



Hong Kong Press Freedom Index hits record low

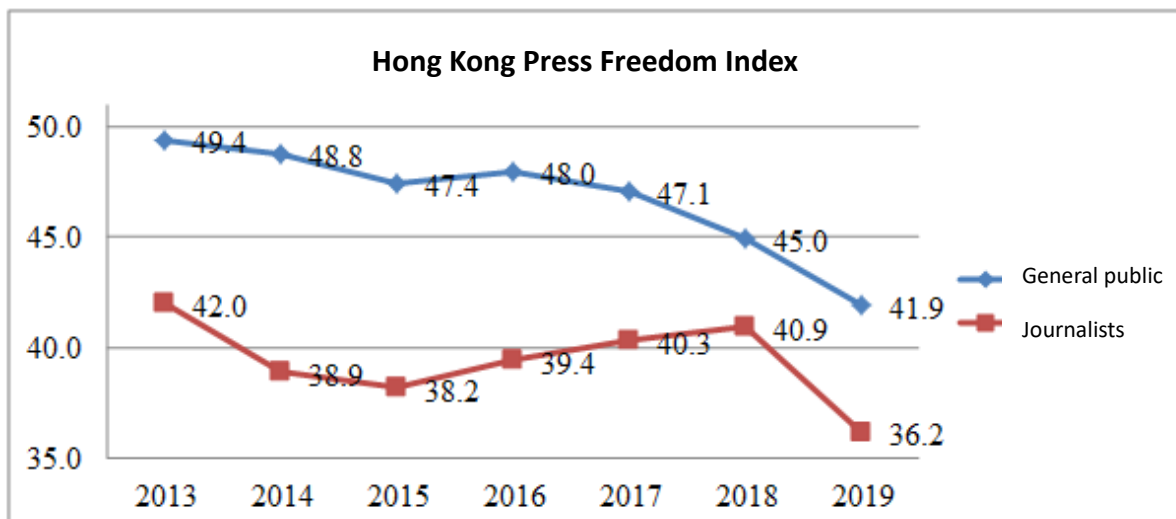
Police obstruct news activities using violence viewed as the major reason in decline

Hong Kong press freedom has dropped to a record low, according to the newly released Hong Kong Journalists Association Press Freedom Index 2019. The decline is the sharpest since the survey was launched in 2013. Both the public and reporters expressed concern over the threatened personal safety of reporters when covering news, and difficulties encountered by reporters when gathering information.

HKJA points out that during the social turmoil in the past year, journalists have tried their best to report the truth, but have been obstructed and interfered with by police and people with different viewpoints. The "Survey on the violence against journalists when covering public order events" found that as many as 65% of the interviewed journalists said that they had been subjected to verbal or/and physical violence during their work.

It is worth noting that press freedom in Hong Kong has continued to deteriorate in recent years, mainly due to invisible pressure from Beijing, media owners, etc., which is not easily noticeable to the public. However, the police and people's violence against reporters in front of live cameras mirrored the reality of press freedom being suppressed which in turn attracted public attention.

Below are the findings of the latest annual surveys commissioned by the Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA). Comprised of two parts, the public and journalists respectively, they were conducted between January and March by Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute (PORI) for the compilation of the annual Hong Kong Press Freedom Index.



Press Freedom Index for general public

The general public index for 2019 declined by 3.1 points to 41.9 on a scale of 0 to 100. The index is a record low and the drop is the biggest since the annual survey launched in 2013. The factors the public considers when measuring press freedom in Hong Kong have changed. The weight of the factor "journalists' personal safety when

covering news" has jumped from the third place in the previous year to the first.

The new low in index was largely due to a significant drop in three ratings: (1) Adequacy of legislative safeguards for journalists' free access to information; (2) Hong Kong news media facing difficulties in obtaining information they need for reporting; and (3) Local journalists becoming the targets of extralegal intimidation or physical violence when reporting. The ratings have dropped by 0.6 to 1.4 points on a scale of 0 to 10 points. The changes were regarded as significant statistically.

78% of the responding general public said, Police drove away all the journalists in Prince Edward Station on 31 August 2019 undermined press freedom in Hong Kong.

Table 1: Three factors with significant changes affecting the general public press freedom index (on a scale of 0-10)

The general public	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Change of mean scores
Adequacy of legislative safeguards for journalists' free access to information (the higher the score, the more adequate)	5.8	5.8	5.7	5.7	5.7	5.3	4.7	-0.6**
Hong Kong news media facing difficulties in obtaining information they need for reporting (the higher the score, the more uncommon)	4.5	4.6	4.3	4.6	4.4	4.3	3.5	-0.8**
Local journalists becoming the targets of extralegal intimidation or physical violence when reporting (the higher the score, the more uncommon)	5.0	4.8	4.6	4.6	4.7	4.7	3.3	-1.4**

* The larger the number, the more positive the representative's evaluation; the smaller the number, the more negative the evaluation.

** Compared with the last survey, the change is statistically significant at $p=0.01$ level.

Press Freedom Index for journalists

The Press Freedom Index for journalists is 36.2, showing a sharp decrease of 4.7 points compared to that of 2018 index. The main reasons are that there have been significant declines in the scores of various issues, including media owners or management exerting pressure on employees to affect editorial autonomy; personal safety threats to reporters when covering news; the media's access to information; and also whether there are enough legal safeguards

for journalists to obtain information required.

Of the 327 responding journalists, 95% said press freedom in Hong Kong had worsened compared to a year ago. As many as 33% of the responding journalists said their seniors had exerted pressure on them to drop or reduce reporting on Hong Kong independence; which accounts for a sharp increase of 11 percentage points; 72% of the respondents said the increasing emphasis of one country over two systems by the central government officials had made them uncomfortable in reporting dissenting voices. This is an increase of 2 percentage points compared to last year's corresponding finding.

Nearly 93% of the respondents observed the problem of law enforcement officers using violence to obstruct news activities deliberately. A vast majority of respondents (over 97%) found the following events undermined press freedom, most of them being related to the police, including: (1) Police officers drove away all journalists from Prince Edward Station in the 831 incident; (2) an Indonesian journalist blinded in her right eye by police projectile; (3) a large number of journalists were arrested during reporting; (4) Court grants injunction to ban doxxing of Hong Kong police; (5) A number of Legislative Council members advocate official journalist licensing system

Survey result on the violence against journalists when covering public order events

In view of the public concern over the fact that journalists have been treated violently when covering news, HKJA conducted the captioned survey to look into the matter. Among the 222 journalists who responded, over 65%, i.e. 145 journalists said that they had been violently treated by the police and/or people with different standpoints when covering news. Only 28 responding journalists had not been violently treated. The remaining respondents either had not covered news at protest venues starting from June 2019 or they did not remember whether they had been treated violently.

According to 141 journalists who reported being violently treated by the police, the violence included having strong lights shone at their eyes, verbal abuse, pushed forcefully, blocking camera lens deliberately, snatching photographic equipment, spraying pepper spray and throwing tear gas projectile at a close range. The injuries suffered by journalists are mainly due to side effects caused by contact or inhalation of chemical substances, including skin allergy, diarrhoea, respiratory problems, etc. Some had bruises, skin damage, and even needed to be admitted to hospital for treatment, including stitches, hemostasis, etc.

On the other hand, 82 journalists reflected that they had been violently treated by people with different stances, mainly from pro-establishment camp or pro-government supporters, police supporters and anti-fugitive law protestors. The violent behaviors of the relevant persons include verbal abuse, pushing forcefully, covering the camera lens deliberately, snatching photographic equipment intentionally, some even attacking reporters with hard objects or corrosive substance, assault with fists and kicks etc.

The public survey was conducted by the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute from Jan 9 to 15, 2020. A total of 1,022 Cantonese speaking Hong Kong residents aged 18 or above were successfully interviewed. HKJA distributed questionnaires to journalists between Jan 17 and March 27, 2020, with a final successful sample of 327.

The HKJA would like to express its sincere appreciation for the generous help of members of the survey advisory group, who are as follows:

Ms. Mak Yin Ting (Former Chairperson, HKJA)

Prof. Clement So (Professor, School of Journalism & Communication, CUHK)

Prof. Lisa Leung (Associate Professor, Department of Cultural Studies, Lingnan University)

Dr. Robert Chung (President and Chief Executive Officer, PORI)

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Hong Kong Journalists Association

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