

Public see new low in Hong Kong's press freedom Beijing viewed as the major factor in decline

Hong Kong press freedom has dropped to a new low in the eyes of the public. One out of five journalists interviewed said they have come under pressure from seniors not to report or to reduce reporting about Hong Kong independence. Both the public and the media said the central government is the major factor in the decline of press freedom.

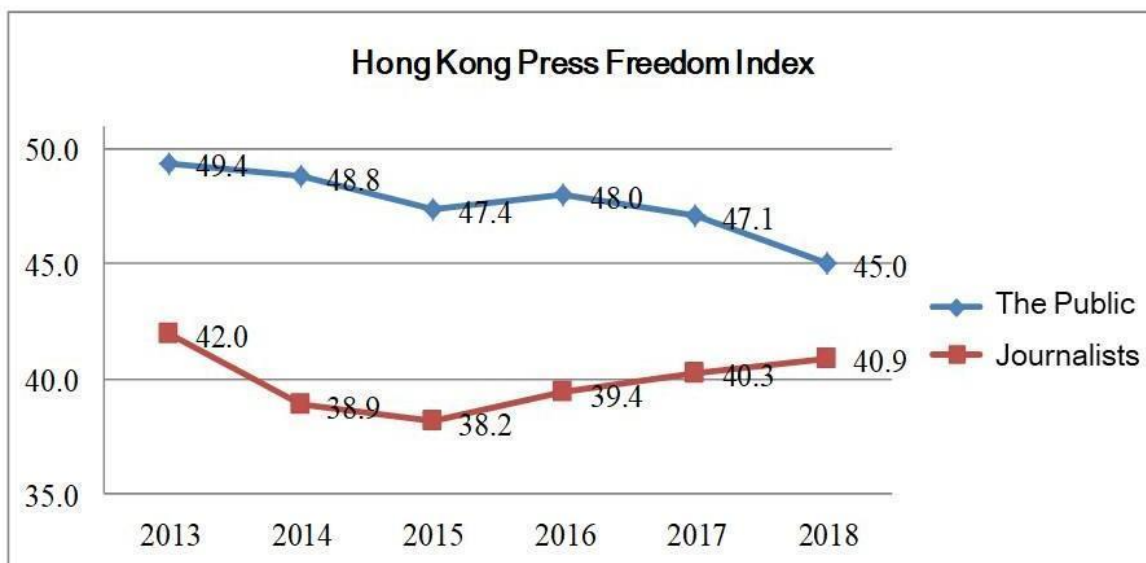
These are the findings of the latest annual surveys commissioned by the Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA). Comprised of two parts, the public and journalists respectively, they were conducted between January and February by University of Hong Kong's Public Opinion Programme for the compilation of the annual Hong Kong Press Freedom Index.

The general public Index for 2018 declined by 2.1 points to 45 on a scale of 0 to 100. The index is a record low and the drop is the biggest since the annual survey was launched in 2013.

HKJA said the general public is feeling the pressure exerted by the Central Government in the face of a series of incidents, in particular the denial of work visa renewal of former First Vice President of Foreign Correspondents' Club Victor Mallet by the government.

“Some have used the fable about slowly cooking a frog to describe the environment of press freedom in Hong Kong. Now, the water is no longer simmering but boiling!” says a HKJA spokesperson.

The union added that their survey findings have not reflected the worry caused by the Government's proposed fugitives transfer bill because they were conducted prior to the controversy.



Press Freedom Index for general public

The new low in index was largely due to a significant drop in three ratings: (1) The media as a watchdog; (2) Adequacy of legislative safeguards for journalists' free access to information;

and (3) Diversity of viewpoints within local media. All have dropped by 0.4 points on a scale of 0 to 10 points. The changes were regarded as significant statistically.

The Central Government was listed for the first time by the public as the top most important factor in their assessment of press freedom in Hong Kong, up from the fourth last year.

About 70% regarded the decision by the SAR Government to bar Victor Mallet from entering Hong Kong damaging to the city's press freedom.

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	Change of mean scores
How adequate do you think existing laws in Hong Kong are in safeguarding local journalists so they can obtain information they want freely? (the higher the score, the more adequate)	5.8	5.8	5.7	5.7	5.7	5.3	-0.4**
How effective do you think is the watchdog role played by the local news media? (the higher the score, the more effective)	6.6	6.3	6.3	6.2	6.3	5.9	-0.4**
Overall, do you think there is a diversity of viewpoints within local media? (the higher the score, the more diversified)	6.0	5.9	5.8	5.7	5.8	5.4	-0.4**

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

The Press Freedom index for journalists

The Press Freedom index for journalists is 40.9, with a slight increase of 0.6 points compared to that of 2017 index. However, the change was regarded as not significant statistically. That means the 2018 index for journalists is similar to that of 2017.

The rise was due to an increase of 0.1 points in several areas of rating, including: how common for the local news media to have doubt or hesitation when criticizing the HKSAR Government, the happenings of self-censorship of news media and difficulty in getting information. The improvements are, however, statistically insignificant, according to HKUPOP.

Nevertheless, 81% of the journalists responding said press freedom in Hong Kong had worsened compared to a year ago. This includes the 25% that described it as "much worse". Self-censorship and pressure from the central government are listed as the top factors in their assessment of press freedom.

What is worrying is that 112 journalists, or 22% of the 516 respondents, said their seniors had exerted pressure on them to drop or reduce reporting on Hong Kong independence.

Sixty-nine percent 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 six percentage points compared to last year's corresponding finding.

the finding of last year.

Over 93% of the respondents found the following events damaging to press freedom, and the majority of them are linked to Central Government. They are: (1) HK Government rejected the work visa renewal application of FCC Vice President Victor Mallet; (2) HK Government officially declared Hong Kong National Party to be an illegal society; (3) Major media allegedly retracted remarks of China's propaganda chief upon instruction of mainland officials; (4) Tai Kwun Center for Heritage and Arts once canceled appearances by the exiled Chinese writer Ma Jian at the Hong Kong International Literary Festival; and (5) Journalists were attacked in Beijing and Sichuan by mainland public servants.

The public survey was conducted by the HKU Public Opinion Programme from Jan 21 to 24, 2019. A total of 1,033 Cantonese speaking Hong Kong residents aged 18 or above were successfully interviewed. HKJA distributed questionnaires to journalists between Jan 5 and Feb 28, 2019, with a final successful sample of 535.

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 (Director, Public Opinion Programme, HKU)

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Hong Kong Journalists Association

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