

Digital Amplification of Fringe Voices: Alternative Media and Street Politics in Hong Kong

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This study examined the development of alternative media in Hong Kong from 2012 to 2016. This time period saw a proliferation of media outlets that represented alternative voices. Adopting the theoretical framework of media ecology, I analyzed the political economy of the alternative media niche. The emergence of the alternative media niche was facilitated by digital technologies, but technological development was not the sole driving force. The centralization of media ownership collided the ability of mainstream media outlets to represent a wide spectrum of opinions. Meanwhile, the legitimacy of institutional politics was challenged by street politics, and hence the loosening of institutional control over ideology opened up a new space for political discussion and civic engagement. Alternative media used digital technologies to respond to this decreased supply and increased demand for media production that amplified fringe voices within the Hong Kong civil society.

Keywords: alternative media, media ecology, Hong Kong localism, political economy, media ownership

Hong Kong is a media-saturated society. The city has a population of 7.3 million and a high volume of media products circulating among the local population. There are 52 daily newspapers, more than 600 periodicals, and seven licensed broadcast networks serving the 2.5 million households in Hong Kong ("Hong Kong: The Facts," 2016). The statistics do not yet include many alternative media outlets that publish on a smaller scale but represent emerging fringe voices. Alternative media production, as an umbrella term, includes various publishing practices (e.g., citizen journalism, online broadcasting, underground press). The most notable feature of alternative media is their operation outside of the institutional framework of mainstream media organizations (Atton, 2002; Downing, 2001). The case in this article revolves around the proliferation of alternative media outlets in Hong Kong from 2012 to 2016, with a particular emphasis on the interaction between the media ecology and the politico-cultural climate. During this period of time, Hong Kong saw a series of profound social changes. The ideological dominance of institutional politics waned, and the street politics with a populist appeal rose. Meanwhile, the political and economic influence of Mainland China strengthened, and the increasing "Mainlandization" provoked resistance from the Hong Kong civil society. As a result, the emergence of alternative media reacted to these ecological changes and promoted media activism to address social unrest.

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The investigation in this study is conducted through the theoretical lens of media ecology. An ecological view of media (McLuhan, 1962, 1964; Postman, 1985) contextualizes the technological infrastructure of media systems within larger social structures. The theory of media ecology, which partakes of “the study of complex communication systems as environments” (Nystrom, 1973, para. 3), borrows the metaphor of natural ecology to depict the fluid, interdependent relationships between different actors. Just like in a rainforest where different species cohabit and influence the living conditions of each other, organizations and individuals in the media ecology operate within a complex set of interactions. Moreover, under the media ecology framework, technological infrastructure and the political economic factors affect each other, simultaneously conditioning media production. Technology is one of the connections people have with each other and with social institutions in a broader sense (Fuller, 2005; Stephens, 2014). An ecological understanding of media technologies bridges the material and the social dimensions of media industry and embeds the operation of media in the political, cultural, and economic systems.

It is the objective of this article to delineate the ecological story line of the rise of alternative media in Hong Kong. By showcasing the development courses of various media outlets and analyzing their contents, I seek to answer the following questions: How are the main actors positioned in Hong Kong media ecology? What niche do alternative media outlets occupy in the media ecology? How is the niche for alternative media configured by the political economy of the media ecology? It is my argument that the emergence of an alternative media niche in Hong Kong was indeed facilitated by digital technologies, but technological development was not the sole driving force. The centralization of media ownership and the political pressure from the Chinese government collided the ability of mainstream media—which had close ties to institutions in power—to represent a wide spectrum of opinions. Meanwhile, the legitimacy of institutional politics was challenged by street politics with a strong populist appeal. A new space for political discussion and civic engagement opened up as the institutional control over ideology loosened. Alternative media outlets used digital communication technologies creatively and effectively. Their success was partly due to the decreased supply and the increased demand of media production that represented the ideological diversity of Hong Kong society.

Literature Review

Context: Postcolonial Hong Kong Politics

Before the explication of key concepts of concern to this study, some contextual information about Hong Kong politics is necessary for better understanding the scope of the case. The current constitutional framework for Hong Kong is called “One Country, Two Systems.” This framework, meaning that Hong Kong is part of China but keeps its own social systems in autonomy, stipulates a composite political system containing both “liberal-democratic and corporatist-oligarchic elements” (Cheng, 2016, p. 387). This system results in tension between the directly elected part of the legislature and the guaranteed proregime majority in the legislative and executive sectors (Cheng, 2016). Before the 2016 election, the Hong Kong Legislative Council (LegCo) was divided between two major camps, with a small number of independent legislators. The two political camps are the “proestablishment” parties that support the Chinese government and local corporate interests, and the “pan-democracy” opposition that advocates installing Western democracy in Hong Kong. Meanwhile, the Hong Kong government is stuck between the governor’s accountability to the

Chinese government and the legislature's accountability to Hong Kong citizens, with no effective mechanism connecting those two (Zheng & Tok, 2013). The blockage in the responsive conduits of the institutional politics drives the articulation of interests and opinions to other channels, such as mass media and advocacy groups (Lau & Kuan, 2002).

The radicalization of street politics during the localist movement fully exposed the fissure in civil society of Hong Kong. The localist movement began to differentiate itself from the pan-democracy oppositional movements around 2010. A series of protests gradually articulated an ideology that reconstructed the collective memory of the local communities and resisted against the hegemony of corporate interests (Cheng, 2016). Around the 2012 LegCo election, the localist camp emerged as a new opposition political force, setting itself apart from the traditional opposition, the pan-democracy coalition. The 2014 Umbrella Movement, in which 20,000 people went on the street to protest, crystallized two assumptions of localism. One was the justifiability of civil disobedience, and the other was the right of Hong Kong people to determine the constitutional relationship between Hong Kong and Mainland China (Yuen, 2015). The core argument of the localist movement was "the preservation of the city's autonomy and local culture" (Chan, 2016, p. 904).

Political Economy of the Digital Media Ecology

An ecological positioning of media production indicates that media organizations operated within a set of political and economic constraints. Murdock and Golding (1973) argued that the political economic nature of media production lies in the media industry's industrial arrangement of capital and its commodification of cultural symbols. As a branch of the media industry, news organizations also bear the institutional structure that conditions journalism as both a product and a practice (Picard, 2017). However, a simplistic thesis to attribute the agency of media production entirely to the control of capital and labor neglects the ecological nature of media systems. The political economy of media production should be used as a perspective to unravel the ecological ties media commodities have with regulation, technology, and culture and ideology (Garnham, 2011). The objective of analyzing media production as an economic activity is "teasing out the connections between the concrete practices of production and the wider organizational and economic shifts that shape them" (Murdock & Golding, 2016, p. 766).

Ownership is pivotal in the political economy of media ecology. From an ecological perspective, ownership functions as more than the entity legally owning a media organization; it should be understood as an institutional affiliation to a certain power arrangement (Downing, 2011). Also, in a capitalist economy, the influence of ownership is often conditioned by the political negotiation between market mechanisms and government regulations (Napoli, Stonbely, Friedland, Glaisyer, & Breitbart, 2012). Specifically relevant to my case study, media ownership has been concentrating in Hong Kong for the past two decades. Weisenhaus (2008) observed that Hong Kong media outlets were increasingly controlled by a small group of business tycoons who had close ties with political elites, and big media corporations began to expand their influence to Chinese-speaking communities across Asia. Under the pressure of owners, self-censorship was common in avoiding criticizing political powers or undermining corporate interests (Fung, 2007; Weisenhaus, 2008). The influence of the Chinese government and pro-Chinese capital was particularly strong after Hong Kong's sovereignty was handed back to China (Fung, 2007; Luqiu, 2017).

Digital technologies have become a prominent material condition of media ecology. According to Chadwick (2013), digital media ecology is characterized by hybridity, a property rooted in the hypermediacy of a given medium "in terms of its position in a system of interdependent relationships with other media" (p. 24). The connectivity and sociality contrived through computational technologies on digital media platforms, especially social media, blur the lines between the virtual sphere and real-life institutions, between production and consumption (Dijck, 2013, Webster, 2011). By contributing contents and redirecting information flows, the audience become more salient actors in the digital media ecology, where institutional media production adjusts to a participatory model (Deuze, 2007; Papacharissi, 2015).

The digital hybridity of media ecology has introduced new rhythms to the political economy of media production. Internet-based communication platforms have been taking the audience away from traditional news media like newspapers and television broadcasters because the Internet caters more to the niche demand of user gratification (Dimmick, Chen, & Li, 2004). The increasing weight of audience interactivity in digital media production reallocates economic resources to areas including user-generated content, audience engagement, and feedback management. However, Mansell (2004) warned against a technological determinist view of new media "with little regard for the associated structures and processes of power that are embedded within them" (p. 97). Although digital media production prioritizes horizontal networks and decenters institutional powers (Benkler, 2006; Castells, 2011), it is still prone to elite domination and co-option into the corporate-capitalist system (Foster & McChesney, 2011; Hindman, 2009).

Alternative Media

The notion of alternative media is relative by nature. Media outlets are considered "alternative" when they are alternative to the mainstream media. Alternative media employed production and distribution techniques in overt subversion to mainstream media (Atton, 2003). In contrast to mainstream media, alternative media tend to target niche markets of audiences, launch their services primarily on noninstitutional platforms, and actively challenge the mainstream ideologies in their products. Historically, alternative media were diverse in their ideological stances, which ranged from socialism and communism to right-wing extremism, and in their publication formats, which ranged from pamphlets to online forums. Although alternative media production tended to be ephemeral and inconsistent over time, it drove social changes in pivotal moments and recorded nonnormalized radicalism (Downing, 2001). Partly because of this reformative impulse, the boundaries around alternative media are not fixed. The relationship between alternative media and mainstream media can be best described as dialectical, especially given the hybrid nature of the digital media ecology (Rauch, 2016). The branding of alternative media versus mainstream media has always been situated within the power contestation among new and established actors in the media ecology (see Couldry & Curran, 2003).

The organizational structure of alternative media highlights access and connection while it decentralizes production bureaucracy and circulation control. This principle does not abolish organizational hierarchy that involves owners, writers, editors, and technical staff. But the editorial decision is made collectively, and the production is guided by a sharing of knowledge and skills (Atton, 2003). Bailey, Cammaerts, and Carpentier (2008) emphasized the "rhizomatic approach" to conceptualize alternative media. The metaphor of rhizome, while describing a nonlinear and interconnected structure, also captures

the connective function of alternative media, which connect between specific communities and civil society, and between political, cultural, and economic institutions (Bailey et al., 2008). The inclusive and participatory impulse resides not only in the organizational structure of alternative media but also in their dealings with audiences, regulatory bodies, and other nonmedia sectors (Atton, 2002). However, adhering to grassroots coproduction and open-access distribution traps alternative media in a disadvantageous position in the predominantly capitalist media market. As pointed out by Fuchs and Sandoval (2015), the commercial operation of media outlets would undermine the autonomy of alternative media, and there are few other options to mobilize resources in the capitalist economy.

Alternative media differ from mainstream media in ideological stance. Sandoval and Fuchs (2010) argued that participatory production alone was not sufficient to challenge the dominant discourse represented by mainstream media. The essence of alternative media production is to develop critical discourse and engage the audience in political activism (Fuchs, 2010). That is, regardless of the form (citizen journalism, news curation, radio talk shows, etc.), alternative media production accumulates symbolic resources to subvert hegemonic powers and creates a space for the cultivation of resistance (Atton, 2003; Downing, 2008). This critical nature of alternative media is especially pivotal in social movements. In the case of the 2014 Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, alternative media challenged the mainstream media's portrayal of the movement as an irrational riot and provided an alternative frame that highlighted the exploration of democratic governance (Kwong, 2015; Lin, 2016). The conceptualization of alternative media in this article gives more weight to the critical perspective than the organizational perspective, whereas the political economy of alternative media is treated as a bridge between these two perspectives.

Overview of the Hong Kong Media Ecology

In this study, I delineated the organizational characteristics of nine mainstream media outlets and tracked the development courses of 11 alternative media outlets around the time period from 2012 to 2016. The nine mainstream media outlets included the most influential and representative newspapers, broadcasting networks, and the government news agency, whereas the alternative outlets consisted of print publications and broadcasting stations. I collected information from a wide range of sources. For a given news outlet, I would look up their website, consult online resources (e.g., Wikipedia) and public records (e.g., company registry) to verify and complete the information about the outlet, and further complement my research with relevant news coverage and academic literature. For some alternative news outlets, whose organizational records were difficult to find, I contacted them directly to get the information I needed.

Figure 1 shows the ecological map of these media outlets.

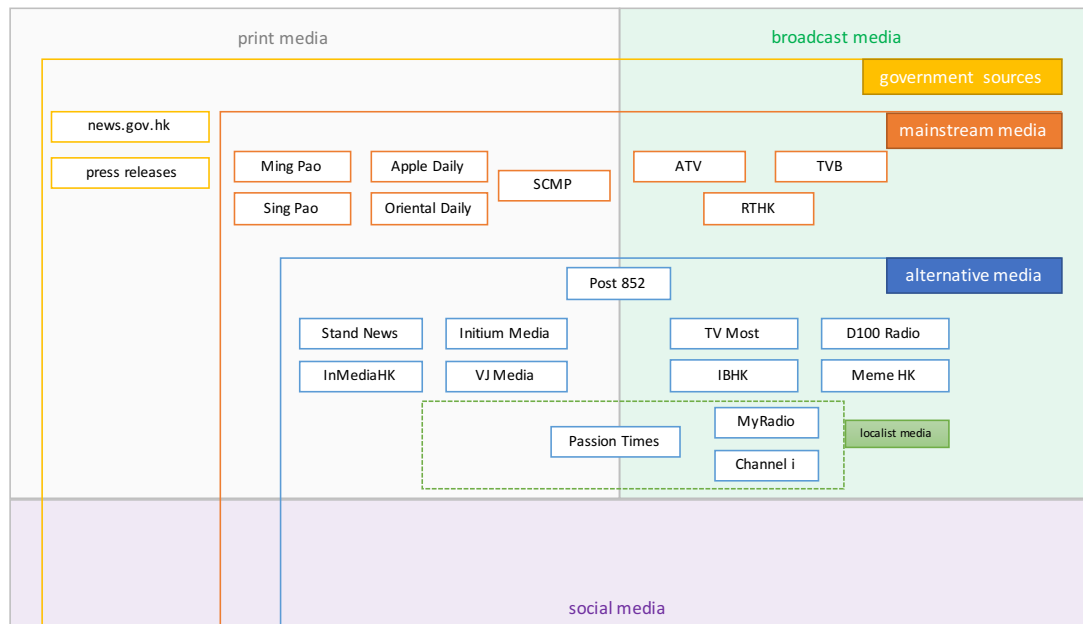


Figure 1. Media outlets in the media ecology of Hong Kong.

The outermost layer, in yellow, refers to government news sources; the next layer, in orange, is composed of mainstream media; and the last layer, in blue, contains alternative media. The background colors in Figure 1 signal the types of media production. Publications in the gray area produce content primarily in print format, whereas outlets in the green area are primarily broadcast media. Media outlets striding over the border publish in both print and broadcast. The bottom part, in purple, indicates the social media presence of these media outlets.

Figure 2 presents a time line on which events having a significant impact on Hong Kong media ecology are chronicled.

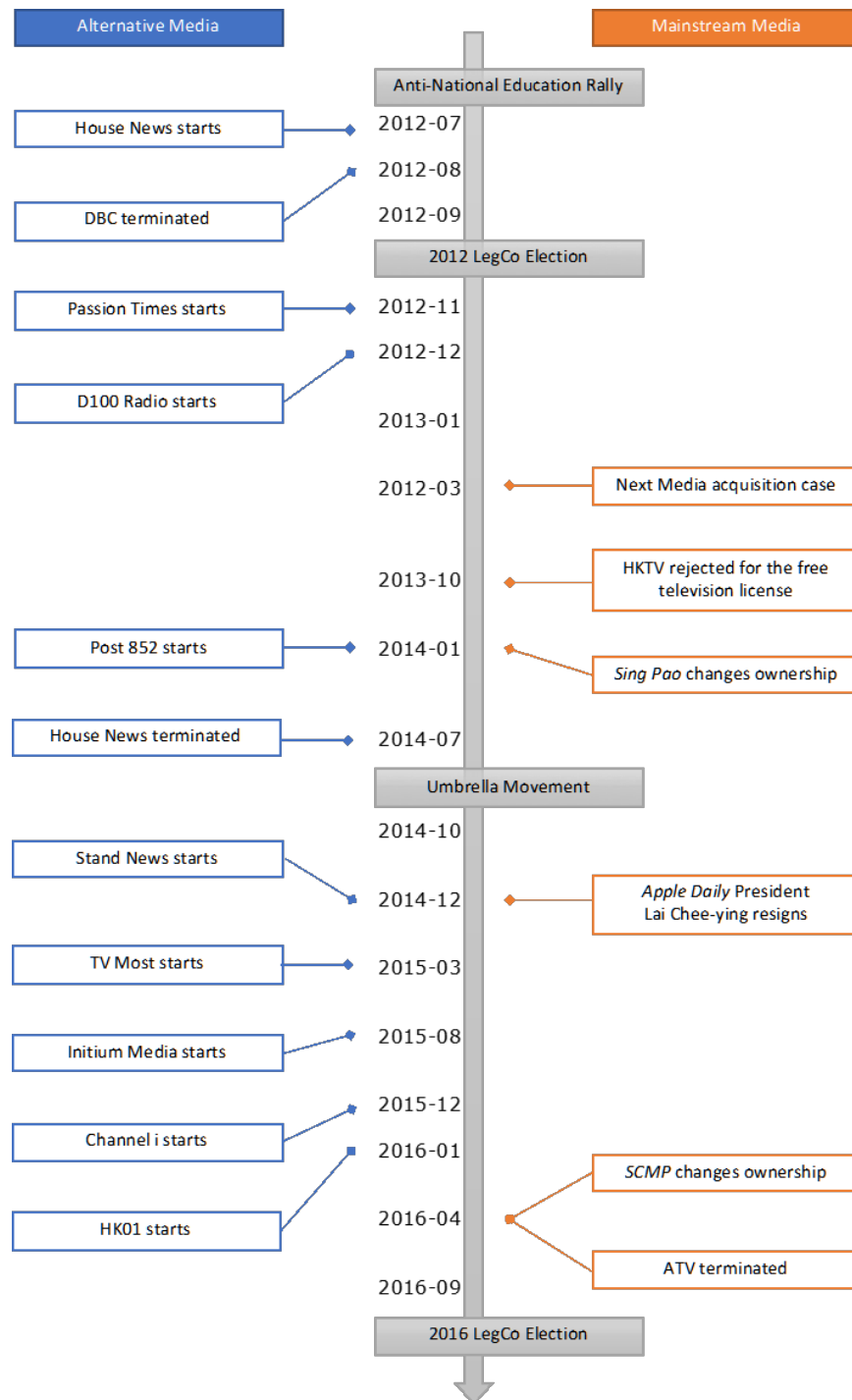


Figure 2. Major events in the Hong Kong media ecology from 2012 to 2016.

First, a series of political developments changed the ideological landscape of the media market. The rally against the national education curriculum, which was accused of being Chinese propaganda, marked the radicalization of the localist movement. Two months later, the radical wing split from the moderate opposition in the 2012 LegCo election and became overtly supportive of the localist movement. The movement was further fueled by many Hong Kong–Mainland conflicts from 2012 to 2014 and culminated in the Umbrella Movement. The localist activists formed parties afterward and made a bid for legislature seats in the 2016 election. However, the rise of radical localism motivated the Chinese government to exert more political pressure in Hong Kong, which in fact strengthened the proestablishment parties.

Meanwhile, the metamorphosis of the media landscape reflected the changing political environment. In Figure 2, the orange boxes present the developments concerning the mainstream media, and the blue boxes the alternative media. The mainstream newspapers and broadcasters became more pro-China because of ownership concentration and self-censorship. Meanwhile, alternative media outlets representing radical or progressive agendas sprung up in two waves, respectively around the anti-national-education rally and around the Umbrella Movement. Distinguished from the existing alternative publications and radio stations, the newly developed niche of alternative media amassed large audiences quickly because of its involvement in salient political issues. The new alternative media did not just cover alternative topics per se, but competed with the mainstream media, claiming to be better alternatives for the mainstream audience. The next section will analyze this alternative media niche and its positioning in the media ecology more in depth.

Mainstream Media: Main Actors to Channel Information Flow

Government Sources

The main approach that the Hong Kong government uses to steer the information flow in society is public relations. The Hong Kong government excels at “helping” the media not only by making raw news materials easily accessible but also by doing the reporting for them. News.gov.hk is the website operated by the Information Service Department, the headquarters of the government’s public relations division. The website is a comprehensive news source. The content on the website, although carefully framed to present the government in a positive light, is of high journalistic quality. Other than news.gov.hk, the government also provides easy access to press releases from every government branch, video recordings and transcripts of legislative proceedings, and administrative statistics. The public relations division of the Hong Kong government is savvy to perform as an information source and to enhance the government agenda within the commercial media sector.

The Hong Kong media industry is large in appearance, but its activeness does not guarantee strong resistance against government influence or corporate powers. The mainstream media rely heavily on subsidized information by the government. There are multiple reasons behind this reliance. In line with the global trend, print media in Hong Kong have not been doing well financially. For example, *South China Morning Post (SCMP)*, the elite English newspaper in Hong Kong, saw a 10% drop in circulation from 2011 to 2016 (Hong Kong Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2016). This decline in circulation revenue combined with drops in advertising income. At the same time, the Information Service Department got a 39% budget

increase from the government in 2017 (Financial Secretary, 2017). Also, the income of journalists in Hong Kong is below the average of all professions, and there is not much room for promotion within one news organization. Local news organizations are not able to keep experienced journalists (Hong Kong Journalists Association, 2016), and the burgeoning public relations industry, within which the government divisions offer the best salaries, becomes an easy exit for underpaid journalists. It has become more difficult for the news media, understaffed and constrained financially, to conduct independent investigations out of the agenda set by government agencies, which have equally professional employees and much more money to spend.

Mainstream Media

Mainstream Newspapers

Currently in Hong Kong, there are 13 mass-circulated daily newspapers that cover political news. The five newspapers in Table 1 are among the most influential print media outlets in Hong Kong and represent the political spectrum and the business models of Hong Kong newspapers.

Table 1. Major Mainstream Newspapers in Hong Kong.

Newspaper	Ownership	Capital	Ideological stance	Business model	Circulation
<i>Apple Daily</i> 蘋果日報	Next Digital 壹傳媒	Hong Kong	Pan-democracy, anti-China	Tabloid	226,816 (audited)
<i>Ming Pao</i> 明報	Media Chinese International 世界華文媒體	Malaysia, Hong Kong	Center pan- democracy	Elite broadsheet	130,000 (claimed)
<i>South China Morning Post</i> 南華早報	Alibaba Group 阿里巴巴集團	China	Center proestablishment	Elite broadsheet	100,385 (audited)
<i>Sing Pao</i> 成報	Sing Pao Media Enterprises 成報傳媒	China	Antiestablishment, pro-China	Tabloid/ broadsheet	100,000 (claimed)
<i>Oriental Daily</i> 東方日報	Oriental Press Group 東方報業集團	Hong Kong	Proestablishment, pro-China	Tabloid	500,000 (claimed)

Note. Circulation in this table is per issue as in July 2013 (source: Hong Kong Audit Bureau of Circulations & Hong Kong Spotlight). Information in other columns is as of March 2017.

In the past five years, three of the five newspapers listed in Table 1 experienced major changes in ownership. The most prominent case was the mergers and acquisitions of Next Media,¹ the mother company of *Apple Daily*. Next Media was founded and for a long time directed by Hong Kong businessman Lai Chee-ying, who held a bold political stance against the Chinese government. Lai meant to sell his media business in Taiwan after the company experienced a severe deficit, but the merger case stirred up strong opposition from both Taiwan and Hong Kong. The worry was that after the ownership transition, Next Media, virtually the only influential Chinese media company that spoke up against the Chinese government, would lose its critical edge. The deal was broken later because of political intervention and social pressure, although the broadcast sector of Next Media was still sold to a Taiwanese businessman with a pro-China background. This unfinished merger case did not affect the editorial board of *Apple Daily* in any fundamental way, but Lai then started to loosen his control over his media business. After the Umbrella Movement, Lai resigned from being the president of *Apple Daily* and the president of Next Media at the end of 2014.

The other two newspapers, *SCMP* and *Sing Pao*, went through substantial change in ownership. *South China Morning Post* Publishers, already owned by pro-China tycoon Kuok Hock Nien, sold *SCMP* to the Alibaba Group, the Chinese corporation that surpassed Walmart as the largest retailer in the world. *Sing Pao* is the oldest Chinese newspaper that still circulates in Hong Kong. In 2014, the ownership of *Sing Pao* was handed over to Chinese businessman Gu Zhuoheng from Hong Kong businessman Yeung Ka-sing, who was convicted of money laundering by that time. In summary, after the newest round of ownership reshuffle, Hong Kong print media were to a great extent controlled by Chinese or pro-China capital at the ownership level. The concentration of ownership had a clear centralizing direction in favor of the Chinese government.

Mainstream Broadcasters

The broadcast sector of Hong Kong media faced a similar conglomeration situation, but in a different form. Television Broadcasts (TVB) had been the biggest broadcast network in Hong Kong since the 1980s. Its monopoly of the television market was partly ensured by the licensing policy of the Hong Kong government. A license was required for free broadcast services to air on public channels. In 2009, the government opened the bidding for free television licenses for the first time in 30 years. Two networks, Fantastic Television and Hong Kong Television Entertainment, received new licenses in 2013. But the decision was controversial because Hong Kong Television Network, which was considered the most prepared and promising competitor, was declined the license for virtually no reason. The government refused to disclose the licensing procedure, and a protest ensued. In 2016, Asian Television, which was the only competitor to TVB for more than 30 years, lost its license because of financial failure and stopped broadcasting in April.

As a result, the monopoly of TVB was not effectively challenged, especially in the broadcast news market. A main source of broadcast news actually diminished with the termination of Asian Television while the newcomer broadcasters focused mostly on entertainment. At the same time, the

¹ The company changed its name to Next Digital in October 2015.

managerial level of TVB shifted in the pro-China direction, favoring capital and labor from the Chinese entertainment industry and deliberately avoiding agitating the Chinese government in the TVB news programming. The other alternative for TVB was Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK), the public broadcast network in Hong Kong. The programs produced by RTHK were of reasonably high quality, and the station covered important social and political issues with in-depth reporting. Occasionally, RTHK shows would feature prominent activists from fringe political groups. But as a public media outlet operated directly under the government structure, RTHK tended to attract the intellectual elite and had limited ability to hold Hong Kong government accountable or to criticize the Chinese government explicitly.

Alternative Media: Reformers and Challengers in the Media Ecology

The political diversity of mainstream media ownership declined from 2012 to 2016. As a result, the range of opinions and values represented by the mainstream media in Hong Kong also shrank. During the same period of time, alternative media outlets proliferated to fill the void left by the mainstream media and extended the structure of media ecology in two directions. First, alternative media outlets introduced a wider spectrum of ideological stances into the media ecology, diversifying the angles and frames of news stories. Second, alternative media outlets enriched the repertoire of media representations, reaching out to more niche markets in the media ecology. Table 2 lists the major alternative media outlets in Hong Kong. It shows that many of them took off after 2012.

Establishment of the Alternative Media Niche

The first wave of alternative media proliferation was triggered by the political situation around the 2012 LegCo election. Starting in 2010, the pan-democracy camp experienced major fission, with parties split up. As the leading party of the pan-democracy camp, the Democratic Party absorbed a smaller pan-democracy party and shifted toward a moderate stance. This move agitated the radical wing of the pan-democracy camp to campaign against the moderate wing, causing the Democratic Party the biggest electoral loss since it was founded. After the election, many political figures and groups that had been loosely affiliated with the pan-democracy camp began to distance themselves from the mainstream political institutions, which opened up the opinion market of alternative media. One prominent example was Passion Times, which was launched two months after the election. The founder Wong Yeung-tat, a renowned radio host, started Passion Times to cover the political issues traditionally advocated by the pan-democracy camp, but from a more radical perspective. Passion Times was closely associated with Wong Yuk-man, the former legislator leading the radical wing of LegCo.

Table 2. Major Alternative News Outlets in Hong Kong (Establishment).

Outlet	Time founded	Director	Director background
InMediaHK 香港獨立媒體	2004-08	Ip Iam-chong 葉蔭聰	Scholar
MyRadio	2007-02	Wong Yuk-man 黃毓民	Political activist
VJ Media 輔仁媒體	2012-02	Yung Lok-kei 容樂其	Political activist
House News/ Stand News 主場新聞/ 立場新聞	2012-07	Tsoi Tong-hoo 蔡東豪	Media worker, businessman
Passion Times 熱血時報	2012-11	Wong Yeung-tat 黃洋達	Script writer, political activist
D100 Radio	2012-12	Lam Yuk-wah 林旭華	Media worker
Post 852 852 郵報	2014-01	Yuen Yiu-ching 袁耀清	Media worker
TV Most 毛記電視	2015-03	Tsui Ka-ho 徐家豪	Lyricist
Initium Media 端媒體	2015-08	Zhang Jieping 張潔平	Media worker
Channel i	2015-12	Leung Tin-kei 梁天琦	Political activist, student
HK 01	2016-01	Lung King-cheong 龍景昌	Media worker

Another outlet that launched in 2012 was House News, a news curation website. The website began operation two months before the election. It aggregated news from other media outlets and analyzed news events from a supposedly independent view. Blogs and columns also constituted a large part of the content on the website. House News was founded on the idea of maintaining an information source that was independent of institutional political forces, especially the infiltration of pro-China ideologies in the mainstream media. It was not the first attempt in Hong Kong to create an independent news source. InMediaHK had existed for eight years beforehand to “break the domination and monopoly

of media by the regime, corporations, and political parties, actualize the free exchange of ideas and information among citizens, and bring new voices to the increasingly unitary opinion marketplace" ("About Us," 2008, para. 4). InMediaHK focused on citizen journalism and kept minimal editorial control. Both House News and InMediaHK, despite holding independence as their core value, exhibited clear favoritism toward the antiestablishment side of the political spectrum. That is, independence from institutional politics, especially the established political parties, was crafted as a niche feature of alternative media.

The independent feature served as a moral high ground for alternative media, especially when the political pressure in the media ecology became more visible. In August 2012, a commercial radio station, Digital Broadcasting Corporation, went off the air because of financial difficulty. It was suspected that there were political motives behind the capital withdrawal. D100 Radio, an online radio station, was launched soon afterward as a substitute for Digital Broadcasting Corporation. The founding slogan of D100 Radio was "rally the people to speak for themselves" (一呼百應 還聲于民), and the station assigned itself the task to "defend the core value of Hong Kong with the freedom of expression" ("About Us," n.d., para. 2). The common value shared by these alternative media outlets—either online radio stations or news curation websites—was the populist resistance to the symbiosis of institutional politics and mainstream media cartels. This round of alternative media proliferation around 2012, albeit being the side effect of a power struggle within institutional politics, constituted a movement by itself. The movement was about diversifying the ideological voices circulated in the media ecology, and it also vibrated deeper in the political domain to challenge the vested interest held by dominant elites.

Localist Specification Within the Alternative Media Niche

The number of new alternative media outlets surged again after the 2014 Umbrella Movement. This time, the basic structure of the alternative media market had been laid out by the 2012 precursors. Especially regarding the ideological spectrum, the opinion markets underrepresented by the mainstream media had been well explored. What the 2014 protest catalyzed was the formalization of the localist movement, and consequently an intensified competition over the ownership of the political alternative as a symbol. After the Umbrella Movement, the localist camp formally broke with the pan-democracy camp in preparation for the 2016 LegCo election. Even within the localist camp, several alliances formed to compete with each other during the election campaign. Channel i, an online radio station, was launched by Hong Kong Indigenous at the end of 2015. This channel was a response to Passion Times and MyRadio, whose founders Wong Yuk-man and Wong Yeung-tat had led a constitutionalist version of the localist movement prior to the 2014 protest. The localist alliance that founded Channel i, on the other hand, represented the post-Umbrella Movement generation of localist activists. The localist media production developed to represent different clusters of localist groups in a more specific manner.

Outside of the localist camp, the ecological space for alternative media was also getting more crowded and contested. The pressure came from opposite directions. First, the mainstream media began to catch up. After the 2014 protest, alternative ideologies like localism gained salience in the mainstream media agenda. According to Kwong's (2016) calculation, the mainstream newspapers picked up the term "localist camp" (本土派) in 2013, and the number of news articles mentioning this term surged from

about 400 in 2014 to more than 1,800 in 2015. With increasing attention from the mainstream media, alternative voices were under the risk of being normalized. Second, the audience base was becoming diluted on social media. House News ceased its service shortly before the Umbrella Movement. However, the founder launched Stand News, a slightly altered version of House News, in December 2014 right after the movement. This timing to exactly avoid reporting the protest upset many supporters of the Umbrella Movement, who started dozens of parody pages on Facebook to mock Stand News. One of those mockery pages, Cemetery News, even outperformed Stand News in terms of Facebook traffic ("The Peculiar Online Media," 2015, January 19). As more actors came in, it became more difficult a task for alternative media outlets to keep competitive enough in the media market while being unconventional enough to cater for the niche audiences.

Expansion of Media Repertoire

Besides expanding the ideological spectrum of the media ecology, alternative media also brought new ways to engage the audience in civic life through media consumption (see Table 3). Two sets of alternative media repertoire had a critical impact on the Hong Kong media ecology. The first was the revival of analytical journalism. Many alternative media outlets were started or directed by distinguished journalists who had long worked for the mainstream media (see Table 2). Yuen Yiu-ching, the former deputy editor and columnist of the *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, took his reporting team with him to found Post 852 in 2014. Post 852 provided original reporting in both print and broadcast and aggregated content from featured commentators and other blogs. Similarly, HK 01 was founded by the former owner of *Ming Pao* in 2016 and assigned Lung King-cheong, the former chief editor of *Ming Pao Weekly*, to supervise the news reporting team. Zhang Jieping, an experienced editor for several news magazines, also left the mainstream media in 2015 to join Initium Media as its executive editor.

This set of alternative media outlets—Post 852, HK 01, and Initium Media—were devoted to providing quality news but at the same time labeled their products as something more than just news. The motto of Post 852 was "do when others don't, excel when others fumble, and leave when others arrive" ("About Us," 2014, para. 1). The commentary section was often highlighted by the three outlets, and some of their news reporting adopted the critical approach to analyze the covered event. Especially in political reporting, these outlets did not focus on breaking the news, but on interpreting the political implications of the news. There had been a long tradition of analytical or even argumentative reporting in Hong Kong journalism, and the Chinese newspapers had never fully embraced the normative idea of objective reporting. Released from the mainstream media that were operated under centralized ownership, these experienced journalists actually gained more room to carry out this analytical tradition. Borrowing the symbolic power of both independence and professionalism, this group of former mainstream media elites tried to reform the news media internally.

Table 3. Major Alternative News Outlets in Hong Kong (Media Repertoires).

Outlet	Ideological stance	Ecological niche
InMediaHK	Prograssroots, Pro-social movement	Citizen journalism
MyRadio	Anti-institutional politics, cultural localism	Political talk show
VJ Media	Egalitarian, anticapitalist	Online subculture
House News/ Stand News	Pro-media independence, prointellectual	News curation
Passion Times	Cultural localism	Online subculture, political satire, localism
D100 Radio	Pro-media independence	Public broadcasting
Post 852	Pan-democracy	Commentating analytical news
TV Most	Antiestablishment, anti-mainstream media	Spoof
Initium Media	Center, proglobalism	Analytical news, international perspective
Channel i	Radical localism	Localism
HK 01	Center, prointellectual	Analytical news

The second set of alternative media repertoire, with a more grassroots origin, was a mixture of political satire and popular culture. Passion Times and VJ Media were the pioneers within this tradition. Passion Times' director Wong Yeung-tat, other than being a political activist was also a renowned stand-up comedian and television scriptwriter. The main political satire shows of Passion Times featured Wong as a comedian and commentator. Many other Passion Times shows covered popular subcultures like fan fiction, gaming, anime, and the occult. VJ Media, founded roughly at the same time as Passion Times, had a similar subcultural undertone. It promoted the elite hedonism in ancient Chinese culture with a populist twist. The motto of VJ Media read "meeting pals with writing and promoting benevolence with pals" (以文會友 以友輔

仁), which echoed the common myth of how ancient Chinese intellectuals exerted political power. Alternative media like Passion Times and VJ Media brought the subcultural symbols from the private domain to the public domain, using those symbols to construct counter frames against elite political powers. This technique was commonly used by alternative media as a symbolic rebellion against the dominant ideologies.

TV Most, an online television station, culminated the satirical subculture with its parody of mainstream television networks. The logo of TV Most was deliberately designed in the same color scheme as the logo of TVB, the giant network that almost enjoyed a monopoly in the television broadcasting market. The news program of TV Most was called *News at About Six-Thirty*, which was a spoof of TVB's *News at Six-Thirty*. And as promised in the program name, TV Most would not broadcast their news at the same time every day. TV Most was part of the media network created by Tsui Ka-ho, a proliferate Hong Kong lyricist. During the licensing controversy in 2013, Tsui announced the intention of setting up TV Most. Two years later, the inaugural video of TV Most was produced in parody of broadcast news, with a former TVB anchor hosting the show. Throughout the "news" about the launch of TV Most, several anchors and entertainers formerly working for the mainstream broadcasters were staged as vox-pop interviewees.

TV Most ("About TV Most," n.d., para. 1) describes its mission as "providing the 6.89 million retarded youth of Hong Kong population with the best low-quality online television 36 hours a day." This facetious statement reveals how TV Most situates itself within the media ecology. Self-deprecatingly labeling its own product as low quality, TV Most is in fact distancing itself from the mainstream broadcasters and reiterating its stance as an alternative media outlet. The target audience of this "low-quality" outlet are people derided by the establishment as the "retarded youth" (廢青). The syntax of the statement suggests that the "retarded youth" actually represent the majority of Hong Kong people in contrast to a small group of politicians and tycoons. In the statement, the Hong Kong population (about 7 million) is rounded to 6.89 million. The number alludes to the 689 ballots Leung Chun-ying received to be elected as the Chief Executive of Hong Kong. Leung is nicknamed 689 as a reminder that he is the product of caucus politics instead of people's will. So a decoded translation of TV Most's statement could be: Without the abundant resources and market monopoly the mainstream media outlets enjoy, we provide Hong Kong people with the media content in which their real voices are recorded.

Digital Infrastructure of the Alternative Media Niche

These two sets of media repertoire, being the driving force for the expansion of the alternative media market, were facilitated by the digital infrastructure of the media ecology. Digital platforms provided elite journalists with the technological affordance to monitor the publication with relatively fewer people and lower expenses. The interactive functions embedded in the digital platforms also enabled this thread of alternative media to brand themselves as accountable to their readers, constructing a virtual intimacy between the reporting team and the audience. Furthermore, it was a recent development that online publications were recognized as sources for quality news. As a result, investors were willing to finance media start-ups that relied primarily on online dissemination.

For the subcultural communities, the Internet sphere was already their base camp. Some of the outlets that featured online subcultures drew their initial audience from online forums about video games,

anime, and fan fiction. For example, even after it adjusted to be a news website, Passion Times still dedicated separate sections for those subcultural topics. It was partly a historical coincidence that the new generation of media activists were both immersed in those subcultures and savvy at digital communication. The alternative media outlets operated by these activists built on the digital network that had ripened for the circulation of online subcultures, and the online subcultures also inherited the ideological mark of the early Internet culture—open source, equal access, and decentralization of power. This ideological mark had an amplified resonance when the subcultural expression was used in political activism.

Discussion

The implication of my findings and the theoretical contribution of this article can be unpacked in three ways. First, the political economic foundation of the development of alternative media is explored. My analysis shows that the critical nature of alternative media is not purely ideological. There is a solid institutional structure that conditions alternative voices. At the base of this structure are media ownership and market differentiation. Media investors seek rewards in the form of commercial gain or political influence, whereas media workers produce content in alignment with the organizational goals of media outlets. Political ideologies can be the markers of niche markets. An alternative ideology, through its media affiliates, reflects the preferred social hierarchy by a certain group of people with similar class, economic, and cultural backgrounds. These groups' influence in other social institutions is the raw material for their media activism. In this sense, the relationship between mainstream media and alternative media is not dichotomous. The two compete and contrast when the represented political agendas are at odds; placed in a broader media ecology, they can also be the complement, the response, or the inspiration to each other.

Second, despite the emphasis on the political economy of media ecology, my study conceptualizes ownership not as a self-contained base of the media industry, but as an ecological actor that is situated in social systems. It is simplistic to think of owners as the bosses who manipulate news content directly through their control over financial and human resources. Ownership rarely involves an individual person with a coherent and independent agenda, but more often entails a set of economic and political interests, sometimes contradicting ones, that are tied to the power arrangement of other social systems. The influence of ownership on media production is a constant negotiation between power articulations, and such influence can be both suppressive and generative. Especially for alternative media, the business operation is closely related to contents serving specific interest groups. Prominent content contributors may "own" the media outlet symbolically, although they do not pay for the assets. Financial investment in alternative media, many times coming from the grassroots or nontraditional investors, can also aim at nurturing a political space for alternative ideologies. In this case, the distinction between media entrepreneurship and media activism is not clear-cut. The participatory production and the critical product are ecologically interdependent.

Third, the connection between the digitalization of media ecology and the amplification of alternative voices should not be understood as a linear correlation. Digital media do not democratize mass communication by default. It is easy to justify such causality with the perceived consequences of media digitalization. Digital media are hailed for overthrowing dictators and connecting communities, and the next second they are accused of spreading resentment and tearing the society apart. This deterministic view of

media technology often neglects the social construction of technologies themselves. The diffusion of technologies is a confluence of political, economic, and cultural threads in the media ecology. These social factors affect each other through digital media production. The emergence of alternative media that represented fringe voices is fueled by the politicization of media market and contributes to a civic culture engaging the public in seeking political solutions to lifeworld predicaments.

My case study of the localist niche of alternative media in Hong Kong paints a holistic picture of how media ecologies evolve given the prevalence of digital technology. Like in a natural ecosystem, the actors in a media ecology are interconnected, and the disruption and the ensuing equilibrium at the systemic level manifest through the relational positioning among the actors. Mainstream media, despite occupying the advantageous position in the media ecology in terms of audience reach and productive resources, are also bound by other institutional forces, including governmental bureaucracy, political elites, and corporate interests. Media outlets branding themselves as the alternative voices "need" the mainstream media to stay mainstream. The market niche of alternative media blossoms when the mainstream media, constrained by politics and ownership, leave out too much of the ideological spectrum. Technological changes can catalyze this political economic dynamic. Digitalization of media production disrupts the existing ecological hierarchy in which institutional actors enjoy dominance. Although digital technologies do not directly cause the emergence of alternative voices in the media ecology, they open up a space, where media entrepreneurship and political activism mutually amplifies each other to challenge the status quo.

Conclusion

In this study, I reconstructed an ecological account of the emergence of alternative media in a specific industrial context. In general, the media market of Hong Kong had been competitive and saturated since the colonial period. For a long time, the news sector of the mainstream media was well supported by the business side of the media industry. News media outlets, especially newspapers, adopted a model in combination of commercial independence and political parallelism from the beginning. The diversity of ownership at the same time brought different political ideologies into the media ecology. However, the opinion spectrum covered by the press was shrinking, as the government became more resourceful and sophisticated in directing the information flow through public relations and the media ownership centralized toward pro-China capital.

The gap left by the mainstream media in the opinion market became the initial soil for the growth of alternative media outlets, and the increasing anti-institution sentiment among the public boosted the demand for alternative sources of political information. At the same time, the maturation of the digital media market provided media activists with the technological affordances and financial resources to start their own publication and expand circulation. Alternative media outlets distinguished themselves from the mainstream media by emphasizing their independence from corporate interests and their audacity to speak out. Also, many established journalists left for the burgeoning alternative media market, bringing in the journalistic tradition of political commentary, while the grassroots praxis of alternative media used street culture symbols to connect with the audience and resist against institutional politics.

Grounded in a case study, this article clarifies the relationship between alternative media, mainstream media, and digital technology from the theoretical viewpoint of media ecology. Digitalization can be a pure market strategy adopted by established media actors to further centralize informational resources. Its affinity with alternative outlets and fringe voices is conditioned by political-economic and sociocultural factors. Alternative media and mainstream media are two groups of media actors that are ecologically interconnected. Their relationship to each other is fluid and contested. What is mainstream or what is alternative is relative to the structural arrangement of power. Either of the two can be constructive or detrimental to the well-being of civil society. My study indicates that future research on alternative media can benefit from media ecology theory by taking due consideration of alternative outlets' ecological positioning against mainstream outlets and better contextualizing the impact of digital technology in specific political-economic conditions.

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