

The decline of Hong Kong's press freedom under the national security law

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HKFP rounds up press freedom incidents over the past year, in the run-up to the anniversary of the security law.

Hong Kong's press freedom has suffered serious setbacks since the Beijing-imposed national security law came into force in June last year. In recent weeks, public broadcaster RTHK has been hit by a series of crackdowns and documentary producer Bao Choy was convicted of making false statements to obtain public vehicle licence plate records. The government plans to restrict media access to public records, legislate against "fake news" and the pro-democracy Apple Daily has been forced to close, in the run-up to the one-year anniversary of the security law.

July 2020

- The Foreign Correspondents' Club issued an open letter to Chief Executive Carrie Lam demanding the government give assurances of press freedom under the national security law.
- Lam said she would guarantee press freedom if the media guaranteed that it would not violate the security law.
- The Hong Kong Journalists Association warned of the "chilling effect" of the law.
- The New York Times moved a third of its Hong Kong staff to Seoul, citing the national security law and the difficulty in securing work visas.
- Police fined journalists at a protest in Yuen Long for allegedly breaching anti-coronavirus social distancing rules.

August 2020

- Police ordered reporters from five Hong Kong digital media platforms to leave a press conference.
 - Apple Daily newspaper claimed that personal data of staffers had been published on a doxxing website.
 - The Foreign Correspondents' Club said reporters were facing "highly unusual" problems obtaining visas, including months-long delays.
 - Beijing's foreign affairs office told the FCC in response to "distinguish right from wrong."
 - Pro-democracy media mogul Jimmy Lai was arrested under the national security law.
 - More than 100 police raided the newsroom at Lai's Apple Daily newspaper in Tseung Kwan O.
 - Journalist Wilson Li was arrested in connection with a pro-democracy NGO under the national security law.
 - Police said they would select which media outlets should have close access to their operations after excluding several local and international news organisation from the Apple Daily raid.
 - Dozens of people gathered at shopping malls to protest for press freedom after the arrest of Lai and the newsroom raid.
- apple daily protest arrest
- Public broadcaster Radio Television Hong Kong removed a website interview with activist-in-exile Nathan Law, citing the national security law.
 - The government appointed new members to RTHK's advisory board.
 - The Hong Kong Journalists Association filed a legal challenge against the Communications Authority's warning concerning RTHK's Headliner show.
- Over 300 iCable News staff signed a petition against the dismissal of three senior engineers.
- A survey showed some journalists who covered the 2019 protests reported a range of health issues due to crowd control weapons.
 - Hong Kong Free Press was denied a work visa for a journalist following an almost six-month wait without any explanation.

September 2020

- The University of Hong Kong was asked a long list of "unusual" questions by the Immigration Department when applying for a work visa for a Pulitzer-winning journalist.
- The government reportedly told an independent film distributor to include an official warning in two documentaries about the anti-extradition bill protests.
- Media groups criticised the police decision to stop recognising accreditations issued by journalist associations.
- RTHK journalist Nabela Qoser had her probation extended and was investigated again after she grilled Chief Executive Carrie Lam.

October 2020

- National security police raided the private office of Jimmy Lai.
- A district councillor was given a suspended prison sentence for publicly identifying the policeman who allegedly shot an Indonesian journalist in the eye.

November 2020

- Freelance producer Bao Choy was arrested for searching car licence plate records while researching a TV documentary about the 2019 Yuen Long mob attacks.
- A student journalist was charged with obstructing police and resisting arrest in a protest in May.
- Police arrested a journalist for obstruction after she refused to stop filming the arrest of two women in a mass protest in Mong Kok in May.
- Hong Kong Chief Secretary Matthew Cheung banned a planned journalists' protest against the arrest of Choy, citing Covid-19 restrictions, despite earlier approval.

December 2020

- iCable News' China desk resigned en masse after the broadcaster fired 40 people in the newsroom, citing the impact of Covid-19.
- Secretary for Home Affairs Caspar Tsui said the government would examine "loopholes" in the laws against fake news and misinformation.
- Bookstore Bookazine declined to distribute a book by Hong Kong Free Press political columnist Kent Ewing, citing fears over the national security law.
- The Court of First Instance rejected the Hong Kong Journalists Association's legal challenge against police "ill-treatment" of the media at protests.
- Prosecutors filed an appeal against the granting of bail to Jimmy Lai after Chinese state media criticised the decision.
- Lai resigned from Apple Daily parent company Next Media to "spend more time dealing with his personal affairs."

January 2021

- The Hong Kong government announced a decision to move Covid-19 press briefings online. It backtracked following criticism from a Hong Kong journalism watchdog.
- Police demanded Apple Daily hand over the information on journalists who searched for public vehicle licence plate records.
- Police visited the newsrooms of Apple Daily, InMedia and StandNews with search warrants demanding documents relating to the primary election for LegCo in July 2020.
- The head of RTHK, Leung Ka-wing, advised staff not to interview the 55 democrats arrested under the national security law over their alleged involvement in the primary.
- Three people convicted of rioting and assaulting a mainland journalist at the airport during anti-government protests in 2019 were jailed for up to 5 1/2 years.
- Bao Choy pleaded not guilty to making false statements after she obtained vehicle registration information for a film about the 2019 Yuen Long mob attacks.
- The head of Hong Kong's largest police union slammed public broadcaster RTHK for allegedly biased reporting of a weekend lockdown to combat Covid-19.
- The staff union at RTHK staged a silent protest to support fellow journalist Nabela Qoser, after she was told to accept a new short-term contract or face dismissal.
- The Communications Authority ruled that three episodes of RTHK's satirical programme Headliner insulted and denigrated the police force, and "strongly advised" the station to follow broadcasting regulations more closely.
- Three parliamentarians from the Norwegian Liberal Party nominated Hong Kong Free Press for a Nobel Peace Prize.

February 2021

- RTHK suspended BBC World News after a ban in China over its Xinjiang reporting.
- Security officers at the West Kowloon Magistrates' Courts barred at least two reporters from attending a trial hearing, to protect the identity of a police officer who had provided a witness statement anonymously.
- Hong Kong's High Court refused to grant bail to media mogul Jimmy Lai again over national security law charges.
- Director of Broadcasting Leung Ka-wing resigned from his post at RTHK six months before the end of his term.
- A Hong Kong government report found "deficiencies" in the editorial management of RTHK
- Funding for RTHK was cut by 4.6 per cent in the 2021-22 budget.
- Baptist University cancelled the World Press Photo exhibition, which included images of the Hong Kong protests, two days before its expected launch.

March 2021

- A top Beijing official said the principle of "patriots governing Hong Kong" extends to the judiciary, the education sector and the media, in addition to public officials.
- A leading civil servant with no broadcasting experience took over as head of RTHK, where three senior employees quit in the space of two weeks.
- Hong Kong's national security police arrested a former top executive of Next Digital, the publisher of Apple Daily, over alleged fraud.
- RTHK made a last-minute decision to cancel a programme featuring a panel discussion of Beijing's plans for a drastic election overhaul.
- The cinema screening of a documentary about a violent campus clash between student protesters and police in 2019 was cancelled at short notice after a pro-Beijing newspaper claimed the film may violate the national security law.
- Hong Kong's Ombudsman said that it would investigate the Immigration Department for refusing a work visa to Hong Kong Free Press for its incoming editor in 2020.
- Bao Choy went on trial for allegedly violating the Road Traffic Ordinance in seeking to obtain vehicle licence plate information for a documentary.
- RTHK axed another episode of a current affairs programme at short notice, the ninth such cancellation since the new Director of Broadcasting Patrick Li took office.
- The Hong Kong government announced plans to restrict public and media access to currently available information on company directors listed in the Companies' Registry.
- RTHK sought to withdraw its entries from journalism awards.

April 2021

- RTHK said that the Hong Kong government has the power to surcharge its employees for the cost of axed programmes.
- Amnesty International Hong Kong said the state of human rights and freedoms in Hong Kong had deteriorated under the national security law in 2020.
- The public perception of the independence and credibility of Hong Kong's news media dropped to a record low, according to an opinion poll.
- Chief Executive Carrie Lam said the Hong Kong government is the "biggest victim of fake news," after pledging to submit a bill to tackle "doxxing" within the current legislative term.

- RTHK dropped veteran journalist Steve Vines as a regular current affairs commentator on its Morning Brew programme after more than ten years.
 - The Epoch Times's printing presses were ransacked by a gang of men wielding sledgehammers.
 - The Hong Kong journalist who challenged a WHO official, Yvonne Tong, resigned from RTHK.
 - Reporters Without Borders East Asia warned that silence from the Hong Kong authorities over an attack on the Epoch Times is fostering a "climate of suspicion" against journalists and "encouraging" violent attacks on the media.
 - Police chief Chris Tang said media outlets that endanger the security of Hong Kong by publishing "fake news" will be investigated.
 - State-owned newspaper Ta Kung Pao in a full-page cover story accused Apple Daily and other pro-democracy "yellow media" of "constantly creating fake news."
 - Reporters without Borders warned that the national security law posed a "grave threat" to the city's journalists as Hong Kong remained at 80th out of 180 regions in the 2021 world press freedom index.
 - RTHK rejected a media award for a TV documentary about the police handling of the Yuen Long mob attack in 2019.
 - The Hong Kong government criticised a Reporters Without Borders report which warned that the national security law poses a "grave threat" to journalists in the city.
 - Hong Kong documentary producer Bao Choy was found guilty and fined HK\$6,000 for knowingly making false statements to obtain vehicle ownership records for the RTHK programme on the Yuen Long mob attacks of 2019.
 - Police confirmed that a journalist from Ta Kung Pao was arrested in February for making false statements to obtain public vehicle records.
 - The Foreign Correspondents' Club urged Hong Kong's police chief to clarify his recent comments about "foreign forces" attempting to stir hatred and conflict in the city using disinformation.
 - Beijing accused the FCC of being an external force interfering with China's internal affairs and undermining the city's rule of law.
 - A fifth senior staffer resigned from RTHK.
- RTHK signed up Chief Executive Carrie Lam to host her own daily show on Beijing's electoral overhaul for the city.
- RTHK axed another episode of a TV documentary series about online media financed by public donations after a month-long vetting.

May 2021

- RTHK began removing shows from its YouTube channel and Facebook page a year after they air. It deleted its archive of content over a year old.
- RTHK's YouTube Channel. Photo: RTHK Screenshot via YouTube.
- The Hong Kong Press Freedom Index hit a record low where close to 99 per cent of respondents said the Beijing-enacted national security law harmed the city's free press.
- RTHK refused to extend an employment contract for journalist Nabela Qoser following an extended probation period. Qoser were known for her hard-line questioning of officials.
- Hong Kong journalist Bao Choy filed an appeal against a magistrate's decision to convict her after she accessed public records to investigate police behaviour during the "7.21" mob attack at Yuen Long MTR station in 2019.
- An executive producer who led Hong Kong's longest running TV documentary programme Hong Kong Connection resigned from RTHK.
- Epoch Times reporter Leung Zhen was attacked by a man wielding a baseball bat from a passing vehicle.
- Assets belonging to pro-democracy media tycoon Jimmy Lai were frozen by the Hong Kong

authorities.

- Trading in shares of Next Digital, the parent company of Hong Kong's largest pro-democracy newspaper Apple Daily, were suspended at the company's request.
- Hong Kong's Security Secretary John Lee denied that the freezing of the assets of pro-democracy media tycoon Jimmy Lai represented a crackdown on press freedom.
- RTHK denied replacing an episode of Hong Kong Connection about the proposed shake-up of the city's electoral system following local media reports that it had been axed.
- RTHK axed a story about the annual Tiananmen Massacre anniversary long-distance run from its news show LegCo review.
- WhatsApp chats democrat Claudia Mo sent to media organisations like the BBC and the New York Times outlining her fears for freedom of speech in the city were deemed by a High Court judge to be sufficient grounds to deny her bail.

June 2021

- RTHK axed another current affairs programme, Letter to Hong Kong.
- It is announced that pro-democracy media tycoon Jimmy Lai is to stand trial on national security charges in Hong Kong's High Court, where the maximum penalty is life imprisonment.
- A Hong Kong court ruled that a local female reporter was guilty of resisting a police officer in the execution of their duties while covering a protest in Mong Kok in May 2020.
 - Hong Kong's Department of Justice dropped a charge of improperly accessing public records against a reporter for Beijing-owned newspaper Ta Kung Pao.
- Hundreds of Hong Kong police officers raided the pro-democracy newspaper Apple Daily and arrested five senior executives on suspicion of violating the national security law.
- Hong Kong's security chief John Lee accused pro-democracy tabloid Apple Daily of using journalism as a tool to endanger national security.
 - Two senior executives from the pro-democracy newspaper Apple Daily were charged under the national security law for allegedly conspiring to collude with foreign powers.
 - Hong Kong public broadcaster RTHK fired outspoken pro-democracy radio host Tsang Chi-ho.
 - Next Digital CEO Cheung Kim-hung and Apple Daily Editor-in-Chief Ryan Law facing national security charges were denied bail at the West Kowloon Magistrates' Courts.
 - Pro-democracy Apple Daily newspaper warned it was unable to pay staff and was at imminent risk of closure after the government froze company assets citing the national security law.
 - Apple Daily's finance section, its English edition, Twitter account and video department ceased operations following an exodus of staff.
 - Police arrested an Apple Daily editorial writer under the national security law for allegedly conspiring to collude with foreign forces.
 - Hong Kong pro-democracy tabloid Apple Daily decided to halt all operations in the city and published its last edition of the newspaper on June 24.
 - Two Apple Daily executives arrested on suspicion of endangering national security sought a court order for Hong Kong police to return journalistic and privileged legal material seized during their arrest and in a raid on the newspaper.

P.S.

<https://hongkongfp.com/2021/06/25/explainer-the-decline-of-hong-kongs-press-freedom-under-the-national-security-law/>