

Free speech, free Hong Kong



Thousands of blue ribbons were tied on the gate of Government House in a rally for press freedom in late February. They symbolised the determination of Hong Kong citizens to defend the SAR's tradition of free speech

HONG Kong's ranking on press freedom indexes has plunged in recent years as editors were **sidelined**, newspaper advertisements were pulled, talk show hosts were sacked and *Ming Pao's* former chief editor was seriously injured in a knife attack. Is local press freedom being **curtailed**?

In mid-February, Reporters Without Borders (無國界記者) announced its annual World Press Freedom Index. Shortly afterwards, the University of

Hong Kong's Public Opinion Programme (POP) released its own ratings on local press freedom.

Shortly after that, the Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA, 香港記者協會) staged a "free press, free Hong Kong" rally.

These media-related events that took place within two weeks of each other carried a **grim** common message: press freedom in Hong Kong is regressing!

Falling for the fourth year

HONG Kong ranked 61st among 180 regions on the World Press Freedom Index, falling a further three places from 2013. It was also the fourth straight year the SAR's position has dropped.

In 2002, when the index was first introduced, Hong Kong ranked 18th. In other words, we have fallen 43 places within the past 12 years.

Caused by self-censorship?

In compiling the index, Reporters Without Borders used 40 indicators under eight categories, including:

- whether reporters were physically attacked, jailed or directly threatened;
- the extent to which reporters were subject to indirect threats, pressure and the accessibility of information;
- **censorship** and self-censorship;
- government-controlled media;

- economic, legal and administrative pressure;
- internet and new media;
- the role of the government in the murdering or imprisonment of, or physical attacks on, reporters.

No reporters have been killed or imprisoned because of their work in Hong Kong. Why then has our press freedom rating dropped?

Clearly, it has something to do with factors such as self-censorship as well as various forms of pressure.

POP: press freedom hits new low

FREEDOM of the press is one of the 10 freedom sub-indicators of the HKU POP's social indicators survey.

This year, the score was 6.61, an all-time low since the poll series started in 1997. POP believes the drop is related to recent media-related incidents.

Press freedom threatened?

These incidents include the changing of the chief editor at *Ming Pao*, advertisers boycotting newspapers that do not have a pro-establishment stance and the removal of commentator Lee Wai-ling as host of a Commercial Radio public affairs programme.

These developments raise the questions:

- why have the controversies continued despite explanation by the management of the organisations concerned?
- why has the public shown so much concern, or even **distrust**, in respect of what could simply be 'staff reshuffles' of a newspaper and a broadcasting company?

Of course, if there had been a **deliberate** attempt to restrict press freedom, one could hardly expect a confession from the responsible parties. But in the minds of many people, that is exactly what motivated those staff changes.

Why rulers want media control

SPEECH is a potent tool. It can be used to build a nation – or destroy it. That is why those in power find it both fascinating and **intimidating**.

Rulers want to generate comments and information favourable to themselves and the conduit for disseminating such messages to the public is the media.

Therefore, to a greater or lesser extent, those in power invariably want, and take steps, to control or exert influence over the media.

If they have the media in their pockets, those in ruling positions do not have to worry about bad things being said about them.

Furthermore, they can employ the media for self-promotion, thus consolidating power.

Totalitarian regimes control media

IN democratic societies, people strive to ensure that the news media operates freely so that it can effectively guard the interests of the public.

This is reflected in the World Press Freedom Index: top-ranking countries are mostly Western democratic ones.

You can find out the lowest-ranking countries at <http://en.rsfs.org> and think about why they have less press freedom, and what it means for their people. 💡

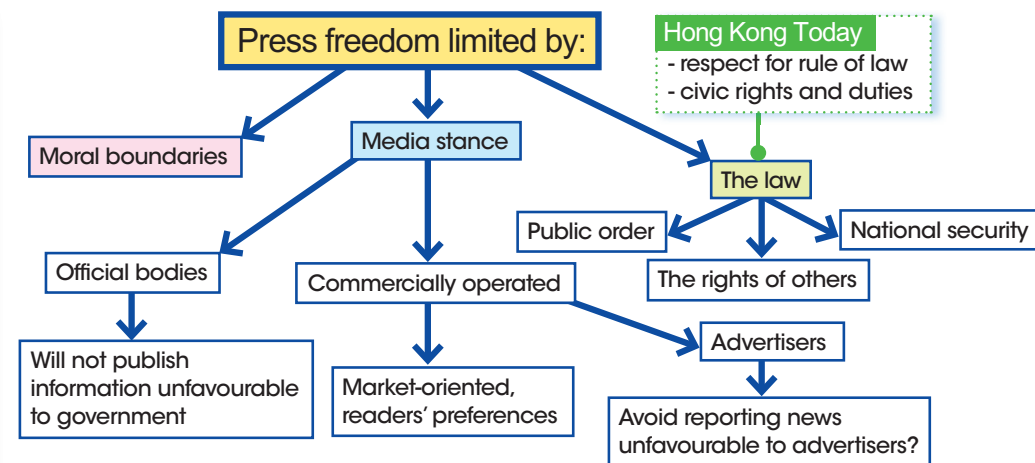
A unique Hong Kong style



The importance functions of press freedom

Function	Explanation	Example
Monitoring developments in society	Media reports inform us about events and developments in society, such as whether government policies are reasonable or whether officials are corrupt. Citizens need such information to make suitable responses in conducting their lives. If the public is kept in the dark, the government could act against the public interest, and the people might react to government actions irrationally.	Is the process of issuing free-to-air television licences fair?
Providing different perspectives	If we only have a media controlled by the state, it then acts as a government mouthpiece, and the public is deprived of alternative viewpoints.	Is the firing of talk show host Lee Wai-ling simply the internal staff reshuffling of a commercial organisation?

Who limits press freedom?



Key ideas

Press freedom is essential to a democratic society as the free flow of information and opinion helps the people make informed decisions and deters government abuse of power. But press freedom in Hong Kong is deteriorating, and several media-related incidents have driven the people to the streets to rally for the protection of this important right.

Did you know?

In 1993, 3 May was proclaimed World Press Freedom Day by the UN General Assembly. It celebrates the fundamental principles of press freedom, evaluates press freedom around the world, defends the media from attacks on its independence and pays tribute to journalists who have lost their lives in the exercise of their profession.

Critical questions

1. Do you think Hong Kong has a free press by and large?
2. Has press freedom in Hong Kong deteriorated since 1997? If so, what are the reasons?

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