

How and why Hong Kong's press downplayed the 'umbrella movement' of 2014

Rebecca Wong describes the combined pressures of Chinese political power and the interests of media proprietors.



The '[umbrella movement](#)' of 2014 in Hong Kong captured the attention of international media. Readers from all over the world must have grasped a general idea about the movement; [its objectives](#), [the quality of the student protestors](#) and the restrained response from the [Hong Kong](#) and [Chinese government](#). Nonetheless, this movement once again highlighted the restricted freedom of the press in Hong Kong.

Newspapers in Hong Kong have never shared a single political stance. On one side was [Ta Kung Pao](#), which was Hong Kong's unofficial outlet for Beijing, and on the other was [Apple Daily](#), which was known for its anti-Beijing style of reporting. [Jimmy Lai](#), owner of the Next Media group, which owns Apple Daily, was repeatedly targeted for his political stance. Oriental Daily, a pro-Chinese newspaper in Hong Kong published a [fake one-page obituary](#) of Lai in August 2014. HSBC and Standard Chartered [ended a long-term advertising relationship](#) with Next Media in 2013, reportedly

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after being told to do so by the Chinese government.

2014 had brought a great deal of aggression towards the pro-democracy press in Hong Kong even before the umbrella movement. [Kevin Lau](#), the chief editor of '[Ming Pao](#)', was attacked in the streets in February and hospitalised for four months. In March, [two senior executives of Hong Kong's Morning News Media group were assaulted](#). The prospects for Hong Kong's critical journalists were reduced even further by the closing of '[House News](#)', an independent pro-democracy news forum in Hong Kong. Tony Tsoi, the co-founder of House News left a letter on its website the day it was closed, in which he wrote, '[I am scared](#)'.

During the early hours of 15 October 2014, [television footage](#) that showed six police officers beating a protestor near Tamar Park went viral on social media. The footage showed [half a dozen police officers](#) taking a handcuffed male to a dark corner and kicked him repeatedly while he was on the ground. The victim was identified as [Ken Tsang](#), a social worker and member of the [Civic Party](#), one of the largest pro-democracy political parties in Hong Kong. A man resembling Tsang was filmed [pouring liquid](#) over police officers before his arrest, although this was not confirmed to be him. The footage was received with rage in Hong Kong and once again the tension between civilians and police was pushed to a second climax (after the use of tear gas and pepper spray on 28 September 2014). As a result, [Tsang's back and head were injured](#).

Reporting of this incident by the local press in Hong Kong was at two extremes. Apple Daily's headline read, '[Demon police surround and beat protestors for four minutes](#)' accompanied by a photo of Tsang's bruised back and face, whereas Ta Kung Pao concentrated on the vicious behaviour of protestors.

The broadcasting of this beating also caused controversies in Hong Kong's local broadcaster, Television Broadcast Ltd (TVB). In the original news report in the early hours of 15 October, TVB reported that Tsang was '[placed on the ground, and then punched and kicked](#)' by police officers near Tamar Park. However, this was removed from broadcast after 7am and downplayed to '[the police are suspected of having used violence against Tsang](#)' in subsequent reporting. Keith Chi-wai Yuen, news editor of TVB said the decision to remove the reference was to give room for audiences to judge for themselves what had actually happened; yet this was interpreted as another pro-government move by TVB. In fact, TVB was given the uncomplimentary nickname, '[Chinese Centralised Television Broadcasts](#)' (in short, CCTVB) for their increasingly pro-government stance.

This move backfired and the Hong Kong communication authorities received [250 complaints](#) by 5pm the day the clip was aired, all of them concerning TVB's decision to modify the clip. The complaints alleged that in doing so, the general public's right to knowledge and press freedom were undermined. On the same evening, around [1000 people](#) gathered at the police headquarters to show their anger at the police's use of violence against Tsang. More than 80 staff members of TVB also published an [open letter](#) on Facebook to protest against the edits. The [Hong Kong Journalists Association](#) openly supported the employees of TVB. [Bruce Lui](#), from the Independent

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Association of Commentators, expressed the risks to reporters of signing the open letter. Lui's concerns could be justified by the fact that [Ho Wing-hong](#), the assistant editor responsible for handling this news, was moved away from the frontline to the position of chief researcher. This move was interpreted as a further restriction on freedom of press in Hong Kong and led to condemnation from [Journalism Educators for Press Freedom](#), a group consisting of journalism teaching staff from local universities and colleges.

Apple Daily, which remained bold in its remarks towards the Hong Kong and Chinese government throughout the movement, [was itself targeted](#). More than [100 people](#) gathered around the headquarters of Apple Daily on the early morning of 11 October 2014, blocking the entrance and stopping the distribution of the newspaper to newsagents around Hong Kong. Lai had to hire a [crane](#) to lift newspapers out of its building into lorry trucks. Still, men with [facemasks blocked the trucks from leaving and threatened the driver](#). The gathering crowd also held up banners condemning Apple Daily as 'big traitors.' Lai applied to the court for a [temporary injunction](#), which was granted on the early morning of 14 October 2014. However, the Hong Kong police did not enforce the court injunction and crowds remained outside Apple Daily's premises.

It was also reported that the staff of Apple Daily received [harassing phone calls and their computers were targets of cyber attacks that led to the paralysis of the company's computer system](#). However, the staff of Apple Daily recorded a [video clip](#) of all the employees holding up the Apple Daily newspaper and yelling, '[Guard our conscience, guard Next Media!](#)' as a response to these attacks. The circulation of the newspaper returned to normal but in late October over 3000 copies were damaged by thugs pouring [soy sauce](#) over the paper, rendering them unfit to sell.

As 2014 came to an end, the pressure on a once-free press seemed greater than ever. But independent journalists still remained in Hong Kong.

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