

A factual and fair press its own best safeguard

Analysis
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tion.

The succinct and blunt observations by newspaper publisher Mr Louis Cha about press freedom after 1997 are likely to provoke a fresh round of thinking on what lies in store for the Hongkong press.

There is no doubt that Mr Cha's predictions are built on solid ground, given his position as a respected, veteran newspaperman in Hongkong and his role as a member of Beijing's Basic Law Drafting Committee.

Nor are there doubts that the observations of Mr Cha, publisher of the *Ming Pao*, were made in a pragmatic manner and with good intentions, which should be read as a warning about what will be in store for the press after 1997.

The gist of Mr Cha's prediction is: there will inevitably be some kind of pressure from China after 1997 and the Chinese-language press will be less free than the English-language press. This is because the latter caters to a smaller section of the community, with opinions therefore having a lesser impact on the Chinese-speaking society.

Pressure other than that enforced by law comes in an invisible form and it exists in any open society. Where the freedom is greater, the invisible pressure from the powers-that-be will grow in propor-

tion. In the way the press operates today, pressures may come in a host of forms. One way of "influencing" the press is through offering fund injections and/or advertising benefits - or withholding them if results do not materialise. The fine tradition of editorial independence would help a lot in doing away with this undue influence.

Another way is through persistent persuasion. The technique is to try to persuade publishers, editors and reporters to take sides, whatever the benefits are.

Even in countries such as the United States and Britain, the selection of journalists or media organisations for briefings, constitutes a form of influence. One of the better-known arrangements is the British parliamentary lobby system, where selected journalists have access to senior politicians.

Those in favour of such an arrangement argue that it involves rights and obligations such as observance of ground rules, and that these in no way affect the judgment of journalists wishing to maintain editorial independence.

Indirect pressure, which is often invisible, works only in cases where the other party willingly complies. Hence the argument that journalists must themselves decide whether they will be subject to this influence or fight for free speech to be upheld.

Much of the anticipated pressure from China after 1997, as described by Mr Cha, is clearly of a different sort. It refers to a psychological factor obviously self-imposed by Chinese-language newspaper operators.

Hence, this should be an invisible pressure rather than something enforced by the law. After all, freedom of the press is to be stipulated in the Basic Law and it is believed that those responsible for drafting the Basic Law will not do something violating this principle.

Invisible as it is, this psychological factor will certainly affect press operations although again, how journalists will respond to it varies from one individual to another.



Mr Louis Cha

their community, whether local or national. It assumes that they are sufficiently well informed about the issues of the day to be able to form the broad judgments required by an election, and to maintain between elections the vigilance necessary in those whose governors are their servants and not their masters . . .

"The responsibility for fulfilling these needs unavoidably rests in large measure upon the press, that is on the newspapers and periodicals, which are the main source from which information, discussions, and advocacy reach the public."

Looking at a long-term effect, one wonders how free an English press could be if the Chinese press remained subdued in its opinions. Such an awkward situation of a freer press for one language and culture within the same community may also create antagonism of a kind that would not be in the interests of Hongkong to see develop.

Moreover, if the English press remains freer because of cultural and journalistic tradition, does it mean that local Chinese owners of English-language newspapers should work along the editorial line of expatriate-owned newspapers or Chinese-owned newspapers?

While Mr Cha's observation may fit in with the cultural and psychological pattern of Chinese life and his warning is built on solid ground, the facts are that Hongkong society has developed to a stage where information-oriented sophistication is fast becoming part of people's lives.

Regardless of what form of government will ultimately emerge in the Hongkong Special Administrative Region (SAR), a broad-minded approach towards opinion will need to be maintained in order to keep up the momentum of developments which have made Hongkong a success in the past.

One encouraging sign today is the open policy being adopted by China. Obviously, an increasingly open-minded approach by the Chinese authorities in dealing with opinions on the mainland will correspondingly result in a lesser psychological burden for the Chinese-language me-

dia in Hongkong.

After all, effects on Hongkong arising from developments in China cannot be entirely insulated, whatever system of government Hongkong is to develop ultimately. No one can deny there will be a clearly spelt-out constitutional link between the SAR and China under the Basic Law. Imagine the possible effects in the unlikely event that radical leaders like the gang of four get back in charge after 1997.

While the China factor cannot be ruled out as irrelevant, members of the Hongkong press will have to uphold their rights by way of their performance. Anywhere in the world where free expression is a way of life, responsible journalism, which calls for factual and unbiased reporting and fair and daring comment, will be the best safeguard against undue pressure.

The Hongkong media have for years been represented by opinions of various stripes. This befits an open society where different opinions are allowed to flourish.

In the past two decades, the media have maintained the tradition of expressing views in a relatively free atmosphere, although some would agree that self-censorship and excesses related to ethics do occur from time to time.

The tidying-up of the situation should not be done through outright suppression or by the boosting of the psychological factor or fears. Nor would segregation of opinions through the English and Chinese press provide an answer that is good for the community as a whole.

Any "corrections" which may be required may come through the inducement of a sense of self-discipline which should go hand in hand with a consciousness of the right to free speech.

Making remarks without a solid basis and writing reports totally out of balance will eventually produce a cumulative effect which may provoke a backlash.

Free expression will therefore have to accompany a clear recognition of professional ethics as well as of rights and obligations, be it in the practice of English or Chinese journalism.

However, what is worrying in Mr Cha's remark is that this may give rise to a situation which amounts to an unnatural segregation of the streams of opinion between the English and the Chinese press.

As a result, the Chinese-language press or media, if TV and radio news is counted, will be "less free" or to put it bluntly, tamed, while English publications will speak their mind as freely as they always have.

If Mr Cha's predictions were borne out, it would mean a step backwards for the Chinese press, which has emerged from an environment full of restrictions to one where restrictions exist only on statute books waiting to be removed where applicable.

That a truly free English-language press will on its own suffice to bring all opinions on issues to the fore is a fallacy. For if the majority of the public on the receiving end are not informed adequately through the Chinese-language press which purports to serve them, they may not be able to form the right opinions.

The significance of this point is well-illustrated by the findings of the Royal Commission on the Press in 1949:

"The democratic form of society demands of its members an active and intelligent participation in the affairs of