

Report on the Hong Kong journalist diaspora community

This project was supported by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ)

March 2023



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1. Introduction

The 2019/2020 mass democratic protests against the extradition bill and the 2020 implementation of the National Security Law has produced a mass outflow of Hongkongers. Those who have left Hong Kong include experienced members of civil society such as politicians, NGO workers, and activists, as well as journalists.

This research represents the first comprehensive attempt to ascertain the size and conditions of the overseas Hong Kong media diaspora. It provides a glimpse into the demographics, working conditions, and hopes and challenges of diaspora journalists, many of whom are no longer working in the industry owing to a string of factors.

This report also details the efforts of former Hong Kong based journalists residing abroad to promote press freedom by continuing to provide news services to audiences in Hong Kong and beyond. They are consciously seeking to maintain the tradition of a free press and fill the gap of heavily restricted information flows in Hong Kong under the current regime.

2. Methodology

The research was conducted using a two-tier approach.

The first tier of the survey consisted of a series of 12 brief questions in a questionnaire. We received 101 anonymous (but verifiable) responses from the United Kingdom, Canada, Taiwan, the United States, and Australia, which have become the main countries attracting Hong Kong emigration. Researchers adopted snowball sampling, whereby survey respondents were asked to pass on the survey to other people who they believed would be suitable participants.

For the second tier, we chose up to 12 participants from the first-tier survey to conduct in-depth interviews, in order to better understand the challenges that the participants are encountering when beginning their media careers in their new home countries, as well as the factors that made them choose not to continue their journalism career.

Limitations

Some former Hong Kong journalists who moved overseas mistakenly believed that if they had left the industry, they should not fill in the survey. Upon explanation by researchers, some of them were willing to participate. However, it was difficult to estimate how many people did not take part due to this misconception.

Some former Hong Kong journalists who moved overseas did not take part in the survey because of security concerns.

It is interesting to note that the researchers were not able to reach out to a higher number of interviewees who were in mid-management when they were working in Hong Kong media.

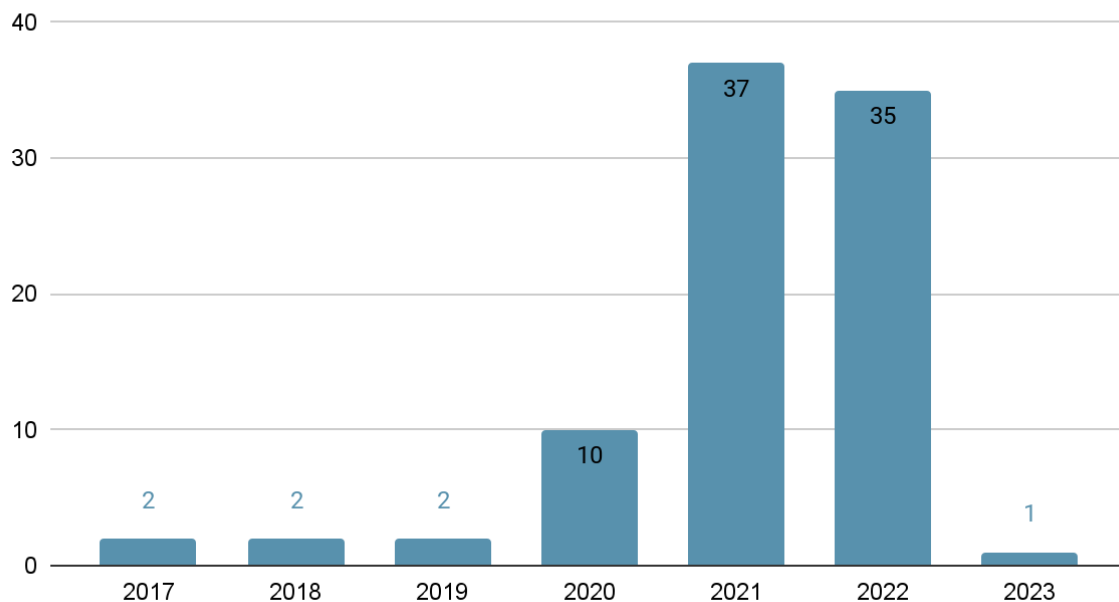
The researchers were only able to speak to one interviewee in Taiwan.

The researchers were not able to interview a higher number of photographers, videographers or camera people.

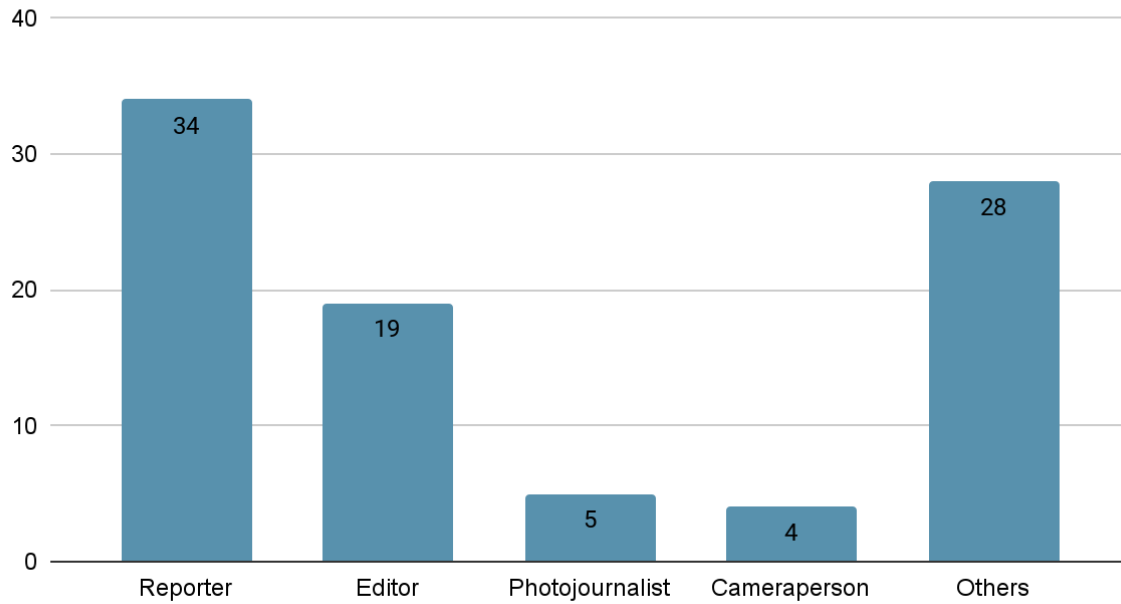
3. Survey results

We received 101 responses between December 17, 2022, and February 20, 2023. Of these, 90 were valid responses, inclusive of those who failed to answer some of the questions towards the end of the survey. In open-ended questions, some respondents may have given unclear answers and such responses were therefore discarded.

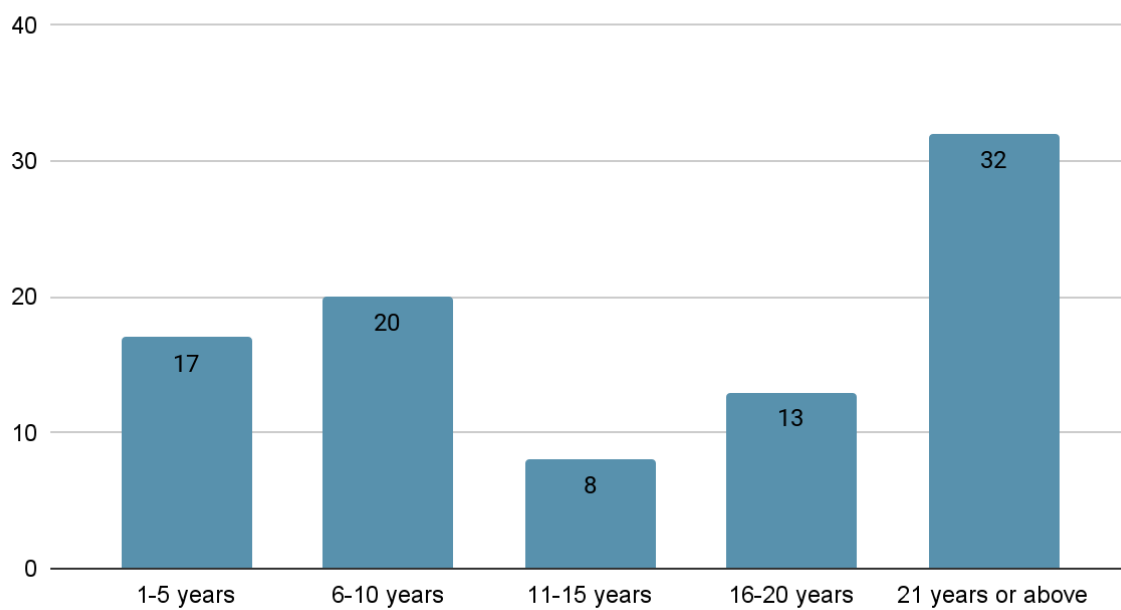
Year of leaving Hong Kong (N=89)



Role in Hong Kong (N=90)



Experience (N=90)



30 respondents said they were confident working in a non-Chinese speaking environment, while 60 said they were not.

59 respondents said they were currently not working in the media industry. They included eight students, three retirees, 13 unemployed. Others were engaged in a wide range of other jobs including freelancer, public relations, marketing, YouTuber, barista, car repairer, speech pathologist, florist, waitress, hotel receptionist and homemaker, among others.

Of these respondents, 32 said they were not seeking employment in the media sector, while 23 said they were.

31 respondents said they were currently working in the media sector. Most say they were journalists, reporters or writers, with a handful saying they were editors or producers. Others included broadcast or online programme hosts, as well as commentators. Some of them said they were freelancers or part-time journalists.

Of these respondents, 12 said they worked for a platform/organisation established by Hongkongers. 15 said they were not.

72 respondents said they were not planning to return to Hong Kong in the near future. 10 said they were planning to do so.

81 respondents said they did not regret their decision to move overseas. One respondent said they regretted the choice.

Analysis

In general, the data matches the perception that most Hong Kong journalists who left within the past five years went to Canada, the UK and Taiwan.

We noticed that we had more respondents having between one and 10 years of experience, and another larger group with more than 20 years of experience. There were fewer respondents having 11 to 20 years of experience.

We suspect there are two possible explanations for this age distribution but it is not possible to be definitive on this matter:

1. Younger and very experienced journalists were the ones who tend to leave, instead of those in middle management; or,
2. We could not reach out to more of those with 11 to 20 years of experience.

While a considerable proportion of the respondents were reporters and editors, there were many who answered “others” in their past roles. While we should have provided more options in terms of job roles, judging from their responses, we could understand there were working in the journalism industry as social media executives, commentators, columnists, YouTubers, and documentary makers, among others.

Two-thirds of the respondents said they were not comfortable working in a non-Chinese speaking environment, and close to two-thirds were not currently working in the media sector. Less than half of these respondents wish to return to the sector, as we will discuss the reasons in the next section.

Even for those currently working in the media sector, only about one-third said they were working for a platform or organisation established by Hongkongers, and 15 said

they were not. But as more platforms and organisations established by Hongkongers emerge, more people are likely to begin to work for them.

The vast majority of respondents said they were not planning to return to Hong Kong, and that they did not regret their decision to move overseas.

Limitations

Some journalists were not willing to participate in the survey for the following reasons:

1. Some explained that they felt they had already left the industry and were not prepared to enter the journalism industry again. Upon explanation by researchers, some of them were willing to participate. However, it was difficult to estimate how many people did not take part due to the misconception.
2. Others explained that they were considering going back to Hong Kong, and they believed it may be sensitive to take part in the survey. This is despite the fact that the researchers explained that the survey was completely anonymous and that the data for the survey would be kept securely.

4. Key findings from interviews

Continuing journalism in different forms

It is very hard to provide a precise estimate of the number of Hong Kong journalists living in exile but our research plus anecdotal evidence and other sources suggests that hundreds of former Hong Kong journalists are now living overseas, and that many are still leaving the city.

Among those who moved overseas in recent years, there were several ways for them to continue working in journalism, namely public broadcasters, Chinese-language media, and newly founded Hong Kong diaspora media.

Public broadcasters

With Chinese-language skills, and specific knowledge of Hong Kong and the diaspora community, public broadcasters welcomed overseas Hong Kong journalists when job opportunities arose. Examples include the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Asia (RFA) which hired Hong Kong journalists in the UK, as well as the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) doing the same in Australia.

While these services would post job opportunities publicly, in some cases, they relied on word of mouth or referral by other journalists when they wished to recruit journalists with Chinese-language skills and knowledge of Hong Kong. For instance, one journalist secured a freelance role at the BBC after being highly praised for coverage outside the Manchester Chinese Consulate General, capturing scenes of an attack on a Hong Kong protester by Chinese diplomatic staff.

Local Chinese-language media

In terms of diaspora media, Canada is a relatively special case, as there had been waves of migration from Hong Kong since the 1980s, contributing to a different media scene for Hongkongers who moved there. There are existing Chinese-language news outlets which have been running for decades.

A Hong Kong journalist who came to Canada in 2020, who used to be a feature reporter, now works at a local Chinese-language radio station. To her, it was “not difficult” to secure a job in the local Chinese-language media. Even though she did not think she had good English, there was no barrier at all for her to continue working as a reporter.

Newly founded Hong Kong diaspora media

Hong Kong journalists who migrated overseas in the past few years all witnessed the rapid decline in press freedom in Hong Kong, and some were passionate to continue reporting on Hong Kong in a free and safe environment, taking advantage of being based in countries which enjoy far better freedom of expression. Please see the next section and the annexe.

Self-run media

Some Hong Kong journalists who moved overseas have started their own, in some cases highly successful, YouTube and Facebook pages channels to provide news reportage, analysis and commentaries.

Freelance work

Although some journalists have switched to other industries, they may return as freelancers or part-time journalists as and when opportunities arise . Hong Kong journalists who chose to study overseas may also act as freelancers or part-time journalists.

While they were often not professional journalists, YouTube commentators who moved overseas were also a main source of information for consumption of listeners in Hong Kong and diaspora communities.

Main challenges

Overall, we found five factors impacting overseas-based Hong Kong journalists when they consider whether they would continue their journalism careers.

Language skills

Most Hong Kong journalists worked in Chinese-language media in the city before they moved, and few were confident working in a non-Chinese speaking environment unless they already had experience working in English-language media.

“There is no solution on the language issue. It is almost impossible for me to achieve a native speaker level of English,” one interviewee who was a producer for a Chinese-language current affairs programme at the Hong Kong public broadcaster said.

Knowledge and interest in local news

Although Hong Kong journalists may adapt to their new lives in their new home countries quickly, it could be difficult for them to obtain a professional level of knowledge of their new home countries' social, political, and economic environments, to a level comparable with native language job seekers in the domestic sphere.

Even if they were able to understand and report on local news, Hong Kong journalists may not have the same level of interest or passion in reporting on their new home countries if the new roles in journalism had nothing to do with Hong Kong or Greater China.

“A main challenge for me is that I need to understand the politics and constitution in Canada, which are different from Hong Kong and more complicated than Hong Kong,” said an interviewee who now works at a Chinese-language radio station in Canada.

Connections and opportunities

As Hong Kong journalists start fresh in their new home countries, they may not have adequate connections in the local media industry to look for suitable roles for themselves, or even create such roles that did not exist beforehand. They may miss opportunities that they could fit in, without even knowing such opportunities existed.

“The gatekeeping process at local media outlets is difficult.” The journalism jobs often went to those who are white and elite, and I am unable to fit in,” said an interviewee in Australia, who was an English-language journalist in Hong Kong for a year, before going to Australia to study speech therapy in 2020.

In Taiwan, an interviewee said that Taiwanese media were not interested in hiring Hong Kong journalists unless they were hired specifically to cover Hong Kong or international news with their English-language skills. However, such job vacancies were scarce.

Newly founded diaspora media have had to rely, to a large extent, on voluntary contributions and were keen to find out about external funding sources, but their process of discovery has been slow because they lack connections with potential funders.

Sustaining livelihood

One simple yet crucial factor for Hong Kong journalists when considering whether to continue their journalism careers overseas is whether they would earn enough to make a living.

Oftentimes, journalism is a low-paid, high-workload industry which forced journalists to leave as they struggled to restart their lives in their new home countries. Some of them could only work part-time in newly founded diaspora media as they were paid minimum wage and had to work in a second job to make ends meet.

“My wife has a full-time job. I have to take on the role of a homemaker to take care of our children. I can only work part-time in journalism if such an opportunity appears,” said an interviewee in the UK, who was a veteran journalist in Chinese-language media in Hong Kong with 20 years of experience.

In Taiwan, younger Hong Kong journalists who do not have a lot of assets must find a job to sustain themselves, since whether or not they could do so may affect their application for residency in the future. As such, they may consider more stable jobs with better pay to make sure of the residency application. Whereas in other places

such as the UK or Canada, job security was not part of the factors taken into account to obtain residency.

Burnout

Following mass social unrest in 2019 and the following Covid-19 pandemic in Hong Kong, journalists who decided to leave the city may face burnout, and in some cases mental health issues, making them unwilling to return to the industry even when they are in a safer environment overseas.

“I am no longer interested in journalism jobs after the past few years. The depressing atmosphere in Hong Kong and the poor management at my workplace under such an environment were simply too much,” said an interviewee who was an investigative journalist in Hong Kong. He moved to the UK in early 2023 and planned to study a master’s degree on the environment.

Views on press unions

Most interviewees did not have much knowledge of press unions in their new home countries. One interviewee in the UK knew of the local union, but the union was uncertain as to what kind of help she could seek.

It was the understanding of researchers that some Hong Kong journalists in the UK were in touch with local unions to secure press cards for their work, and there was an initiative by the National Union of Journalists to offer a six-month free membership. Some had tried to apply for relocation subsidies from the Reporters Without Borders. More outreach by unions would certainly be advised.

Training needs

Many Hong Kong journalists in their new home countries will need training in the English language to be able to continue working in the media industry.

They would also need opportunities to learn about the political, social and economic environment in their new home countries. It would be beneficial to have events for Hong Kong journalists to meet local media and press unions to find opportunities for cooperation.

Moreover, industry transitional professional training support should be given to enhance their professional skills in new home countries.

Visa issues

There are existing open visa schemes for Hong Kong people to move to Australia, Canada, the UK, and Taiwan. In most cases, Hong Kong journalists would be able to stay for several years, before applying for permanent residency. There is a need to emphasise the special needs of Hong Kong journalists to obtain visas if they fail to fulfill other criteria for entry.

5. New diaspora media

With a large number of Hongkongers moving overseas and the crushing of Hong Kong's media freedom, many have realised the need for establishing diaspora media in hotspots of migration. Since 2021, at least six new media outlets run by Hong Kong journalists have been established in the UK, Taiwan, Canada and Australia. Others are in the pipeline.

Many YouTube commentators have also moved overseas, providing their opinions from afar.

In the annexe, we supply the first comprehensive guide to these outlets.

Case study: The Points

Chinese-language The Points, which plans to have a substantial bilingual element, was founded in January 2023² by a group of Hong Kong journalists entirely based overseas to provide general news coverage of Hong Kong and the diaspora community. It is the only media organisation of this kind based in three geographical centres to provide a rolling 24-hour news service. It covers news in Hong Kong and Greater China, the UK and Europe, Canada and the US, as well as Australia.

The Points has two public faces, one of which is Finn Lau, a Hong Kong activist in exile serving as executive director. Researchers spoke to chief editor Jane Poon, another face of this new media. Poon was a former head of digital news at Next Digital, the media group established by Jimmy Lai, that was forcefully closed by the Hong Kong government. Poon left Hong Kong for Australia in 2017 and was originally planning to retire.

But following the 2019 social movement and the crushing of media freedom in Hong Kong, she was interested in establishing a new media outlet to fill the gap in general news reporting in Hong Kong, after the loss of Apple Daily and Stand News, two main sources of daily news.

In Australia, where Poon is based, there is the public broadcaster SBS as well as other existing commercial media which publish in Chinese. However, Poon noted that SBS faced limitations as only a portion of its news would be about Hong Kong and the diaspora community, and there have been complaints over the quality of local Chinese-language commercial media. One of the roles of new Hong Kong diaspora media would be to fill this void.

Challenges and vision

The Points have no more than 10 staff members, which include reporters, designers, and administrative staff. Poon said The Points started running much later than other diaspora media outlets because they had to sort out many issues before launching with a small number of staff members. With the lack of manpower, Poon admitted mistakes have been made in the editorial process, which they hoped would be smoother later on.

How to reach a wider audience is of major concern to Poon. She wished for the news outlet to work together with other new media platforms and independent journalists, but the existing workload was already tough.

Funding is a main issue as the news outlet has an operational fund to sustain it for less than one year, she said. It runs a Patreon account with three tiers of subscription, namely US\$6, \$24 and \$59 per month. It also asks for a yearly subscription with a goal of securing US\$320,000. A month after it was launched, it has only achieved 1% of the goal.

“We wished to become a platform for people to speak out. This is our vision. But it’s far far away, not something we can achieve for now. We’ll see if we can generate more resources for us to help other independent media and independent journalists. But if we can’t survive ourselves, it’s only a vision,” said Poon.

Assistance required

To Poon, The Points needs financial assistance, as well as more exposure.

In terms of finance, Poon mentioned that it would be great to obtain assistance in terms of helping them complete grant proposals, as they lacked the experience, connections and language skills to do so. They also urgently require assistance to obtain some guidance for seeking funding from governments, NGOs and private foundations, Poon said.

New Hong Kong diaspora media would need support in getting exposure in their new local environment, so that the relevant people — such as politicians, government workers, press unions and community stakeholders — would know of them, allowing them to get into the local press corps, Poon said.

Other comments

The researchers also spoke to journalists at other new Hong Kong diaspora outlets, who wished to remain anonymous.

Difficulties in staffing, funding, and coverage

One interviewee, “H” has over 15 years of experience as a producer at the public broadcaster in Hong Kong. After moving to London, she worked as a junior florist and also a part-time journalist for a UK-based diaspora media.

As most staff members were not in London, “H” filled in when it was necessary to report in London, such as during Queen Elizabeth II’s funeral. She could only do so when she was free from her day job and did not intend to return to journalism long-term, due to the diaspora media’s funding difficulties.

“R”, an experienced journalist who works for another UK-based diaspora media outlet agrees that with scarce resources and low pay, it is quite unlikely for Hong Kong journalists to wish to continue working in diaspora media.

Another issue is that Hong Kong journalists are now scattered in many different places across the globe, unlike in Hong Kong when they worked in big teams. This meant it was difficult to reproduce the synergy they had when they were in Hong Kong.

“H” also said when covering sensitive political topics related to Hong Kong in the UK, it was difficult to find interviewees, since they may wish to return to Hong Kong at some point and were afraid to speak on the record. As a result, they were unable to produce reports concerning such topics.

6. Conclusion

We found that Hong Kong journalists started to leave the city en masse in 2020, likely in the hundreds. In descending order, they have moved to the UK, by far the most popular choice due to the British government's BN(O) visa scheme, followed by Canada and Taiwan, and the remaining went to Australia, the US and other countries. Many have fewer than 10 years of experience, while many have more than 20 years under their belt, those in between were a relatively smaller group.

Two-thirds of the respondents were not working in the media industry after moving overseas. As expected, language was a main challenge. We also identified other obstacles such as knowledge and interest in local news, connections and opportunities, sustaining livelihood and burnout. Many respondents believed that they simply would not be able to fit into a local media working environment, except for those in Canada. If their financial situation allows for it, they may study a course or a master's degree to switch lanes into a new industry gradually; if not, they would have to look for other work immediately to make ends meet.

For the one-third who were able to continue working in the media industry, their opportunities vary from country to country. They could be working as public broadcasters in the UK and Australia; Those in Canada could find jobs in local Chinese-language media; new diaspora media have started to boom in new communities; and some may choose to become a freelancer or a part-time journalist.

As we look at new diaspora media, we find common challenges such as funding issues. Many of these new platforms run on an initial seed fund which could sustain them for perhaps a year, and they are under pressure to perform well to gain subscribers to carry on. Staff shortage and staff being separated geographically also creates a major challenge. Last but not least, new diaspora media would need more



exposure in their new home countries as they do not benefit from working under an established brand.

Despite the formidable obstacles facing media employees previously working in Hong Kong who have now relocated overseas, our research has found a strong determination to keep the spirit and practise of a free media alive. Given the dangers of independent journalism within Hong Kong, our respondents recognise the responsibility to work for the restoration of a free media in their new, and safer homes abroad.

Appendix 1

List of diaspora media

HongKonger Station 香港台

Founded in 2021 in Canada by singer Joseph Tay and PR executive Fiona Wong to provide general news and information for the Hong Kong diaspora community in North America.

<https://www.hongkongerstation.com/>

Commons 同文

Founded in October 2021 in Taiwan to provide general news related to Hong Kong and the wider diaspora community.

<https://commonshk.com/>

The Chaser 追新聞

Founded in February 2022 by a group of UK-based Hong Kong journalists. They cover general news in the UK and Hong Kong.

<https://thechasernews.co.uk/>

Green Bean 綠豆

Founded in mid-2022 by a group of former public broadcaster RTHK journalists to provide weekly video updates on current affairs in Hong Kong and the UK as well as the diaspora community. It also has columns written by journalists, commentators and cartoons.

<https://greenbean.media/>

Mekong Review

The publication, founded in 2015, is a quarterly literary magazine, publishes reviews, essays, interviews, fiction and poetry on and from Asia. In late 2022, Kevin Yam, a Hong Kong lawyer who moved to Australia, took over as Editor-at-Large. The publication will provide more coverage about Hong Kong and Greater China within the Asia-Pacific context.

<https://mekongreview.com/>

The Points 棱角

Founded in January 2023 by a group of Hong Kong journalists based around the globe to provide general news coverage of Hong Kong and the diaspora community.

<https://points-media.com/>

Paiseh To Bother You 歹勢打攞晒

A new programme in Cantonese started in March 2022 in Taiwan under the public broadcast Radio Taiwan International about life in Taiwan, hosted by former Hong Kong public broadcaster RTHK host Tsang Chi-ho.

<https://www.facebook.com/Paisehtobotheryou/>

Photon Media 光傳媒

An upcoming news media based in Taiwan is covering Hong Kong news and the diaspora community.

<https://www.facebook.com/photonmediahk>

YouTube commentary channels

YouTube channels run by overseas Hongkongers have become a significant source for Hong Kong and overseas Hongkongers to obtain information. Examples include:

Stephen Shiu	Based in Taiwan, he started memehongkong – an online media outlet– which has now been become a very popular talk show based around the host. https://www.youtube.com/c/memehongkong
Lau Sai-leung	Lau is a veteran commentator and founder of House News (predecessor of Stand News), also a former editor at Next Magazine (sister publication of Apple Daily) and a former adviser to Hong Kong chief executive Donald Tsang. He is based in Canada. https://www.youtube.com/c/%E5%9F%8E%E5%AF%A8Singjai
Yau Ching-yuen	852 Post was an online media outlet founded by the veteran journalist which ceased operations in May 2021. https://www.youtube.com/c/Post852
Simon Shen	Shen is a scholar based in Taiwan. https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCXf8jlTSP9kp6g4ROCFgvbQ
Sam Ng	Co-host of RTHK’s satirical show Headliner, now based in the UK. https://www.youtube.com/c/NgSam
Tsang Chi-ho	Co-host of RTHK’s satirical show Headliner, now based in Taiwan. https://www.youtube.com/c/%E5%BF%97%E8%B1%AALiveShow



AOHKMP
海外香港
傳媒專業人員協會

Chris Wong	A former anchor at the TVB news channel before moving to the UK. https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCyCZ0qec223YCgJwU83LubA
Gavin Chiu	Chiu is a historian and scholar who now lives in the United Kingdom. https://www.youtube.com/@gctalk
Hong Kong Peanuts	Run by a group of pro-democracy commentators. https://www.youtube.com/c/%E9%A6%99%E6%B8%AF%E8%8A%B1%E7%94%9Fhkpeanutcom
Hong Kong Uncensored	Run by a group of pro-democracy commentators. https://www.youtube.com/c/HongKongUncensored%E9%A6%99%E6%B8%AF%E5%86%87%E6%A0%BC%E4%BB%94
Whirling Clouds Valley	Chip Tsao and Alex Bao founded the current affairs talk show Whirling Clouds Valley in March 2022. They were co-hosts of the popular Commercial Radio late-night talk show Summit, now both based in the UK. Tsao still appears irregularly on Summit. https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCCVFgDdTfiGxQ695BxMBMUg

Appendix II

Survey questions

1. When did you move overseas?
2. Where are you located?
3. How many years have you been involved in media work?
4. What kind of work you have undertaken before leaving Hong Kong?
5. Are you confident about working in a non-Chinese speaking environment?
6. What is your current job?
7. Are you currently working in the media sector?
8. (If answered yes in Q7) If you are in the media sector, are you working for a platform/organisation established by Hongkongers?
9. (If answered no in Q7) If not already employed in the media sector, are you seeking employment in this sector?
10. Are you planning to return to Hong Kong in the near future?
11. Do you regret your decision to move overseas?