

How the media creates fear, from the USA and UK to Hong Kong

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How the media creates fear, from the USA and UK to Hong Kong

In the last few decades, people have idealised the networked, online media landscape, for its potential to democratise information and education, inclusively open forums for new voices, and connect civic-minded people and groups around the world. It is true that some grassroots movements have utilised social media effectively to support and act on commitments to human rights and social justice (Boler, 2008). Yet such a dreamy view of media should be revised significantly in light of contemporary reality. Globally, we have become victims of a mass media that demonstrates no sense of responsibility or obligation to any party except for its private funders. This has become more apparent throughout the twenty-first century, leading to instabilities and a sense of fear that benefits a very small percentage of people in the world.

We have had reason to be wary of mainstream media's political influence in western societies for some time, as a potential puppet for the powers that be. One of the most obvious examples of mainstream media bias, demonstrating the willingness of mainstream media players to throw out facts in the place of partisan loyalties, was the media blitz in the United States and the United Kingdom that played a supporting role in the build up to the 2003 intervention and occupation of Iraq (McKelvey, 2009). At this time, United States government officials grilled and at times tortured prisoners for questionable intelligence, while lending a sympathetic ear to political defectors in Iraq, to concoct justification for invasion of Iraq, due to the alleged presence of aluminium pipes said to be part of a 'prewar weapons of mass destruction program'. Mainstream media journalists faithfully reported these stories as facts and news, helping build a public case for an invasion that was previously held as controversial in the public sphere. Media repetitiously linked Osama bin Laden to Iraq as well, letting dark imagery and hearsay replace confirmed information (Jackson, 2014).

After it became widely known that the intelligence and data undergirding political claims were mostly questionable and empirically lacking, many news sources apologised for their weak sense of social responsibility, and their willingness to compromise the need for validating sources, in the frenzy for war, and in the excitement of sharing dramatic stories. In an editorial, the *New York Times* admitted that it had depended on 'a circle of Iraqi informants, defectors and exiles bent on "regime change" in Iraq ... eagerly confirmed by United States officials convinced of the need to intervene' (2004). This public apology admitted that a handful of their published articles presented unverified information as if it was confirmed, while contradictions discovered later and corrections were reported in a far more subtle fashion: 'The *Times* gave voice to skeptics of the tubes on Jan. 9 ... That challenge was reported on Page A10; it might well have belonged on Page A1'. The apology by the *Times* was one of many given by mainstream media outlets at the time, in the United States and the United Kingdom, reflecting how media sources got caught up in the clamour for war, and failed to practice due diligence in relation to the importance of accurate reporting.

The mass media again preferred to focus on sensational fantasies rather than facts, in reporting on the latest United States presidential election and 'Brexit' vote for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union. Dan Rather notes that instead of focusing on facts, contexts,

perspectives, and depth, the media covered only the spectacle of Trump throughout the election (Bruni, 2019). In research on the role of the media in the election, Thomas Patterson (2016) notes that news coverage of Trump far exceeded what his support polls justified during the course of the election, while the posts were predominantly positive. In this case, the media gave him more attention, and more favourable attention, than was warranted in representing the public's views or interests during the election. Likely this was because of the outlandish, often offensive, nature of his political speeches and campaigns. Yet journalists did not consider what possible effect their coverage might have, as they drew public attention time and again to Trump, in a sense normalising and partly validating his ideas, by not presenting them in a particularly critical fashion. In contrast, stories about Hillary Clinton were generally negative (Bruni, 2019). When the election became a duel of Clinton and Trump, they were treated by most mainstream media news coverage as equally fit for the office of President, with 'fair and balanced' coverage meaning in this case covering both candidates, as if they had the same balance of good and bad, capable and inept, truthful or incorrect. In *Merchants of Truth* (2019), Jill Abramson notes further that most of the political and personal dirt on Trump never came out, while Clinton's use of private email in the workplace became the biggest talking point, again constructing a landscape wherein both candidates were somehow similar or equivalent in qualifications, morality, and capabilities.

Assuming Clinton's outcome was inevitable, nobody in mainstream media bothered to see their role as educational or informative, preferring to stoke and fuel Trump's fire. While news sources in Hong Kong noted support for Trump among Chinese Americans, for example (Shi & Wong, 2016), this was rarely focused on in United States western media, which took for granted negative polling numbers presuming Clinton's victory. As Frank Bruni notes (2019), media continue to stoke the flames today, hardly learning from this situation. Most stories on Trump in news media are still focused on his 'political skills', and diverse views about them in the public sphere, and not on his political actions and activities.

Similarly, media worked to ensure a Brexit outcome in the United Kingdom. For some this was a known goal, with the editor of *The Sun* noting after the Brexit victory 'so much for the waning power of the print media'. In preparation for the vote, many news agencies regularly touted lies fed to them by pro-Brexit politicians, and exaggerated horror stories of immigration to Europe and the United Kingdom, of illegal immigrants, and wild economic projections of Brexit as a financial victory (Martinson, 2016). In some cases, media voices may have been politically influenced to favour Brexit, while in other cases they were just happy to report on alarmist, doomsday possibilities that were associated with remaining in the European Union.

Of course, traditional news media sources cannot take all the credit for Brexit—or for Trump's victory. Cambridge Analytica's online campaign of horror stories, exaggerations, constructed footage, and downright lies also played a role here, unquestioningly facilitated by Facebook. Neither the leaders of Cambridge Analytica nor Facebook saw themselves as negatively interfering with and altering public understanding in line with private partisan interests during that time. Yet Cambridge Analytica did declare the election of Trump a business victory, having earlier contributed to Ted Cruz's run (Lewis & Hilder, 2018). Fear played a central role in both the Trump and Brexit campaigns, as in both cases the evils of the other party and the horrors of immigration, foreigners, and crime were exaggerated to extreme, grotesque lengths, to benefit those paying for services which were essentially works of mass misinformation and propaganda.

Today in Hong Kong, the mainstream media continues to play a problematic role, not of educating or informing, but of fuelling fires. For months, western media has repetitiously linked Hong Kong's situation today to Tiananmen Square, where 30 years ago student protests and demonstrations led to a government massacre in mainland China (e.g. Blanchette, 2019; Schell, 2019; Tharoor, 2019). A great deal has happened in the last 30 years in mainland China and in Hong Kong, respectively, but you would not know it from the mainstream media. Despite many online webpages and sites begging western sources to be a bit more critical (not to mention

respectful) about the context, including an opinion from a Hong Kong-based journalist, 'To Understand Hong Kong, Don't Think About Tiananmen' (Sala, 2019), doomsday scenarios are what sells. And what sells matters more, looking at the headlines and coverage across western media sources, than actually reporting what is going on. There is also a significant risk here of normalising horrific doomsday scenarios, but this seems to be lost on some journalists, apparently earning their keep at the expense of international understanding.

Having lived in Hong Kong for the past seven years, that many reporters based in western societies are not informed about Hong Kong is not news to me. We chuckled in Hong Kong during the Umbrella Movement a few years back, when western journalists kept struggling over a very important phrase in Hong Kong, that conveys succinctly the legal arrangement with the Mainland: 'one country, two systems' (Jackson, 2019a). Yet the lengths media sources are going to in order to publish anything scandalous today still astonishes me. As I sit in my office at the University of Hong Kong, it would seem that I was living in a war zone, of youth rioting across my campus, all over the Central area and across the trains. Yet this is not real life in Hong Kong. Every morning last week, I woke up to a handful of messages from reporters, asking me to chime in about the many problems and protest events apparently occurring across the society. When I don't respond emphatically, as if these protests and related events are bombarding me, the journalists find others more willing to speculate and elaborate, regardless of whether they can judged as valid sources.

As an educational researcher, I find the simplified view given in the media about how education undergirds events in Hong Kong and China to be particularly vexing. In media coverage from western (American, British, and Australian) sources, it seems to be taken for granted that everyone in China is brainwashed, while the Hong Kong youth have been educationally radicalised. Many recent articles explain that the difference between Mainland Chinese and Hong Kong youth lie in their different brainwashing (e.g., Cunningham, Barstow & Zhang, 2019; May & Qin, 2019). In Mainland China, the story goes, moral and national education has indoctrinated youth, while in Hong Kong, they have all been radicalised by Liberal Studies. Most of the stories quote a few teachers or students to explain these views. One article features recent educational research by a team based in Australia, without citing or referencing any research on this topic by Hong Kong-based scholars (Cunningham et al., 2019).

In Hong Kong, the story goes, the youth rejected 'moral and national' education, and only learn Liberal Studies. However, in reality, 'moral and civic education' continues to be taught in Hong Kong—and has been rather sneakily retitled 'moral, civic and national education', since. This subject was introduced by the British in the colonial era, and teaches students to identify with Mainland China, with goals such as cultivating 'love of China'. Furthermore, my research shows that some Liberal Studies textbooks teach that all Chinese people should follow Chinese traditions, marry other Chinese people, and treat Chinese people better than others (Jackson, 2017, 2019b). In Hong Kong, where nearly 10 percent of the resident population is not ethnically Chinese, and where the Basic Law forbids discrimination and prejudice, this is hardly 'liberal' radicalisation.

On the other hand, while patriotic Mainland youth get a lot of press, some Mainland-based youth also participate in protests in Hong Kong, or have sympathy. They are less visible than (other) Hong Kong people, but that may be due to factors beyond education, which the media should also be aware of—namely, different rights to free expression across the two societies. Furthermore, western news sources decry how in China, children 'a young as 7 are taught to love the Chinese Communist Party and recite party slogans', as if school children 'as young as 7' in the states do not pledge allegiance in mass to the flag every morning, without understanding what 'allegiance' means.

Western media sources like the idea that Hong Kong wants to be rescued by the west. This aligns with a generally anti-Chinese attitude in many western societies, that goes beyond political concern with China, as western sources continue to seek out and then reverberate back

views of western superiority and goodness through narrow and unbalanced reporting. While pro-Hong Kong and pro-democracy protestors may seek out the attention of western media to make the case for Hong Kong around the world, few people in Hong Kong see the west as the source of political progress. Yet images of Hong Kong in western media regularly feature protestors waving American flags and making pleas to the states and the United Kingdom. Again, these are things I have never seen in Hong Kong, or heard of, from anyone based here, including people who participate and attend protests. In a leaderless movement like that in Hong Kong today, there are pockets to be found of people with different priorities, agendas, and orientations. There are some who are focused on western attention and western assistance. However, this is not the majority, while the meaning of American flags within the movement represents a nuanced view, not appealing to the country as a whole, but referring to particular American legislation (Buhi, 2019). This phenomenon receives disproportionate media coverage, given its obvious appeal, as a form of navel-gazing for western-based journalists.

Why is media misleading and miseducating in these cases? News media in the online age depends more and more on page hits. If a news website does not run amusing or shocking, sensational short stories, no one will ever find harder-hitting pieces, because the number of page hits about trendy cats (for example) will inevitably be higher than that for hard-hitting pieces, that require more attention. Advertisers want to fund pages people go to—pages where their advertisements will be placed and seen. In this context, what sells is clowns, monsters, infamous tanks, and other bad guys and dooms days, and trendy cats. If a media source writes a piece to educate people, the people may not click on the link, and advertisers will rethink sponsoring that online space in the future. This is not a public media, but a privatised one. It does not answer to the public sphere but only to funders.

Of course, it is not the job of media to educate the public; it is the job of educators. As long as there has been media, there have been politicians, among others, who have noted that without a society with capacities to critically receive and respond to media messages and other possible propaganda, democracy is a pipe dream. However, educators have often been one step behind this process, from a historical view. Critical educators have always encouraged critical media literacy, but have sometimes found, particularly in the internet age, reticence among some teachers. As Nicholas Burbules noted early on in considering the educational value of the internet, teachers tended to first claim the new media was threatening, before collectively shrugging in despair, that the new technology was difficult to apply in relation to their prior teaching schema (e.g. Burbules & Callister, 2000). Since then, the average professor has been left in the dust by their students, as each generation uses technology in more sophisticated ways than the generation before. To say that school teachers need to teach critical use of the media is an understatement now. In many cases, school teachers could learn a trick or two about savvy media use online from their students.


So what can educators and other concerned parties do, as the world literally and figuratively heats up, with polarised views taking up all air time, with little attention to facts, complexities, contexts, and the responsibility to broadly and insightfully inform? There is a tendency for all people to strengthen their previously held perspectives in these cases, while only being presented the most polarising of alternative views. One may also be tempted to try to 'get a piece of the action', when journalists are under pressure to capture news events, but ill-equipped to evaluate experts from non-experts. In this case, everyone can find their own soapbox to share their view, but this hardly helps the situation. On the other hand, what gets obscured by media is the way that people on 'all sides' continue to aim to receive good information, be critically informed and nuanced, and work on the side of justice and equality (not everyone, but most people). Dialogue may be possible, despite the drivers for polarisation, sensationalism, and dooms day narratives today.

In this context, educators should take a critical role in relation to media, in their own work, and when engaging with students and others, as experts in their areas and in the field of

learning. It is not necessary, and it may be impossible, for educators to get the ‘upper hand’ in relation to media today, given its high value to political and other financial actors, which far surpasses the societal value placed on schooling and education. Yet for media narratives to have the upper hand does not mean there is no space for consideration of other views. Educators should continue to critically analyse media and develop more sophisticated means for understanding media as a vital backdrop to their work, and to the future of democratic and other forms of dialogue and information dissemination, for the public good and for private, partisan interests, around the world.

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