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B. McIntyre

*Chinese University of Hong Kong*

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# Suburban Journalism In The Hong Kong Context

Bryce McIntyre  
Chinese University of Hong Kong

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**H**ong Kong differs from other geopolitical units in being more like a city-state than a nation. Most of the population is concentrated in densely populated areas of Kowloon and Hong Kong Island. However, Hong Kong also has several so-called New Towns that are located in the New Territories, a rural area north of Kowloon. The New Towns have some attributes of suburban communities.

To provide some understanding of suburban journalism in Hong Kong, four experts were interviewed — Dr. Clement So, an associate professor in the School of Journalism and Communication at The Chinese University of Hong Kong; Robert Keatley, editor of the South China Morning Post, Hong Kong's leading English-language newspaper; Prof. Yuen Ying Chan, formerly a reporter for the New York Daily News currently director of the Journalism and Media Studies Centre at the University of Hong Kong; and Dr. Judith L. Clarke, formerly senior editor at Asiaweek and currently an associate professor in the Department of Journalism at Hong Kong Baptist University. The interviews took place on separate occasions over a two-week period, and the responses compiled.

Question: First, is there such a thing as suburban journalism in Hong Kong?

Prof. Clement So: Actually there is. It is not very healthy, but there is. There are community newspapers in Hong Kong for different communities such as Sha Tin, Tuen Mun, Wanchai. There are five or six of them. They are not dailies, but maybe weeklies.

Mr. Robert Keatley: I would guess that other papers do more than we do. I mean, we do cover Hong Kong events, city events, but I think papers perhaps like Apple [the Apple Daily] and others would provide more intensive coverage of particular areas of Hong Kong and the kinds of stories that we wouldn't pick up.

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Q: How comprehensive is suburban journalism in Hong Kong? Does

it really cover the issues at the local level?

Prof. So: Yes, it's quite comprehensive.

Mr. Keatley: I think ODN [the Oriental Daily News] and Apple and the popular papers seem to cover everything that moves in Hong Kong. They try very hard. We, on the other hand, try to limit ourselves to broader issues. We don't do a lot of crime stories. We don't do all the accident stories and incident stories that suburban journalists would do — or that the other papers would do, the Hong Kong mass papers would do. We do things, like, today there was a feature on the growing gap between the rich and the poor. And that was a New Town or a housing area family. So we hit issues, but we do not do a lot of spot stories on events. Those wouldn't suit our readers, and our readers' interests are perhaps somewhat different. According to the most recent numbers we have, from an A.C. Nielsen newspaper study that we buy into, about 52:48 of our readers are Chinese versus non-Chinese — this is not by passport, but by ethnic group — and about 75 to 80 percent are Asian versus non-Asian, if you cut it another way. They tend to be the more affluent, better educated, more international, obviously English-speaking or bilingual, higher income. So it's not quite a cross-section of Hong Kong itself. But they're interested in education. We do a lot on education. We even have a special section on education every Saturday that we started recently.

Prof. Clarke: Not really. Not the English papers. So far as I know, local issues, especially since the demise of the councils, are neglected. Sometimes we send the students to cover the courts in Sha Tin or something like that. You never see their reports because they're for class. So where do you see reports of court cases in Sha Tin or Sheung Shui? You only see them if there's a high profile case.

Prof. Chan: If you look at the newspapers, you can see much more space, much more newshole, devoted to celebrities and trivia — not to say they're not interesting, but I think we need more stories about real people, more stories about the concerns of the neighborhoods.

Q: How well trained are local journalists to cover suburban issues?

Prof. So: They are not well trained. We're not training them for this.

Mr. Keatley: Well, I suppose nobody's trained as well as he could be. But I think for what we're after, yes. Now, we don't chase the movie stars, and we don't do the gossip and all the sex scandals that you find in ODN and Apple and the Sun and some of the others ... but I think we understand welfare issues, education issues, and job and employment issues.

Prof. Clarke: Probably not very well. We teach English language

journalism, so we do focus more on looking at the Post, the iMail, the international newspapers. But not all students can get work at those places, so we do a lot of local stuff anyway, and I don't know whether our students are well enough prepared. We don't concentrate very much on issues in Fanling and so on. But they [the students] do have their student newspaper – The Young Reporter — where it is possible for them to go out and do stories in suburban areas, but they tend not to. We used to have some enthusiasts that would do stories about rural villages being abandoned – you know, one old lady still lives in some remote village with her dog, that kind of thing — but nowadays they're not interested even in that. . . . We do cover local courts, and we used to cover urban and regional councils. We don't do the district councils now because they seem to be rather powerless.<sup>1</sup> And so we have lost that area of coverage. So I don't think we do it very well, but we do it.

Prof. Chan: I think they are not well trained. Students are shaped by the newspapers, by the agenda of the newspapers. We send students out to be interns at major papers. So, what are the stories that the editors of the papers want? They want scandals, trivia, or breaking stories about car wrecks, about suicides, crime stories. So, because of the orientation of the newspapers, our students are not trained to respect and appreciate more the importance of real people.

Q: Are Hong Kong readers missing something by not having more of this kind of reporting?

Prof. Clarke: Quite likely. I suppose that, for local people, having local news. Now, if there are Chinese papers for some of the New Towns, I'm sure they're doing part of that service. But, yes, there should be something.

Mr. Keatley: They don't get the texture of Hong Kong life — as I don't get it. Particularly if you're like me and you don't read Chinese, you miss an awful lot that is going on around you. And you might miss real stories because there are scoops on things that do matter occasionally, in business areas and elsewhere.

Prof. Chan: What they are not getting is the impact of city policy on the neighborhoods. [This should be reported] in a way that is supported by facts and investigation and detailed reporting. We could use more of that.

Q: What are we lacking? What are we not training journalists to do?

Prof. So: Well, actually, I kind of agree with this author [Cafarella]. We tend to ignore suburban journalism, but Hong Kong is different [from Australia]. In Hong Kong we have 14 major dailies and

only a handful of community newspapers. All [community newspapers] belong to the same group. And our students, when they graduate, would not want to do journalism for these community newspapers. So actually we have no responsibility to train students for these kinds of community newspapers in Hong Kong. This is not a career path for them.

Mr. Keatley: I think that there are two problems that I see when we hire people. One is totally understandable, and that's the ability to write in English, and that's weak. And the other is a more general journalism thing, and that is not enough asking of why something happens and explaining why things happen and the context of things. It tends to be reporting of almost a stenographic nature. This happened yesterday — it's the who, what, when, but the why is not dealt with. There is not enough interpretation, analysis background, context, whatever.

Q: Do you think Hong Kong readers would appreciate suburban journalism if it were provided to them?

Prof. So: They wouldn't appreciate it. There are several reasons. First of all, the average Hong Kong person more or less lacks a sense of community. For example, I would not say, "I belong to Sha Tin. I was born in Sha Tin and have been here for 20 years." This is because Hong Kong people treat Hong Kong as a whole and do not regard a certain district as their hometown. And secondly, Hong Kong people move around very often, from one area to another, and this physical movement destroys the sense of community. And thirdly, Hong Kong has been developing so fast in the past 40 years. . . . This development destroys the sense of community. And then, fourthly, so-called metropolitan journalism is so strong and so powerful that it overshadows community newspapers totally, so Hong Kong people feel that they do not need that kind of suburban journalism or community newspapers. And finally, unlike in other countries — Australia, the U.S. or Canada — in the community or in the county they have very strong, very visible councils, such as city councils, and also the police. In Hong Kong at the district level the councils are so weak — that is, the district councils in Hong Kong — they deal with very minor, trivial matters. And also the police are not so accessible or so important. People go to the top, to the city level, not the community level, and this is true for reporters, as well as citizens. So we have a completely different setup in Hong Kong. . . .

Mr. Keatley: I think they probably would not.

Prof. Clarke: No. For certain areas it just wouldn't work. The way Hong Kong is laid out, it probably wouldn't work in town, in Kowloon and Hong Kong. Even if you had one [community newspaper] for,

say, Stanley or Pokfulam, people move in and out of those places so easily they don't really identify with just one place.

Prof. Chan: I think so. People are realistic and practical. If you tell stories in an interesting way, I think readers would appreciate that. The readers in the neighborhoods, like in the housing estates or in the towns, would appreciate information on employment, on what's happening to the schools, what's happening in the streets. Just bread and butter issues that impact them. People want those stories. And they might not be stories that rise to the level of citywide scandal. But how about those smaller, essential stories in the neighborhoods?

Q: Would you say journalism educators are ignorant about suburban journalism in Hong Kong?

Prof. So: Well, I would tend to say no, because we don't feel the need, and the students don't feel the need. We do not ignore it. It is just not important enough to warrant our attention.

Prof. Clarke: I really wouldn't know — in the sense that teaching English journalism, we really haven't gone out in the communities in that way. So, yes, they probably are to some extent. Perhaps they probably don't take enough notice of it, rather than being ignorant of it.

Prof. Chan: I don't know. I'm not here to make a judgment. In general, what we teach in journalism schools is that journalists are basically storytellers. [What is important is] how we train them in the skills of reporting, writing, investigation, and also an interest — to instill in them a curiosity about the real world. Not sitting in an armchair. Not rubbing shoulders with the rich. This can be an infectious disease.

Q: In any case, you do perceive a difference between suburban journalism and metropolitan journalism?

Prof. So: Oh, yes. Actually, when I was in Canada, I worked for a daily newspaper, a Chinese newspaper. In Canada, the Chinese people belong to a community, a very close-knit community, so I had the feeling I was working for a community newspaper. And so it was very different — the way you handle your topics and the readers and the sources. They are very different. You don't want to antagonize your sources, for example.

Prof. Clarke: Yes. But also, because we are in the nature of a nation and a locality at the same time — being quite a small place, but also a big place at the same time. It's quite difficult to cover everything. But yes, there is a difference between suburban and urban journalism, I'm sure, but both can be learned.

Mr. Keatley: Well, good journalism is good journalism. It may be sometimes harder, given the constraints on suburban journalists, to ask some of the tough questions or cover stories with an edge in the reporting and writing when it's called for. Commercial pressures on the suburban press may be a little bit greater.

Prof. Chan: Yes, in reporting about people who are not at the center of power, meaning the city — the city represents the seat of power and influence, the politics and economics — but there are people who are at the margins. And often, because they are not being covered, you have wonderful stories, very dear, waiting to be told. There are two kinds of journalism in the sense of going down to the neighborhoods, going to the communities, so that journalism is engaging the public, instead of disengaging them. This celebrity journalism has the effect of disengaging the readers. Readers can sit back. It's like watching a soap opera. It is wonderful. It is entertaining. It has nothing to do with me. But we need more journalism that is engaging and empowering.

Q: Do you agree with Cafarella that the attributes of community journalism include the following: (1) Newsmakers are not media savvy; (2) The effects of government policies on ordinary people are reported; (3) Local councils are the principal governing bodies covered in the news; (4) There is a symbiotic relationship between local businesses and suburban newspapers; and (5) Suburban journalism provides good training for journalists?

Prof. So: Generally, yes. But in the context of Hong Kong, only the first point and the fourth point are applicable to Hong Kong, but not the second, the third or the fifth. The second point and the third point, regarding local councils, they do not apply. And as for the fifth point, the community newspapers here do not provide good training for journalists. Actually, most of the reporters and editors working for the community newspapers in Hong Kong have not had formal training in journalism and they are paid very low salaries and they have low self-esteem. They belong to another stream. They have no chance to move into the mainstream.

Prof. Clarke: Newsmakers are not media savvy ... we come across those kinds of people all the time. They could live anywhere. They could live in North Point or Mong Kok. It doesn't really matter where they live. When it comes to stories about the effects of government policies on ordinary people, that sort of thing does tend to be reported in our English papers. And we don't have local councils. I don't know if there is a symbiotic relationship between local business and suburban newspapers. We don't have suburban newspapers. If we did have them, they would provide good training for journalists. It would be great if there were an English

language paper out in Fanling. I can't see any need for an English language paper, but local papers would be good – Chinese papers for the Chinese journalism students would be good out in the New Territories.

Mr. Keatley: In Hong Kong it's fairly generally true that newsmakers are not media savvy. People are not as used to speaking to journalists as they might be in the U.S. or perhaps Australia. Access to people in business is difficult, more so than I would expect, and there's more suspicion that someone's going to get it wrong or "I don't want my name in the newspaper". I think there may be a degree more of that here than in some other countries. [As for reporting on the effects of government policies on ordinary people], that's what we try to do. We had two pieces this morning — one on the rich-poor divide and one on education in our "Analysis" pages trying to explain exactly that, what's happening and why it is happening. We don't cover the district boards. I suppose we perceive a lack of general interest [in the district boards] and space and personnel. We look at them from time to time. Hong Kong used to have urban councils, which they abolished a couple of years ago. A lot of people regret that because it was a form of local democracy. We cover Legco [the Legislative Council, Hong Kong's highest legislative body]. We cover the voting systems in the villages in the New Territories. The indigenous people whose families were there in 1898 when the British moved in had a right to vote and people who moved in later did not. But that's been changed, and we've been very supportive of those changes.

Prof. Chan: I wouldn't say suburban journalism is distinctively different from metropolitan journalism because it requires the same generic skills. Nevertheless, newsmakers are not media savvy? Exactly. You've got to reach out to them. They will not hand you the story. They don't know how to spin you, like the Donald Tsangs of the world [Donald Tsang is chief secretary of the Hong Kong civil service].

Q: Well, assuming, just for the sake of argument, that you wanted to develop a curriculum in suburban reporting, what kind of material would you want to include?

Prof. So: Well, in the reporting classes we might add a session or two to talk about community newspapers and about the situations that their reporters face and what kinds of techniques or understanding they should have in order to survive in that kind of reporting environment or organizational environment. But there is no need for a full-fledged training or separate courses for this kind of journalism.

Mr. Keatley: I suppose trying to emphasize the reasons things happen

and the forces at work on a given issue or a given controversy — explain it. I wouldn't have, off the top of my head, any specific that wouldn't apply generally.

Prof. Clarke: I think that what we have already been doing could be used more — covering the courts, covering the police, covering the beats — you know, local government, district offices, and so on. Perhaps we could have a little bit more of that.

Prof. Chan: We teach reporting and writing. That's the core of the program. It's required of everybody. That provides the grounding. Then we encourage students to go out to the neighborhoods to do stories about people, about real people. We try to instill in students the spirit of New Journalism. And then also train them in the skills of reporting and writing, to be good storytellers.

Q: Cafarella states that some reporters at Australian suburban newspapers are required to write advertising copy. How do you feel about this blurring of the distinction between editorial and advertising functions?

Prof. So: It's very bad. I don't think we should get involved in this area. My students [who have been hired by suburban newspapers in Hong Kong] have told me they thought they were not working in the public interest, but in the interests of the advertisers, of the bosses. So they did not regard themselves as journalists, but as salespeople. They try to sell the newspaper, try to sell the space, and the story comes as a bonus.

Mr. Keatley: I feel very strongly about that. I am against that. We certainly do not do that here [at the Post].

Prof. Clarke: That's not really the best situation, but on a small paper everybody does everything. They probably are plugging the advertising as well.

Prof. Chan: Well, you know, you've got to separate advertising and reporting — I mean that's a principle. But at small town papers I guess people adapt to different situations. I mean, in Hong Kong you have reporters who accept travel junkets and come back and write travel pieces for major news organizations. But we should hang onto the principle as much as we can.

Q: Finally, Cafarella recommends that we teach critical thinking. How does one teach critical thinking?

Prof. So: This is very difficult. I would say it depends largely on a student's personality. But of course we can lay out some conditions that would be more conducive to critical thinking. For example, students should be encouraged to have a broader range of common knowledge. They should have better common sense.

Also we can encourage them to be more inquisitive, encourage them to ask questions when they see something that is not right. And we can try to induce the idea that people tend to lie to you when you are a reporter. People are more or less selfish, and they care for their own interests and they may not speak honestly. And, finally, they should be exposed more to critical theories such as British cultural studies or Marxism or political economy, that kind of stuff, which may help because that line of theorizing is more critical in nature and it questions the assumptions and the structure of society.

Mr. Keatley: Ask tough questions of the students. Make them explain why they wrote that, why they didn't do that, case by case, story by story.

Prof. Clarke: In fact, journalism is one of those subjects where you can teach critical thinking in a way, because you throw people into doing a feature story and they really have to get their minds around all sorts of issues. Ethical issues that they haven't understood until they've done it, and issues, like, you know, it's just a matter of knowing the matter before you write it and then you find that your language is so limited when you want to express something. Asking questions, getting them to consider things in lectures and providing challenging activities for them.

Prof. Chan: Number one, I think you should make demands of students, you should challenge their established ideas, you should promote discussion, debate. You should encourage a collegial atmosphere where people feel comfortable about confronting and challenging each other. And you should train people in the basic respect for facts. What we find is that, in Hong Kong, because of the political climate, because of the history of journalism, and because of the relationship with China, we tend to see students who see themselves as advocates for certain issues. Which is fine, but you have to challenge your most cherished ideas.

## NOTES

1. For administrative purposes, Hong Kong is divided into 18 districts, each of which has a district board. About two-thirds of board members are elected. The boards have small budgets, and their powers are limited to issues such as sanitation, environmental hygiene, traffic regulation, recreation, playgrounds, and cultural events. As a result, board meetings are not generally covered by the press.

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BRYCE T. MCINTYRE (Ph.D. Stanford University) is an associate professor in the School of Journalism and Communication at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. He has published several books on journalistic principles and practices. Email: [bmcintyre@cuhk.edu.hk](mailto:bmcintyre@cuhk.edu.hk)

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