a) Reporter's ideology*				
rightist	53	44	29	2
centrist	47	46	45	29
leftist	0	10	27	69
(n)	(17)	(39)	(71)	(45)
(b) Reporter's schooling**				
rightist	100	68	66	15
nonrightist	0	32	34	85
(n)	(9)	(25)	(41)	(20)
(c) Level of policy control***				
high	59	33	24	37
low	41	67	76	63
(n)	(17)	(39)	(72)	(46)

Note. *gamma = .65, χ^2 = 52.1, df = 6, $p < .01$; **gamma = .44, χ^2 = 23.9, df = 3, $p < .01$; ***gamma = .11, χ^2 = 8.35, df = 3, $p < .04$.

Hypothesis 2. The party press is expected to have a higher propensity to exercise policy control with respect to the coverage of conflictual issues.

Hypothesis 2 is confirmed in Table 2(a), with party linkage significantly correlated with the feeling of policy control (gamma = .34, $p < .03$). Almost half of the journalists in the party press (43%) reported a high level of policy control in covering controversial social issues, compared with only 27% in the nonparty press.

The literature (Breed, 1955; Gieber, 1964; Sigelman, 1973) suggests that overt interference with journalistic autonomy is an ethical taboo for the professional press. In the Chinese tradition, the party press has long been an instrument of propaganda. The reporters being studied are, however, ideologically so compatible with their newspapers that, except in the case of the ultrarightist press, those who feel subjected to low press control efforts outnumber those who feel subjected to high control efforts (Table 1c).

Table 1c shows that the relationship between press ideology and level of policy control obtains statistical significance (gamma = .11, $p < .04$). The ultrarightist press (59%) leads in editorial control, followed in descending order by the ultraleftist press (37%), the rightist (33%), and the centrist

Table 2
Level of Policy Control, Level of Policy Compliance, and
Newspaper's Party Linkage (in percentages)

	Party press	Nonparty press
(a) Level of policy control*		
high	43	27
low	57	73
(n)	(63)	(111)
(b) Level of policy compliance**		
high	37	27
low	63	73
(n)	(62)	(110)

Note. *gamma = .34, χ^2 = 4.6, df = 1, $p < .03$; **gamma = .22, χ^2 = 1.8, df = 1, $p < .18$.

(24%). The comparison between the ultraleftist press and the ultrarightist press is intriguing. The ultraleftist press imposes a more stringent control on recruitment than the ultrarightist press; 69% of the reporters in the former, as opposed to 53% in the latter, are congruent with press ideology (Table 1a). Because of this higher ideological congruence the ultraleftist press has less need than the ultrarightist press for explicit interventions in the coverage of conflictual issues. The ultrarightist press seems to prefer on-the-job policy control. As a result, 37% of the reporters in the ultraleftist press, compared with 59% in the ultrarightist press, reported a high level of policy control (Table 1c).

Further analysis discloses that the relationship between press partisanship and the level of policy control virtually disappears for younger journalists but becomes enhanced for older journalists (gamma = .58, $p < .01$). Holding education constant, the partial correlations turn out to be nonsignificant.

Hypothesis 3. Reporters working in party newspapers are more likely than those working in nonparty newspapers to comply with policy control.

It is clear from Table 2b that reporters working in the party press were more inclined to submit to their superiors' directives than their counterparts in the nonparty press. Given that, it should be noted that the majority of journalists working in both types of newspapers reported a low level of compliance, due in large measure to their high ideological affinity. The relationship between press partisanship and compliance falls short of statistical significance (gamma = .22, $p < .18$). This relationship is

suppressed by the age factor: It obtains statistical significance among older journalists (gamma = .53, $p < .03$) but not among their younger colleagues. In addition, this correlation almost disappears for reporters with less than a college education but was enhanced (still statistically nonsignificant) for those with a higher education. As expected, the older, party-press journalists are more thoroughly socialized to the political ideology of the organization.

Conclusions and Discussion

Political ideology determines "journalistic paradigms" and media-institution control. The ideologically stratified press in Hong Kong exercises organizational control primarily through entry recruitment. Reporters were ideologically so congruent with their newspapers that the majority of them did not feel subjected to specific or explicit guideline control in the newswork. As a practical matter, they need not be told specifically what to write. Social control in the newsroom is a structural and subtle process, with reporters tending to absorb the institutional definitions of the situation and news norms.

From an organizational perspective, recruitment is one form of preventive routinization that removes or reduces the uncertainty itself, whereas routinization by information and absorption is embodied in job descriptions, task instructions, and socialization prescribing how to respond to uncertainty (see Hickson et al., 1971). The most effective institutional control occurs at the level of the "conditioned belief"—that is, the control exercised by conditioning the journalist's belief so that the fact of submission to organizational norms is not recognized—not at the level of distributing actual rewards and punishments (Galbraith, 1983).

Neither ideological disputes nor open conflicts were frequently brought to the surface. When conflicts did break out, chances were that they did not appeal to ideological discord. Seven out of ten times the conflict resulted from the discrepancy between the editor's higher position in the organization's hierarchy and the journalist's firsthand knowledge about events being covered. Particularly instructive were the 10% of the self-proclaimed left-leaning staff in the rightist press, who disclosed in private that they refrained from publicly expressing their political views. When their views clashed with the organizational directive, they would couch their views subtly in their written stories without risking job security. This form of

evading organizational control is pervasive. No matter how more formally and overtly journalists are subject to organizational control, they continue to have distinct occupational identities and enjoy relative autonomy (see Freidson, 1984). Should ideological disputes arise, however, the party-press reporters would comply with the organizational policy more readily than their counterparts in the nonparty press. Younger and professionally educated reporters are less ideologically committed to the CCP-KMT struggle.

In sum, the polarized partisan and ideological environment of Hong Kong has provided a microcosm for examining press organization control. Most evidence seems to amplify the existing literature. Further research must examine the process of press control in a changing ideological climate brought about by the prospective return of Hong Kong to mainland China in 1997.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this article was a winner of the Top Three Papers Award of the Theory and Methodology Division, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication in 1985. Thoughtful comments of Professors Steven H. Chaffee, Peter Monge, Phillip Tichenor, and Dona Schwartz are gratefully acknowledged.

2. As of 1980 the newspaper consumption rate was 350 copies per 1,000 population in Hong Kong, second to Japan (497 copies) in Asia and one of the highest in the world. Of the 485 publications registered with the government, 57 were newspapers. Half of these newspapers, devoted to horse-racing tips and entertainment gossip, appear irregularly. The 20 papers included in this study are those that the Government Information Service considers serious enough to warrant daily monitoring.

3. The ultraleftist papers are *Ta Kung Pao, Wen Wei Po, New Evening Post, Ching Pao Daily,* and the *Hong Kong Commercial Daily.* The centrist papers are *Ming Pao Daily News, Ming Pao Evening News, Hong Kong Economic Journal, Sing Pao Daily News,* the *Star, Tin Tin Yat Pao,* and the *Oriental Daily News.* The rightist papers are *Sing Tao Jih Pao, Sing Tao Man Pao, Wah Kiu Yat Pao, Wah Kiu Man Pao,* the *Hong Kong Daily News,* and the *Express.* The ultrarightist papers are the *Hong Kong Times, Kung Sheung Daily News* and *Kung Sheung Evening News* (the latter two were closed in 1984). There is no newspaper circulation auditing bureau in Hong Kong. According to the estimates by Survey Research Hong Kong released in 1984, the ultraleftist press accounted for 7% of the 4.57 million readership (not newspaper circulation) figures, the centrist press commanded 75%, the rightist press held 16%, and the ultrarightist press only had 2%.

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