Media reform and freedom have long been a highly contested area of discussion among scholars, practitioners, government institutions, as well as the general public. A major source of frustration comes from the conflict between press’ claim of service to public interest and readers’ evaluation to the contrary. To better understand news media performance in Hong Kong, the Institute for Journalism and Society at the School of Communication, Hong Kong Baptist University launched a media performance project earlier this year. Part of the project involves large-scale content analyses of local newspapers and audience surveys.

In both studies, we measure local press performance in terms of practice and functions by contrasting informing and entertaining (human interests), factual and interpretive, local and cosmopolitan, watchdog and boosterism, diversity and focus, and advocacy and professionalism. Altogether 14 local newspapers currently in circulation in Hong Kong were included in the study. A total of 27,797 news stories between 1st January and 27th December 2007 were content analyzed.

Findings from the content analyses reveal the following major characteristics of news coverage in Hong Kong:

- Informing-entertaining: Coverage on politics and economy as staples of public affairs content in the press averages about 34% across all 14 newspapers. However, HK Economic Journal tops the list with 83.4% of its space regularly devoted to this area of content. Six other newspaper, including HK Commercial Daily, HK Standard, South China Morning Post, Wen Wei Po, HK Economic Times, and Ta Kung Pao follow as a distant second with around 40% of their total coverage on politics and economy. Despite popular perception about the rise in infotainment, leisure and entertainment content only take up an average of 6% in the

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1 Informing-entertaining scale identifies how serious news events are covered in different ways and by different newspapers; Factual-interpretive scale clusters newspapers according to weights attached to facts in relation to interpretation of facts; Local-cosmopolitan scale is operationally defined as the degree to which different newspapers devote editorial attention to the geographical locale of news; Watchdog-boosterism scale sets the core of analysis on the extent to which a newspaper plays out the role of power supervision versus that of economic development celebrant; Focused-diversified scale assesses the spread of news content with regard to different types story and different sources of voices; Advocacy-professionalism scale contrasts partisan and vested interests by the criteria of professionalism epitomized in such editorial pursuits as fairness and balance.

news sections across all 14 newspapers. *Oriental Daily* and *Apple Daily* are the only two newspapers where entertainment content exceeds 10% of the total news space.

Crime coverage, which is widely seen as an indicator of dramatic or sensational approach to news reporting, has its fair share among HK newspapers. Among the 14 newspapers analyzed, six (*HK Daily News, Sing Pao, Sing Tao Daily, the Sun, Apple Daily, and Ming Pao*) set aside about 20% of total news space to crime content;

- **Factual-interpretive:** In our search for subjective wording and name calling in news headlines, we found that on average, about 30% of headlines have these across all 14 newspapers, although *Oriental Daily* ranks first with almost half of all its headlines having an explicit presence of subjective wordings;

- **Local-cosmopolitan:** More than half of the news stories are about local Hong Kong events for all newspapers. *Sing Tao Daily, HK Economic Times* and *HK Daily News* rank top three, while *Ta Kung Pao* and the two English language newspapers bring up the rear. Newspapers whose coverage of news in mainland China takes up one third include *Hong Kong Economic Journal, Wen Wei Pao, Hong Kong Commercial Daily, Ta Kung Pao* and *South China Morning Post*;

- **Watchdog-boosterism:** One in five of the news stories for all 14 newspapers contains some form of criticisms of HK government, mainland government or business corporations. Without exception, stories criticizing mainland government fall far behind those targeted at local government in number. On the other hand, less than 3% of news stories on average take a position that boosters local or mainland government;

- **Diversity-focus:** The presence of conflicting views within a news story varies across different newspapers, despite a 20% average for all newspapers. On the two extremes, more than 80% of *HK Standard* stories contain at least two different views, whereas the same figure for *Oriental Daily* is 5.1%.

In addition to the content analysis, we also conducted two rounds of audience surveys, one in September and one last month. A total of 2,025 permanent Hong Kong residents were telephone interviewed. We are interested in various audience evaluations of news content in the press. We found that about 80% of respondents read at least one newspaper. Among the respondents surveyed, more than half read a newspaper everyday. *Oriental Daily* and *Apple Daily* are the two most popular newspapers in the pool.

Most of the readers reported that they choose a particular newspaper to read out of “inertia”. *The Apple Daily* is reported to be the most entertaining, followed by *Oriental Daily* and *the Sun*. Findings indicate that most respondents are satisfied with the newspaper they read, although they do not necessarily regard it as the most credible. *Ming Pao* ranks first in credibility rating by all respondents. A sub-sample analysis shows that only two other newspapers receive top ranking in credibility. *Oriental Daily* is top-ranked by its readers, older people, those of low and medium education level, and people with relatively low household income. *Sing Tao Daily* is also ranked first in credibility, but by its readers only.