Shifting political power and news sources: The case in Hong Kong's political transition

J. Y. M. Nip
Hong Kong Baptist University

Recommended Citation
Nip, J. Y. M., Shifting political power and news sources: The case in Hong Kong's political transition, Asia Pacific Media Educator, 3, 1997, 49-69.
Available at: http://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss3/4
Shifting Political Power And News Sources: The Case In Hong Kong’s Political Transition

Early studies on news sources in Hong Kong have shown that news was dominated by government institutions, among which the executive was always the main source. However, recent studies have questioned these findings. This article examines the citation of sources in reports of the progress of a controversial legislative bill in three Chinese-language newspapers. It found that in the final years of Hong Kong’s political transition, the legislature was dominant as a news source, not the executive. The finding is explained by source availability and journalistic selection, of which the latter is hypothesized to be influenced by society’s aspiration for democracy.

Joyce Y.M. Nip
Hong Kong Baptist University

In democratic societies, news is the main channel through which people receive information about public affairs. Because news has been shown to set the public agenda and shape public opinion (McCombs and Shaw 1972), it has been recognized as a key element of the political process, where the government, the political opposition, and citizen groups compete for publicity and attention. Considerable research has been done in the West into how each of them has successfully used the media to serve its purpose (Tuchman 1978; Gans 1979; Ericson et al. 1989). Marxist culturologists consider news as a cultural product which reproduces the definitions of the powerful (Hall et al. 1978). Liberal pluralists see official domination as the media performing its proper role of informing the public and reporting on important public debates (Lichter et al. 1986).

This study examines the citation of sources in reports of the legislative process of a controversial legislative bill, guided by the “sociology of news” perspective. But findings could well be interpreted in other perspectives.

Many studies on news sources which found official (and
executive) domination were conducted using the elite press (Sigal 1973; Gans 1979; Bennett 1990) or national television network news (Gans 1979; Whitney et al. 1989; Reese et al. 1994), and mostly in the U.S. The findings were often assumed to apply to other news media across a variety of situations. But Ericson et al. (1989, 1991) have since suggested that the news negotiation process differs across different reporting beats, news markets (popular or quality), and the news medium (newspaper, radio, television). By extension, difference in the process may be more likely observed across cultures given the ambiguity in the external validity of previous findings.

Acknowledging the specificity of the news negotiation process for different news markets, news medium, and culture, this study focuses on studying the market variation in source citation as an attempt to understand the widely-used but little-researched popular news media. And to eliminate the "medium" and "culture" factors, only Chinese-language newspapers with no strong political leaning were studied.

This is a study of the connection between news and power in the specific context of Hong Kong in its final years of transition from being a British colony to a Special Administrative Region of China. Unlike previous studies which were conducted in societies where the distribution of political power is rather stable, this study was carried out when the power relationship in government, and between government and the people was in flux in Hong Kong, a remarkable feature of which was the shift of political power from the executive to the legislature. News access is taken as the result of negotiation between journalists and sources in the process of which the market positioning of the news outlet comes in as a factor.

News is a representation of the power of sources in two ways. Firstly, issues attended to by legitimated institutional sources have a high chance to be reported as news because news gathering arrangements allocate heavy resources to those institutions (Tuchman 1978; Ericson et al. 1989, 1991). Other issues, in contrast, are ignored. The exclusion of certain issues from being raised is in itself an exercise of power (Bachrach and Baratz 1962).

Secondly, the frame of reality represented by the sources cited may restrict the perceptions, cognitions, and preferences of the news audience who are thereby denied alternative representations and, therefore, harbour no grievances. Such an absence of grievance may not mean the satisfaction of the people's real interest; it may only be the result of domination of the knowers...
through the media (Lukes 1972). The power of news sources is constrained by the power of journalists in the news making process. This explains why a frequently cited source is not necessarily presented favourably. Sometimes it is presented in a context which discredits it (Ericson et al. 1989:5).

The negotiation between sources and journalists in the news making process takes place in the physical, social, and cultural terrains (Ericson et al. 1989). The physical refers to the space, personnel, and work routines under which sources provide news to journalists. The social is the network of interpersonal relationships connecting sources and journalists. The cultural is the value aspect of sources and journalists. The physical and social aspects of the negotiation affects the availability of sources to (particular) news organizations, while the cultural aspect affects the selection of news organizations among available sources.

The availability of each source compared to the other potential sources in the same organization, and the availability of its organization compared to other potential source organizations is left to the selection of the news organizations, each of which has its biases(values and work practices) which mobilize it to attend to certain events but not to others (Schattschneider 1960, in Bachrach and Baratz 1962; and in Lukes 1974).

A body of literature has shown that government institutions are the most frequently used sources in news reporting, and their views are the most represented in news. Sigal (1973) found that 46.5% of the sources cited in foreign and national news stories on the front page of the New York Times and Washington Post in 1949-69 were U.S. officials. In stories with only one source or with a primary source, U.S. officials were also dominant, being the sole source in 56.3% of the single-source stories and 53.8% of primary sources.

Molotch and Lester's study (1975) of two years of newspaper reporting of an environmental accident in 1969 found a hierarchy of credible newsmakers, with the U.S. president at the top and the federal executive branch following. Gans (1979), studying national news in Newsweek and CBS News between 1967 and 1975, found that "a very small number of Knowns, probably less than fifty and most of them high federal officials" (12) appeared repeatedly in the news.

Brown et al. (1987) found in the 1979-80 front-page straight news stories of New York Times, Washington Post and four North Carolina newspapers that U.S. Government officials were again the most cited, accounting for 31.0% of the sources.
sample of U.S. television network newscasts in 1982-84, Whitney et al. (1989) again found that federal government officials were the most frequently cited sources, accounting for 28.2%. Bennett (1990) analyzed the news and editorial coverage in the New York Times of U.S. policy making towards Nicaragua between 1983 and 1986, and found that 67.9% of voiced opinions came from officers, offices, or committees of U.S. governmental institutions. Reese et al. (1994) used network analysis to study the structure of news sources on U.S. television in 1987 and found that 36% of the "inside" group of sources were federal government officials. In their studies of the world views presented by news, Gitlin (1980) found that a U.S. New Left student body was framed by hegemonic definitions in CBS News and the New York Times in 1965; Broadbent (1993) found that over a wide range of U.S. and British newspapers and television news, the reportage about Nicaragua’s 1984 elections was biased according to the U.S. official frame.

Officials who dominate news as sources encompass officials from various branches of government (the executive, legislature, and judiciary) among which executive officials appear most frequently, followed by those from the legislature. Sigal’s (1973) study, for example, found that only 6% of the official sources cited (46.5% of total) came from Congress, and only 2% from the judiciary.

Executive dominance as news sources has been found in countries with different political systems. Comparing political news content in the U.S., Britain, and the Soviet Union in 1990-91, Alexseev and Bennett (1995) found that the ruling administration predominated as opinion sources (more than 50%). Compared to the opposition, the ruling administration had a 12% to 25% advantage; and within the opposition, the elite that was most represented as news sources came from the legislature in the U.S. and Britain, and nomenklatura members in the Soviet Union.

Liberal pluralists have explained executive dominance in news by the existence of consensus among the elite using the "indexing" hypothesis, which suggests that "mass media news professionals...tend to ‘index’ the range of voices and viewpoints in both news and editorials according to the range of views expressed in mainstream government debate about a given topic” (Bennett 1990:106).

Since this study was conducted in 1995, Althaus et al. (1996), who sought to refine the indexing hypothesis, have found by studying the New York Times’ reports of the U.S.-Libya crisis of 1985-6 that in terms of sources U.S. officials did not dominate the
news, although they did determine the parameters of policy
discussions in the news reports. The authors suggested that
"predictions about whose views are indexed may vary from case
to case depending on the distribution of power over outcomes"
(p.412). They also acknowledged that "different ways of studying
different media or different cases might have yielded divergent
findings" (p.417).

This suggests that findings of earlier research on news
sources might have been influenced by the fact that cases selected
for study were mostly issues in the realm of administration where
the executive held more political power than other branches of
government over the outcome of the cases. It follows that if the
case chosen is the legislative process where legislature members
have greater power than the executive, the pattern of sources used
in news may not show executive dominance over the legislature.

Apart from the divergence of views among officials, the
market in which a news outlet positions itself has also been shown
to influence the relative dominance of various source categories
in news. Ericson et al. (1991), studying crime, law, and justice
news in newspapers, television, and radio in the Toronto region
in 1983, found that quality newspapers made much greater use of
politicians and civil servants than popular newspapers. This is
because popular outlets, which tend to give "non-discursive,
entertaining, and simple accounts of events" (p.40), tend to use
more of those sources who provide them with primary facts
already formatted for their market (in Ericson et al.'s case, the
police).

Quality outlets, particularly quality newspapers, use more
sources and a wider range of source types. Ericson et al. also found
that quality news outlets supported the official consensus
expressed by the ruling and opposition parties, whereas the
popular outlets, maintaining the element of conflict commonly
found in popular reporting, stepped out of the consensus
expressed at the legislature.

The current study was carried out in 1995 when consensus
between the executive and the legislature was at the lowest. Before
direct elections were introduced to the Legislative Council in 1991,
Hong Kong had been run by an elite which comprised the top
bureaucrats and a minority of wealthy business people and
professionals appointed by the Governor to the Executive Council,
Legislative Council, municipal councils, and advisory boards,
committees and tribunals in what is often described as consensus
politics.
Some form of popular representation in the Legislative Council was introduced only in 1985 when a minority of seats were open for elections by electoral colleges, but the indirect elections failed to bring any change in the relationship between the Legislative Council and the Executive, and the Legislative Council remained as a body bestowing consent on government policies, rather than playing the role of check and balance as designed in democratic systems (Leung, 1990). The introduction of directly elected members into the Legislative Council in 1991, however, turned the Legislative Council into an opposition (Cheek-Milby 1995).

The oppositional practice of the Legislative Council was partly “encouraged” by the British colonial government, which following the 1989 Beijing crackdown had taken on a policy to establish democratic institutions and groom democratic aspirations in the colony as a safeguard against a future Communist Chinese regime. During the Governorship of Christopher Patten between 1992 and 1997, representatives of large business corporations in the Executive Council were replaced by appointments of liberal professionals from various sectors, including social services. Chairmanship of the Legislative Council was delegated to a non-official by the Governor, who previously had chaired all Legislative sittings. Weekly sessions in the Legislative Council to question the Governor were started. Expression of views by the people was encouraged. At the same time the executive was constantly under open attack and diplomatic pressure from China to check the growth of democracy in Hong Kong.

It is in this context when political power was shifting from the executive to the legislature, and when China was seeking to exercise its power over Hong Kong that news was studied to determine the relative power of the executive, legislature, the people, and China as sources. Reportage about the Mandatory Provident Fund Schemes Bill 1995, (eventually passed after the administration agreed to multiple amendments), was chosen as an appropriate case study. The Bill, drawn up to establish private compulsory provident fund retirement schemes with contributions from employers, employees and self-employed people, was opposed by all the quarters being studied, which led to an intense power contest between them. The Legislative Council and citizen groups acted as the Government’s opposition throughout. The administration, which introduced the Bill in June 1995, was determined to have the Bill passed in that legislative session before
it closed at the end of July.

The Legislative Council was highly resistant. Those who supported privately managed schemes as set out in the Bill were opposed to the scope of coverage. Others were opposed to privately managed schemes and fought for government-administered schemes. Some were opposed to the contributory nature of the proposed retirement schemes, arguing that they should be government funded.

Citizen groups were also active in expressing their views about the Bill -- mostly opposition on grounds which resembled the Legislative Council’s positions. The Bill also drew pressure from the Chinese Government, which queried the need to push through a Bill with heavy financial implications in the last years of British administration.

The administration had beefed up its public relations machinery since 1989 to compete with mainland China and the Legislative Council in setting the news agenda. Legislative Council members had no reservation in using the media to air their views. But availability of mainland Chinese officials and its agents as news sources was highly restricted by China’s traditional distance from the news media. Not only were requests for interviews with Chinese officials almost never granted, members of the Preliminary Working Committee, apart from a few selected, had been prohibited from speaking to the news media.

The Bill provided a good case for study also because of the time it was introduced (the last year of the Legislative Council’s term 1991-1995) when the executive-legislature relationship should have stabilized into a pattern typical of the last years of British rule. Journalists who specialized in the Legislative Council beat should also have had time to build their relations with the members comparable to those they had established with administration officials and Executive Councillors.

The Bill was passed in the colony’s regular legislative process resembling Westminster procedures involving three readings of the Bill, except that in Hong Kong bureaucrats in the colonial administration doubled up as policy officials, who introduced the Bill into the legislature as “official members” of the Council. Prior approval of a policy by the Governor in consultation with the Executive Council was needed before being translated into a bill.

Once gazetted, (in this case on 9 June 1995), the Bill was in the hands of the legislature, who had the statutory power to pass it, amend it, or vote it down. A Bill approved by the legislature needs the Governor’s assent and approval from London, but London’s approval has always been automatic (the last disapproval was in 1913) and the last time the Governor
disallowed a bill was in 1946 (Miners 1991:215). Thus in practice, the Bill’s passage in the Legislative Council is final. The role of the three official members in the Council was to explain the Bill in its second reading, amend it when necessary to raise the chance of its passage, and to vote according to the executive’s position in the second and third readings. All meetings of the weekly sitting of the Legislative Council, as well as its Bills Committee members, are open to the media.

This study aims to answer three research questions:

a) Do officials, and particularly executive officials, dominate the news reporting of Hong Kong as sources?

b) Do newspapers holding different market positions differ in their use of voices represented? And if yes, how do they differ?

In the course of data analysis, when Legislative sources unexpectedly emerged as the dominant category of sources, a third research question arose:

c) How successful are Legislative Council members compared to citizen groups in getting reported as sources?

All (66) news and feature stories on the Bill from the news pages of three Chinese daily newspapers, the Oriental Daily News, Ming Pao and the Hong Kong Economic Times, on the legislative process of the Bill were content analyzed from the Bill’s gazetting to its third reading. The period covered 9 June and 28 July 1995, both days included. None of the papers has any strong political leaning. The Oriental claims the largest circulation of all papers in Hong Kong, its coverage favouring sex, crime and scandals while playing up their sensational details. Ming Pao is a serious comprehensive paper which tends to be more issue-oriented in its reportage, whereas the Economic Times is a paper specializing in business news and selecting only key political and social stories catering to professionals.

Modifying Sigal’s (1973) categorization, sources were coded into four categories:

a) Executive (E) - members from the Hong Kong Government bureaucracy, including the judiciary; Executive Council; Government advisory committees and official agencies; and administration official documents. Sigal separated the judiciary as a category but since the judiciary in Hong Kong has the tradition of not speaking on public issues, it was considered unnecessary to treat it as a separate category. It turned out there was not one single use of judiciary officials as a cited source;

b) Legislative (L) - Legislative Council members, and their spokespeople and staff;

c) Citizen (C) - members of trade unions, business
associations, pressure groups, citizen groups, and general members of the public. Members of political parties, including their spokespersons, who were not Legislative Council members were also included.

d) Chinese (Ch)- government officials of the mainland Chinese Government, members of the Preliminary Working Committee, members of official agencies of the Beijing Government in Hong Kong.

Following previous studies, the number of times a source was cited, whether directly or indirectly, with full identification or as "informed source" was taken to indicate its degree of power in news access. Each citation of a specific person, organization or codable "informed source" was counted. Repeat counting of the same person, organization or "informed source" in the same story was eliminated. Not counted were: the same source cited more than once in the story; some specific person cited after the organization they represented was cited in the same story; and attributed statements used as background information in stories. Following Sigal's (1973) study, the occurrence of various source categories in single-source category stories was taken as a second indicator of news access.

Lacking sufficient clues about the relative power of news sources in Hong Kong, it was assumed that the pattern found in the West held for Hong Kong. To examine the power of official sources in news representation, Legislative sources were grouped with Executive sources as official sources to compare with Citizen sources. To examine the power of Executive sources specifically, comparisons were made with the Legislature, Citizen, and Chinese sources respectively.

Hypothesis 1. Executive (E) and Legislative (L) sources together were cited more often than Citizen (C) sources in the stories studied.

Hypothesis 2. Executive sources were cited more often than Legislative sources in the stories studied.

Hypothesis 3. Executive sources were cited more often than Citizen sources in the stories studied.

Hypothesis 4. Executive sources were cited more often than Chinese (Ch) sources in the stories studied.

In order to test how much power the opposition had gained in news representation, Legislative sources were grouped with Citizen sources to compare against Executive sources.

Hypothesis 5. Executive sources were cited more often than Legislative and Citizen sources put together in the stories studied.
Findings

Hypothesis 6. In single-source category stories, Executive sources were cited more than Legislative sources.

Hypothesis 7. In single-source category stories, Executive sources were cited more than Citizen sources.

Hypothesis 8. In single-source category stories, Executive sources were cited more than Chinese sources.

As seen in Table 1, the citation of Legislative sources (L) (81) was almost half of all the citations (46.8% of total), making it the most important source category. Executive sources (E), which was the second most important category, only formed 28.3% of all the citations. Chinese (Ch) sources (21), making up only 12.1% of all sources, were notably much less used than Executive sources or Legislative sources. Its use was about the same as Citizen sources (C), which made up 12.7% of total sources. Variation was observed among the papers: Oriental cited the most Citizen sources, the same as Executive sources (23.2%), while in Economic Times the citation of Legislative sources (35.4%) was about the same as Executive sources (37.5%).

When the difference in the number of stories carried in the papers was cancelled out by calculating the sources used per story, citation of source categories was again compared. Variances of the two categories in each comparison were tested to see whether they were equal or unequal. The appropriate two-sample t-test was then performed on the means of each comparison pair.

Table 1:

News Sources In The Oriental, Ming Pao, And Economic Times In Reporting The Mandatory Provident Fund Schemes Bill 1995

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story No.</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>L</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>Ch</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oriental</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>13 (23.2%)</td>
<td>25 (44.6%)</td>
<td>13 (23.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ming Pao</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18 (26.1%)</td>
<td>39 (56.5%)</td>
<td>4 (5.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Econ Times</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18 (37.5%)</td>
<td>17 (35.4%)</td>
<td>5 (10.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>49 (28.3%)</td>
<td>81 (46.8%)</td>
<td>22 (12.7%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2:
Comparisons of Source Dominance in The Oriental, Ming Pao, and Economic Times in Reporting the Mandatory Provident Fund Schemes Bill 1995

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Average source/story</th>
<th>t statistic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E+L</td>
<td>1.97</td>
<td>6.47*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>-2.02*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>3.13*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>3.35*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>-3.45*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oriental</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E+L</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>2.29*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>-1.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>1.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>-2.58*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ming Pao</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E+L</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>5.73*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>-2.22*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>2.80*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>1.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>-2.64*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Times</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E+L</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>3.76*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>3.13*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>2.10*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>-0.53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05 two-tailed

As seen in Table 2:
1) The three papers combined, Executive and Legislative sources combined (1.97) were cited more than Citizen sources (0.33). Thus, Hypothesis 1 which predicts stronger influence of E and L over C was confirmed. The pattern, found in all the papers, is consistent with past findings that officials dominate news.

2) Three papers taken together, Executive sources (0.74) were
JOYCE Y.M. NIP: Shifting Political Power

cited less than Legislative sources (1.23). Thus, Hypothesis 2 was not confirmed. This finding deviates from earlier studies on news sources, which found executive dominance over legislative sources.

In this study, the pattern of Legislative sources dominating over Executive sources was largely formed by Ming Pao, which was the only paper showing greater citation of Legislative sources (1.86) over Executive sources (0.86) significantly (*p= .03). Oriental showed the overall pattern (L 1.04; E 0.54) but it was not significant (*p= .23). Economic Times showed no significant difference between Executive sources (0.86) and Legislative sources (0.81).

3) Three papers together, Executive sources (0.74) were cited more than Citizen sources (0.33). Thus, Hypothesis 3 was confirmed. This is entirely in line with past findings. Individually, Ming Pao (E 0.86; C 0.19) and Economic Times (E 0.86; C 0.24) both showed the overall pattern significantly (*p< .05), but in Oriental, Executive (0.54) and Citizen sources (0.54) were used equally. The difference in prominence of Executive sources (compared to Legislative and Citizen sources respectively) found in the papers support recent studies (Ericson et al. 1989, 1991) which found variation in source citation pattern depending on the market positioning of the news outlets.

4) Three papers taken together, Executive sources (0.74) were cited more than Chinese sources (0.32), thus hypothesis 4 was confirmed. Each of the three papers showed the overall pattern. But in Oriental (E 0.54; Ch 0.21) and Ming Pao (E 0.86; Ch 0.38), the dominance was only significant at *p= .07.

5) The three papers together, Executive sources (0.74) were cited less than Legislative and Citizen sources together (1.56), thus hypotheses 5 was not confirmed. The pattern was consistent across the three papers, but in Economic Times (E 0.86; L+C 1.05) the difference was not significant. This shows that in Ming Pao and Oriental, the opposition has a greater voice than the Executive.

As seen in Table 3, among the single-source category stories in the three papers together, Executive sources were used about the same as other sources. Thus, Hypothesis 6 that Executive sources are cited more than Legislative sources in single-source category stories was not confirmed.

Individually, Oriental had the most single-source category stories (17 out of its 24 stories), Economic Times the least (6 of its 21). Ming Pao had 9 (out of its 21). Of Oriental’s single-source category stories, Citizen sources contributed the greatest number of stories (7). Of Ming Pao’s single-source category stories, Legislative sources contributed the greatest number of stories (5). In Economic Times, there was no clear dominance of any category.

Since Legislative sources were unexpectedly found to
Table 3:
Single-Source Category Stories in the Oriental, Ming Pao and Economic Times in reporting the Mandatory Provident Fund Schemes Bill 1995

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sum</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>L</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>Ch</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oriental</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ming Pao</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Econ Times</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4:
Comparison of Legislative/Citizen Sources in The Oriental, Ming Pao, and Economic Times in Reporting the Mandatory Provident Fund Schemes Bill 1995

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Average source/story</th>
<th>t-statistic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>L</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oriental</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ming Pao</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Econ Times</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05 two-tailed

dominate over Executive sources, to further understand the power of the Legislative Council as opposition in news representation, Legislative sources were compared to Citizen sources.

The three papers together showed a very significant dominance (*p = .0003) of Legislative sources over Citizen sources. All three papers followed the overall pattern, but in Oriental (L 1.04; C 0.54) the difference was not significant (*p = .26). In Economic Times (L 0.81; C 0.24) the dominance was significant only at *p = .10.

Three of the hypotheses (2, 5, and 6) were not confirmed. The three hypotheses fail to predict the prominence of Legislative sources (relative to Executive sources in terms of citation per story...
in the last years of the British colonial administration had
established itself as the legitimate institution of opposition. It was
more quoted than citizen groups, and surpassed the executive as
a source of news in Chinese newspapers. This finding challenges
the universality often assumed by earlier studies of news sources
that the executive always dominates in news.

In this study the executive was the second most dominant
source, cited more than China’s sources. The study also gives
support to Ericson et al.’s (1989, 1991) framework of analysis which
takes into account factors specific to the reporting situation. Market
variation found among the papers, while supporting the finding
(Ericson et al. 1991) that quality outlets used more official sources
than popular outlets, further questions the applicability of earlier
findings mostly based on the elite news media. The dominance of
the Legislative Council could be understood in Ericson et al.’s
(1989) framework of news negotiation in the physical, social, and
cultural terrains, which could be developed using two concepts,
“news selection” and “source availability”.

1. News Selection Factors: Cultural Values

The period 1991 to 1995 was the first term of office of the
Legislative Council which included directly elected members (18
out of 61) with another 21 indirectly elected members returned by
electoral colleges. Introduction of direct elections led to the
formation of political parties which appealed to the people rather
than to the administration for legitimacy. The result was a highly
active and combative Legislative Council acting as opposition to
the administration, providing activities which matched well with
the “conflict” value of newsmaking, facilitating its members being
reported as sources of news. This conflict between the Executive
and the Legislative Council grew in the years to follow (1995 to
1997), after representation of the Legislative Council was further
broadened in the elections of 1995.

The “conflict” value that favoured the Legislative Council
in news selection was helped by the Council’s power in the
legislative process. Liberal-pluralists have suggested that the
indexing hypothesis may be revised in such a way as to predict
that news content indexes the views of those according to their
distribution of power over the outcome of a topic (Althaus et al.

In this study, the Legislative Council members were the
people who in practice had the ultimate power to determine
whether the Bill could be passed or not, given the tradition of
endorsement by the executive and London. Even on the statutory
level, the power of the Legislative Council had also been rising.
The Legislative Council House Committee, set up in 1992, had
power to summon witnesses and call for testimony.

In the reporting of the Mandatory Provident Fund Schemes Bill 1995, the question of whether the Bill would be passed was one of the prominent themes, a concern spawned by the fact that Legislative councillors had exercised their votes to bargain and block bills previously proposed by the executive. Indeed, the issue of Executive-Legislative Council deadlock had become so serious that the Governor, Christopher Patten (1995), raised it as a problem that needed address.

The finding that Legislative sources were dominant gives support to Althaus et al.'s tentative prediction above. The indexing function of the media could also be understood from a cultural perspective: that news organizations select sources according to their (hegemonic) value that institutional decision-making is important. It is this element of power which promoted the Legislative Council above Citizen groups in the selection process of news organizations, despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of Legislative Council members until now have only played their Councillors' role in a part-time capacity, on top of their professional occupations. From the hegemonic value perspective, the lack of official consensus between the Executive and the Legislative Council regarding the Mandatory Provident Fund Schemes Bill 1995 provided greater scope for diversity in the use of news sources, as predicted by the indexing hypothesis (Bennett 1990).

The values held by the people, to which newspapers appealed for readership, also helped the Legislative Council in being selected as news sources. The Sino-British Joint Declaration, which sets out guarantees for Hong Kong to enjoy a high degree of autonomy under Chinese rule after July 1, 1997, as agreed between the U.K. and China without Hong Kong's participation, did not quell people's suspicion of the Chinese communist regime, particularly after the Beijing crackdown in 1989. Many felt that the guarantee for Hong Kong's future lay rather in the establishment of a strong Legislative Council (Cheek-Milby, 1995). The strong support for an early introduction of direct elections as expressed in a Government consultation conducted in 1987 was clear evidence of the people's sentiment. 3

2. Source Availability: Physical Factors

If the above cultural factors explain the demand side for the Legislative Council as news sources, the ready availability of the Legislative Council explains the supply side. In Hong Kong, Legislative reporting is the responsibility of the political desk, which in large newspapers, would be divided into several beats, including the "legislative beat" and the "Government beat". Even
in small newspapers, there would be one or two specially assigned reporters who monitored the activities of the Legislative Council. The physical assignment of special reporters for the Legislative Council provides the mechanism for the transformation of Legislative Council activities into news. The weekly sittings of the Legislative Council, and meetings of Bills Committees were the staple of legislative beat journalists.

Legislative Council members were by comparison also more accessible than administration officials or Executive Council members, who in the legislative process, played the role of explaining the legislation and winning support from the public and the legislature. Keen to compete against other political parties, Legislative Council members returned by direct elections and those with political affiliation, in particular, were always responsive to initiatives made by journalists to contact them. The numbers of their personal mobile phones, pagers, and home telephones were no secret to journalists of the Legislative beat.

In 1993 claimable expenses of Legislative Councillors were raised by almost 100%, while claimable expenses of Executive Councillors were abolished. This physical re-allocation of resources has enabled Legislative Councillors to strengthen their secretarial support, which often helped journalists by supplying reporters with up-to-the-minute detail of when and where the members could be contacted.

On any particular policy, the Legislative Council members also far out-numbered administration officials in charge of the policy and the Executive Councillors. The fact that membership of the Legislative Council during 1991-1995 was split between six rather undisciplined political parties which shifted alliances from bill to bill, together with non-party affiliated members, only further increased the spectrum of voices.

3. Source Availability: Social Factors

The physical accessibility of Legislative Councillors helped them to foster close social relations with reporters. Unlike in the West, being a journalist in Hong Kong is not a prestigious job, and certainly not an entry permit to the elite circles where policy officials mix with business leaders. In terms of life experiences, journalists in Hong Kong are certainly more attuned to the networks of directly elected Legislative Council members, many of whom had a background of social activism, than to high society. The close social connections between Legislative Council members and journalists thus facilitated the selection of Legislative Council members as sources.
Since power is a relationship between two (groups of) people where one seeks to secure the other’s compliance by overcoming or averting the other’s opposition (Lukes 1974), the study of power is meaningful only when opposition exists between the two, and when both try to secure the other’s compliance. There is no doubt that over the Bill, opposition existed between the Hong Kong Government executive, which was determined to push through the Bill, and China, which queried the need for the Bill at all. But what is unclear is whether China did mobilize their resources to the full in the power contest.

Although mainland Chinese officials declared from the beginning that the post-1997 Hong Kong Government would reserve the right to review the Bill even if it were passed (Hong Kong Economic Times 17 June 1995; 28 July 1995; Ming Pao 10 June 1995; 17 June 1995), the mainland appointed Preliminary Working Committee endorsed the Bill in principle in the later stage of its legislative process, partly because Chinese officials lacked the expertise and time to decide to what it was in the content of the Bill that they objected (Oriental Daily News 28 June 1995), and partly because it could not ignore the support given to the Bill by business members in the Preliminary Working Committee.

Within the above discussed general pattern of Legislative dominance, two observations stood out as evidence of market variability among the three papers. One was the high use of Citizen sources in Oriental, the other the comparative use of Executive and Legislative sources in Economic Times.

The greater use of Citizen sources in Oriental was consistent with past studies that found greater representation of unofficial sources and views in popular outlets, to the extent that it could outdo official sources (Ericson et al. 1991). In Oriental’s case, its use of Citizen sources was on par with Executive sources in citation per story, and more than Executive sources in the number of single-source category stories.

In Economic Times, the use of Legislative and Executive sources was almost equal. While factors discussed in the previous section applied, its deviation from the pattern of Legislative dominance could be explained by the values of the news organization, which sought to appeal to the values of its readers on the issue.

Economic Times, being a business newspaper which targeted at the middle class and business people, is expected to identify more with business interests than the other two papers. Over the Mandatory Provident Fund Schemes Bill, the business sector was
supportive in principle because the privately managed funds established according to the Bill would generate opportunities for the insurance industry.

The Liberal Party, which represented business interests in the Legislative Council, was indeed supportive of the Bill in principle, although it played opposition in the Legislative Council owing to its criticism of the Bill’s scope of coverage. Since the opinions of the Economic Times and its readers coincided with that of the administration in this issue, Executive sources were more used than in the other papers, thus the dominance of Legislative Council sources found in the other two papers was not observed.

Conclusion

Like any study, this one has its limitations. This study examines one legislative case, and found a pattern of source citation different from most previous studies. While acknowledging the limitation of a single case, the value of the case is seen in lending support to Ericson et al.’s (1989, 1991) and Althaus et al.’s (1996) studies which take into account market variation and the relative power of the sources over the event’s outcome in the news negotiation process.

Three Chinese-language newspapers were studied. While they cannot be taken to represent the whole spectrum of news media in Hong Kong, which also includes television, radio, and English-language news, as well as news media of a strong pro-Communist China ideology, the sample of newspapers enable our understanding of the politically neutral Chinese-language newspapers, which are much more widely read than either English-language papers or the traditional “leftist” papers.

In the short time since Hong Kong reverted to Chinese sovereignty on July 1, fundamental changes have taken place in the politics of the territory. One of the key changes is the unmistakable shift of political power from the legislature back to the executive. A telling example of the power shift is the provisional legislature’s passing of a bill which controls the migration to Hong Kong of children born in mainland China to Hong Kong permanent residents. This highly controversial legislation was passed in just one day, as asked by the executive. This process of law-making stands in sharp contrast to what used to be a long and hard battle between the Executive and the Legislative Council involving lobbying, bargaining, compromise, and public opinion campaigns on both sides.

The shift in the power relationship between official institutions will operate amid other changes that affect news representation. The Legislative Council elected with broad
representation has been replaced by a provisional legislature returned by a tiny minority voted in by a China-appointed group, leading to the lowering of the legislature's legitimacy. The Government administration's public relations offices now tend to be reactive rather than proactive as previously. These are only some of the new conditions under which news organizations interact with the legislature and executive as sources. By May 1998 a new legislature will be elected according to rules which the provisional legislature has passed. A new configuration of power between the executive, legislature, and the people will again emerge. Further research will be needed to investigate how these radical changes will be represented in the news.

NOTES

1 Author's interview with Mike Hanson, former Government Information Coordinator, on 25 July 1995.

2 The Preliminary Working Committee is an organization set up and appointed by the Chinese Government in July 1993 to study issues related to the change of sovereignty of Hong Kong in 1997. Its membership included Beijing officials and some Hong Kong people.

3 The issue of whether direct elections should be introduced to the Legislative Council in 1988 was not an issue on which the Government invited views in the 1987 consultation. But it was something the people felt so strongly about that responses made to the consultation centred around it. The Government concluded that public opinion expressed in the consultation opposed the introduction of direct elections in 1988, based on manipulative counting of responses. It was estimated that a total of 230,000 individuals put their names in seven signature campaigns in support of introducing direct elections in 1988, but the Government chose to selectively report "seven" campaigns rather than the number of people who supported direct elections. At the same time, it counted every signature on 45,000 pre-printed identical letters as individuals showing opposition to direct elections.

REFERENCES


Bachrach, P. and Baratz, M.S. (1962). "Two faces of power" In J. Scott (Ed.)
JOYCE Y.M. NIP: Shifting Political Power ...


Patten, C. (1995). Address by the Governor the Right Honourable
Christopher Patten at the opening of the 1995/96 session of the Legislative Council. Hong Kong: Government Printer.


