



Journalist Fellowship Paper

Audio report: Hong Kong protests

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Contents

Foreword	4
Introduction	5
A toothy issue	7
WhatsApp	10
Charlie's angle	13
Exploring information sentiment	15
Healing the divide	17

Foreword

This paper, the first of its kind for the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, was submitted in audio format. What follows below is a transcript of that audio. Find the full audio file on the RISJ website under Wei Du's profile, or by visiting her SoundCloud at <https://bit.ly/WeiDuAudio>.

Introduction

My name is Wei Du. I'm a foreign correspondent for Channel NewsAsia based in Hong Kong.

For many years, it felt strange saying that. Because Hong Kong is just so shiny, so familiar, and – in journalistic terms – so banal. Every year the company does an off-site when correspondents all over Asia return to Hong Kong. People would come back talking about their trip to a mass grave, or about covering their third coup. And I'd be like: "Well, in Hong Kong... property is still very expensive?"

Yeah, I was a little ashamed. But in 2019, everything changed. I used to wear dresses and heels to work, now I began wearing jeans (non-stretchy) and T-shirts (100% cotton) because polyester, we were told, would melt into your skin if it caught on fire.

And because proper safety helmets were difficult to find, I bought a roller skating helmet online. It dangled from my backpack when I went around town, making me look like a superannuated teenager.

The nights were long and trying to catch up with wildcat strikes was exhausting. But I loved it. I felt alive. At work, I'd chase protests and when I got home the Adrenalin wouldn't pass fast enough. So I'd sit on the couch having a drink and watching yet more protest coverage on TV – usually until 2- or 3 o' clock in the morning.

Aside from work, my other life was on social media: Twitter for English, WeChat for Chinese. I'm a pretty opinionated person, and I'm not shy about telling people what to think. But with the protests, I found that hard because I couldn't make up my mind.

I couldn't stand it when government officials said this was all a big misunderstanding and Hong Kong was as free as ever. I mean, have these people been living under a rock? But I also couldn't accept it when protesters said, 'the police made us throw petrol bombs'. 'They made us smash-up subway stations.' 'We had no choice.'

Of course you had a choice!

Most of the people on social media didn't seem to share my confusion. On Twitter, everything the police did was bad... *brutal*. In fact, 'they were *for sure* Chinese soldiers dressed in Hong Kong police uniforms', and they '*for sure* executed half a dozen protesters in a subway station and made their bodies disappear'.

On WeChat, it's a parallel universe: 'CIA caught on camera directing Hong Kong protest!'. Or, 'Youngsters promised sex in return for staging violence!' As I read the posts, my anger simmered.

A toothy issue

In Hong Kong, I'm known as a Mainlander, and that comes with complications.

Since Britain handed Hong Kong back to China in 1997, about a million mainlanders have moved from the rest of China to settle in Hong Kong.

A very small minority are the super-rich: they want the protection for their wealth and the ease of travel that comes with a Hong Kong passport. A bigger minority are people like me: people who did well in school, and perhaps had an overseas education, and then were offered a job in Hong Kong.

But more than half of the one million came for family reunion: mostly very poor mainland women who married very poor Hong Kong men who otherwise wouldn't have found wives.

The most bigoted version of the narrative in Hong Kong makes no distinction among the groups: Mainlanders are both responsible for pushing up the luxury property prices, *and* overcrowding in public housing estates.

Even in the best of times, trying to interview people in Mandarin (the Mainland tongue) was awkward. They tried to figure out how much blame you should take, and you would anxiously read signs of how much they blamed you.

It eventually became an exhausting and pointless exercise, so I stopped speaking Mandarin.

Now, with the protests, language became a flashpoint. On a sunny day in the Financial District, a mainland-born JP Morgan banker unknowingly walked into a protest when he left the office for lunch.

In a video that would soon go viral, you could see him trying to get back into the office building holding his lunch box. He was surrounded by protesters and photographers: nervous and agitated.

The video doesn't show why he had attracted so much attention but right before he could get through the door he turned towards the crowd. In an explicable move that would cause so much bad blood in the months to come, he shouted to them in Mandarin: “We're all Chinese!”

In case you've been told that the Hong Kong protest was about extradition, or police brutality, or housing prices, or the lack of job opportunities... all of that is true.

But that's also not really the point. What people are fighting for is an identity unique to Hong Kong, and different from the rest of China.

I can explain a bit more about that later on, but for now all you need to know is how precarious it is for a Mainlander to yell to Hong Kong protesters that they were but all Chinese. Those were fighting words.

The crowd went nuts. The chant you hear in the background: that's the protesters telling the young man to go back to China. The photographers closed in on him once again, hoping to capture a dramatic moment. An older white man with a camera pushes the door to the building shut right as the young man was about to go through. The young man was startled: he couldn't work out what to do with this man whose camera was in his face waiting for him to react. And, in that moment, a protester ran up and sucker-punched him from behind.

The episode incensed the Chinese internet. “You get beaten up for speaking Mandarin on your own soil?” one viral past post asked. And the presence of the foreigner didn't go unnoticed: “Victor Mallet, the Financial Times”, the post went on to identify him without any proof. “Sub-human scum!” it exclaimed in the end.

Except, it wasn't Victor. Because I knew Victor. He had been banned from entering Hong Kong months before after hosting a dialogue at the Foreign Correspondents Club with an activist advocating Hong Kong's total split from China.

You see the logic here: wouldn't it be convenient if the person who somehow led to the beating of a patriotic young man is also the person who's actually trying to help split Hong Kong from China? Because then it all makes sense. It wouldn't be so much a pro-democracy movement but rather a foreign-directed covert campaign to undermine China.

Yes, *too* convenient. I didn't understand why anyone with an average IQ couldn't see that. "Oh, come on," I posted on WeChat. "Anyone spreading that Victor Mallet fake news, you don't deserve to be my friend."

A few minutes later, my dentist left a message. It said: "I don't care to be your friend. Half your reporters in Hong Kong should be executed anyway."

I guess I need a new dentist.

WhatsApp

If the fake news in Chinese was easy to spot, the English language stuff was far more sophisticated and fascinating.

Like this one, forwarded to me by a friend on WhatsApp. Here's how it goes:

Why are so many young Hong Kongers so angry?

Good question.

Why do they hate China so much?

I'm listening...

Despite Hong Kong under Beijing sovereignty being visibly freer – more democratic than it ever was under the British.

Um, you're sure about that?

What makes their frontline rioters so violent, in zombie-like fashion? What motivates them?

Well, why don't you just tell me?

The following account is circulating on various online platforms. It's purportedly by someone who joined the Black Shirts for two months, and observed them close up.

Yeah, I'm totally going to believe that. But tell me, anonymous person, what have you learnt?

They would have spent their adolescence as homebound boys and girls, working long hours. Their parents neglected family communication but, after joining the rioters' call, these homely youngsters received much peer recognition.

So condescending, but okay.

They believe that Hong Kong people are different themselves from Chinese Mainlanders. They are especially concerned about how the world views Hong Kong, as they don't wish to be degraded by others within a single sovereign framework.

Well, that is not entirely untrue.

On Facebook, there is so much distortion and incitement to hatred against the Chinese people as well as endless disinformation. Well-known anti-China writers unconscionably spread their black propaganda.

See? I knew it was all your fault, Facebook!

This generation of young Hong Kongers has been brainwashed to become Nazis. Such notions of compassion and diversity are swept aside. Their hearts are full of hatred – the kind that breaches the bottom lines of human nature.

Wait, what?

I came across another coincidence about the Black Shirt rioters. Many of their frontline warriors were surnamed Nguyen. It's well known that there are hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese and their descendants in Hong Kong.

That's just not true. Many Vietnamese went through Hong Kong at the end of the Vietnam War, but most of them didn't stay. Today, Hong Kong has more Koreans than Vietnamese. Which is to say: not that many.

Well as it happens, the first to clamour for Hong Kong independence came from their ranks. They were not Chinese. It dawned on me that the biggest spark for war is not political disputes but racial or ethnic hatred. Hitler incited the Germans to hate the Jews. The Japanese labelled the Chinese “the sick man of East Asia”. Trump incited racial hatred and successfully became President of the United States.

Where the hell are you going with this?

Seizing on this point, anti-China forces in Hong Kong have incessantly demonized and incited hatred towards the Chinese among local youth for their own political ends.

Oh, I see: it's the foreign black hand again. I just can't...

Charlie's angle

In case you were wondering, I promptly corrected the friend who sent it through with a message in ALL CAPS.

We have since made up, and he agreed to talk to me about it but didn't want to be named. Let's just call him "Charlie". Charlie is neither a Hong Konger nor a Mainlander.

I asked him why he forwarded the message to me: was it to inform me, or to get me to verify it? He responded: "More to inform, I guess, since I thought it was quite a possible scenario and an overall interesting read for me, and for many of my friends."

So he couldn't tell whether it was true or not? "Some bits felt questionable, but I think about 80% or so felt reasonable. And I could see it playing out in some fashion. So I guess you could say I got suckered into believing a good portion of the narrative."

And what was the other 20%? Does he remember any clear red flag? "That there are so many Vietnamese Chinese."

See, for me that one lie would lead me to discredit the whole story. But apparently for Charlie that just meant you discount that one lie.

I then asked Charlie how he would rate international media coverage of the protest: was it fair, biased against government and police, or biased against protesters? "Totally biased against government and police, especially Western media outlets like Wall Street Journal, CNN, Guardian, BBC, and so on."

Could he give me some examples of biased reporting? "What I can generally recall is that the cameras are mostly aimed at the police brutality, much less coverage or scenes of the atrocities by protestors. Probably for some fear of reprisal. And very unbalanced reporting. I can't recall exactly what happened that time when the man was set on fire,

and something else happened on the same day. But the media largely only talked about the other incident which was very much pro-protester. I've got no problem when they've actually reported an incident factually, but it's an issue for me when they only report the ones that conveniently suit their bias or tilt.”

The day he's talking about was November 11th: an old man was confronting a group of protesters who were smashing up a subway station, when somebody showered him in a liquid and his whole body caught fire. The other incident – the one Charlie couldn't recall – that was a police officer in a tussle with protestors firing a live round into the chest of a young protester who miraculously survived.

Both incidents were widely reported, but Charlie is right in the sense that most reports started with the police shooting and didn't get into the immolation until much later in the article. I tried to parse the editorial decision: one, a bone-chilling crime committed by a civilian, the other questionable use of force by law enforcement.

It's a close call. What does Charlie think of Chinese state media coverage of the protests? “Definitely biased against protesters. But in many cases, reasonably so. Let's say Western media's pro-protest intensity was a 10, the Chinese mainland media's intensity is, like, a three.”

So in other words, he doesn't support Chinese propaganda but sees it as fair game because of the bias in the Western press. If everyone is “biased”, does Charlie feel he doesn't know what to believe anymore? “Big time. Literally when I see a headline these days I need to try and see a video to see the incident or see for the context of the comment to be sure. It's difficult – very, very difficult.”

Exploring information sentiment

I repeated the questions I posed to Charlie to 13 of my other friends in Hong Kong. Seven are born-and-bred Hong Kongers, the other six Mainland migrants like myself. And the results? Let's just say there are quite a few surprises.

Now no one is disputing that the Chinese propaganda is biased against protesters, but eight out of 13 (61.5%) considered international media coverage of the protests distinctly anti-China.

Opinions on local media are more divergent. What's interesting though no one seems to be happy with it. If you support the protest you think the media coverage is too pro-government and if you support the government well vice versa. So perhaps it's no surprise that half of them say their trust in the media declined.

Surprisingly most people don't share Charlie's pessimism on his own judgement 6 out of 8 who answered the question said they could very well tell what's true and what's not. Though half of the six will be worried for other people because quotes "it's a bit big problem when social media algorithms only show people what they already agree with"

Now I know you've heard this before: the Filter Bubble Theory. The problem is, it's just not true. Research has shown that people get a much more diverse range of views from platforms like Facebook and Twitter, simply because we interact with a wider collection of people online than in reality.

The problem isn't with algorithms; the problem is with us. We're too eager to reject out of hand the opinions we disagree with. As survival instinct dictates, we're incredibly bad at second-guessing ourselves.

Think about it this way: if everyone's only seeing things that they agree with online then why is the internet such a nasty place?

I spent a lot of time thinking about these things because I was given three months to do so at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University. It turns out many things we journalists thought to be true weren't even close.

“Much of the public does not see the distinction between credible information and misinformation as a binary black and white choice,” explains Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, the Director of the Institute. “They see it as gradations and scales of grey in most cases.” If you're trying to tell people what to believe, he says, you're attempting the impossible.

“I'm not personally convinced we should think it's depressing to find that lifelong socialization and education, and people's communities – the people around them they care about, and whom they respect and love and value – that those influences are often more decisive on their view of the world and how they carry themselves in the world than information they come across in the media.

“I'm not sure that's necessarily a bad thing. If I put myself in the position of a journalist, my definition of success would not be whether I change people's view of the world but whether I give them relatively accurate, relatively accessible, relatively timely and relevant information that can help them think about the world right now.”

In the end, Rasmus says, journalists love talking about healing the divide – they just don't usually do it. Which got me thinking: well surely I can do that?

Healing the divide

I called Claire in Hong Kong. She was not a close friend: we met on a group tour to Iran a few years back. And, like any good Chinese person, we added each other on WeChat.

In August, when Beijing threatened to ban Hong Kong carrier Cathay Pacific after one of its pilots was charged with rioting in a protest, I posted on WeChat: “Isn't that a little too hysterical?”

Almost immediately, Clare started shouting at me: “Yellow reporters like you,” she said, “you just love chaos. You have no idea how life has been for normal folks like us.”

Yellow is the colour of the pro-democracy movement, so essentially she had accused me of a pro-protest bias. And she didn't do this in a private chat; she did it in a group we shared with more than 50 people – many of whom I've never met. The fallout was swift: we hadn't spoken since.

But since my dentist didn't want to talk, I had to call her instead.

I asked her why she called me a yellow reporter, because I'm pretty sure she had never watched my reports before. That's happened quite a bit, by the way: people would send me insults because they read somewhere something that made them angry – something not written by me. Perhaps because I was the only foreign correspondent they knew.

“That was impulsive of me,” she said, when I called from Oxford to discuss it. “I'm really sorry. I later read some of your tweets on the JP Morgan incident and realised you're actually pretty neutral.”

Were you very worried about your Mainland background, I asked her. Did you have to do things differently?

“Yes,” she said. “I had stopped speaking Mandarin when talking on the phone and I was worried about my kids at their school, which is on the other side of the island. Once supporters started smashing street lights, I kept thinking the school bus would get into a horrific accident.”

That's something I didn't think about: I don't have kids, I don't know what kind of paranoia a mother is capable of. I don't know if I can say anything to change her mind. I'd like to say that social movements are just a fact of life in any normal society. Look at Taiwan, look at Korea.

But then I know in China the suspicion runs deep. The Cultural Revolution was half a century ago and every family is still carrying the scar. I never got to meet my biological grandfather, my father hadn't seen his father since he was barely a teenager. The last time a social movement swept across China, people were stunned by the outpouring of cruelty from their friends and neighbours.

But in Hong Kong, people don't carry that scar. In Hong Kong, many people would say Mainlanders are invaders, and invaders don't get a say in how a place should be. I can see the logic in that too.

I can't make up my mind. Maybe I shouldn't try changing anyone else's.