

INFORMATION NOTE

Measuring Press Freedom in Hong Kong

1. Background

1.1 In the meeting on 20 October 1997, Members of the Panel on Information Policy (the Panel) requested more specific information on the feasibility of conducting independent research on measuring press freedom in Hong Kong, namely, the form, timing, frequency, and costs of such research. The objective of such study is to find out whether there has been any perceived change in press freedom in Hong Kong since 1 July 1997.

2. Approaches

2.1 To find out the feasibility of measuring press freedom in Hong Kong, the Research and Library Services Division (RLS) of the Provisional Legislative Council Secretariat made further enquiries to commercial researchers, academics and the Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA). The findings are summarized below.

Table 1 Feasibility of Measuring Press Freedom in Hong Kong

Approach	Cost	Time Resource	Frequency	Researcher
Public opinion survey	\$80,000 to \$200,000	over 6 months	annual	HKJA + RTHK + Commercial researcher
Survey of journalists	\$100,000	8 months	annual	HKJA + Academic
Content analysis	Not applicable	9 months	Not applicable*	Academic (not available)
Freedom index	\$110,000 to \$220,000	over 10 months	annual	RTHK + Academic + Commercial researcher

Remarks: * The two studies were made in 1993 and 1969 respectively.

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3. Public Opinion Survey

3.1 **Form:** This kind of survey usually takes the form of a telephone interview. By interviewing the public, the researcher gauges directly the public's feelings towards the subject.

3.2 **Sampling:** The researcher selects telephone numbers randomly from telephone directories plus additional numbers generated by computers. The target sample would represent the Hong Kong population of 18 years or above. The optimal sample size for telephone surveys is between 1 000 and 1 500 households.

3.3 **Questionnaire design:** Most of the questions asked take the form of ranking. For example, "Please rank press freedom in Hong Kong on a scale of one to ten, ten being the most free and one being the least free." As a norm in a telephone interview, which poses time pressure on the interviewee and the social pressure of not talking to a stranger readily, not more than fifteen questions are asked.

3.4 **Cost:** The cost for a single study varies between HK\$80,000 and HK\$200,000. The time required would be over six months, comprising over two months for tendering and design of questionnaire, one month for interview, and three months for analysis, compilation and translation of survey results.

3.5 **Experience:** The last telephone survey on this subject was conducted in December 1994 by a commercial research firm sponsored jointly by the Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA) and Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK).

3.6 Two smaller scale surveys on journalistic behaviour were carried out by an academic researcher in September 1997 and October 1997¹. Questions covered both paparazzi behaviour (after the death of Diana, Princess of Wales) and press freedom. Response rates of less than 44% in sample sizes of around 500 were recorded. It should be noted that the sample sizes were smaller than half of the optimal, making it difficult to judge to what extent the survey results enable the reader to understand the opinions or attitude of the population. A copy of the survey result is available at the Library for reference.

¹ Social Sciences Research Centre, The University of Hong Kong, *POP Express*, September and October 1997.

4. Opinion Survey of Journalists

4.1 **Form:** A survey of journalists usually takes the form of a self-administered questionnaire.

4.2 **Sampling:** A sample of journalists is randomly chosen from over 20 news organizations in Hong Kong. They include reporters, editors, correspondents of the international media, and news translators working in television, radio, newspapers and news magazines. The optimal sample size is between 750 and 800 individuals.

4.3 **Questionnaire design:** The questionnaire aims to discover how journalists see and feel about (a) interference from the government, in the form of imprisonment of journalists or legal action against news organizations; (b) interference from outside parties, such as withdrawal of commercial advertisement; and (c) self-censorship which results from fear of (a) or (b) above. The questions in the questionnaire are put in the form of ranking. For example, "As a journalist, I worry about press freedom in Hong Kong--please rank from one to ten your agreement with this statement, one if you absolutely agree, or ten if you absolutely disagree".

4.4 **Cost:** The cost would be about HK\$100,000. The time required would be about eight months, comprising three months for tendering, preparation and design of questionnaire, two months for survey, and three months for analysis, compilation and translation of survey results.

4.5 **Experience:** The last survey of journalists was conducted in the summer of 1996 by the Department of Journalism and Communication, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

5. Content Analysis

5.1 **Form:** Content analysis usually takes the form of a researcher choosing several newspapers published in a long period of time (a minimum of several years), to monitor the volume and content of press reports, especially the editorials.

5.2 **Sampling:** Newspapers are selected so as to give a wide representation of political sympathy and readership.

5.3 **Rationale:** The content is monitored to gauge (a) which topics are reported; (b) which topics are allowed to be reported; (c) the way of reporting which is accepted or allowed to differ from the government line; (d) the degree of freedom which is allowed or exercised by the press in making comments on topical issues; (e) change in standpoint adopted or allowed to be adopted by the press on various social and political issues.

5.4 Content analysis involves interpretation of meaning which is vulnerable to subjective assessment by the researcher. Controversy may arise because different people have different subjective assessment. Content analysis cannot measure the direct perception of the general public. Moreover, it requires huge amount of time and manpower resources. So far, no commercial researcher has conducted any content analysis.

5.5 **Cost:** The last content analysis was conducted in 1993 by Dr. Siu Nam LEE, Associate Professor in the Department of Journalism and Communication, The Chinese University of Hong Kong. He received research funding from the University Grants Committee and spent nine months to study five newspapers published in a period of 20 years from 1967 to 1987. A copy of his study is available in the PLC Library.

5.6 **Experience:** Only two content analyses had been done in Hong Kong, one in 1969 and one in 1993. Both were made by academic researchers. Both covered a 20-year period which required almost one year of study to complete.

6. Freedom Index in Hong Kong

6.1 **Form:** A freedom index is an index made of weighting of different subjects of political rights and civil liberties. Press freedom is but only one of these rights and liberties, amongst others such as the right of the citizen to elect the head of state and the legislative representatives, to participate in political activities through freedom of assembly and demonstration, fair electoral laws, the existence of a significant opposition vote, freedom of political or quasi-political organization, access to an independent non-discriminatory judiciary, and free trade unions for effective collective bargaining. These rights and liberties are then put in the form of a checklist of questions. They are ranked on a scale and given a weighting as to the importance in the overall basket of freedoms available in the society. The points scored are consolidated to form an index. The world authority on measuring freedom by a freedom index is the Freedom House, whose checklist is attached at [Appendix I](#) for easy reference. Members may wish to note that press freedom is only one out of 21 rights and liberties. The survey usually takes the form of a telephone interview.

6.2 **Sampling:** The researcher selects telephone numbers randomly from telephone directories plus additional numbers generated by computers. The target sample would represent the Hong Kong population of 18 years or above. The optimal sample size for telephone surveys is between 1 000 and 1 500 individuals.

6.3 **Questionnaire design:** The respondent is asked to rank different freedoms on a list. For example, “Please rank how free you think you are able to elect your legislative representatives--rank one if absolutely not free and ten as absolutely free.” “Please rank how free you think the press is in reporting natural disasters: rank one if absolutely not free and ten as absolutely free.” Then all these scores are given weights and consolidated into an index.

6.4 **Cost:** One commercial research has indicated that the cost in 1998 would be between HK\$110,000 and HK\$220,000. The cost of the two previous studies was between HK\$50,000 and HK\$80,000 each. The time required was understood to be over ten months, comprising two months for tendering, between one to two months for reaching consensus on the components of a freedom index and the weighting as to each component, one month of design of questionnaire, five months of analysis, compilation and translation of survey results.

6.5 **Experience:** The last study to measure press freedom in Hong Kong by way of a freedom index was made in September 1994, as a follow-up to the initial study made in September 1993. These two studies were jointly conducted by RTHK, the Department of Communication of Hong Kong Baptist College (now Baptist University), the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of City Polytechnic of Hong Kong (now City University) and a commercial researcher.

6.6 Since only two studies have been made using a “freedom index”, independent researchers have expressed the view that before conducting another empirical study of press freedom in Hong Kong, they would need to work out a set of well-defined components of this “freedom index” so as to enable the index to be accepted by a wide audience. The time required is likely to be between one to two months.

7. Trend

7.1 All researchers and the HKJA have expressed the view that any research into press freedom would only be meaningful if a trend can be established. This would mean establishing a base for reference in a chosen point in time and then conducting a follow-up research at regular intervals, such as every year. If annual research were to be undertaken, the resource implication would be a commitment of between HK\$80,000 and HK\$220,000 in funding plus over six to ten months of the time of researchers every year.

8. Timing

8.1 Both academic and commercial researchers, in response to RLS further enquiries, expressed the view that since Hong Kong became the Special Administrative Region only on 1 July 1997, it would be too early to conclude whether the degree of press freedom in Hong Kong has been affected. Nevertheless, it would be useful to conduct a thorough measure of press freedom at some point in time, preferably after one year, in order to establish a base for future comparison.

9. Reservation

9.1 The HKJA, in the course of our enquiry, has expressed the view that the funding of research or studies by the government or the legislature would likely cast doubt in the minds of the public about the credibility of the research findings. This point has also been raised by a Member of the Panel.

9.2 Academic researchers have indicated that other issues such as “violence and pornography in comic books for children” and “professional ethics in journalism” (c.f. paparazzi behaviour) would seem to merit research at this moment in time.

9.3 Commercial researchers have indicated that the commitment of financial resources every year would be a major consideration. Past experience has indicated that sustained financial commitment has been a major constraint.

10. Analysis

10.1 Opinion surveys of the public and of journalists need support from the HKJA, which has indicated reservation about funding by the government or the legislature, which would likely cast doubt in the minds of the public about the credibility of the research findings. This point has also been raised by a Member of the Panel.

10.2 Content analysis is highly time-consuming and labour-intensive.

10.3 Freedom index needs consensus amongst researchers on the components of the index. It would also have continued and substantial resource implications in terms of money, time and manpower. The HKJA has expressed reservations on the researches being funded by the government or the legislature. Academic expertise might or might not be available. Commercial researchers have experienced difficulty in ascertaining sustained financing of such kind of a research project.

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Appendix I

Extracts from “Freedom in the World: The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties 1995-1996” Published by the Freedom House

Checklists to Measure Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Political Rights Checklist

1. Is the head of state and/or head of government or other chief authority elected through free and fair elections?
2. Are the legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?
3. Are there fair electoral laws, equal campaigning opportunities, fair polling and honest tabulation of ballots?
4. Are the voters able to endow their freely elected representatives with real power?
5. Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system open to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?
6. Is there a significant opposition vote, de facto opposition power, and a realistic possibility for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?
7. Are the people free from domination by the military, foreign powers, totalitarian parties, religious hierarchies, economic oligarchies or any other powerful grouping?
8. Do cultural, ethnic, religious and other minority groups have reasonable self-determination, self-government, autonomy or participation through informal consensus in the decision-making process?

Civil Liberties Checklist

1. Are there free and independent media, literature and other cultural expressions?
2. Is there open public discussion and free private discussion?
3. Is there freedom of assembly and demonstration?
4. Is there freedom of political or quasi-political organization?
5. Are citizens equal under the law, with access to an independent, non-discriminatory judiciary, and are they respected by the security forces?
6. Is there protection from political terror, and from unjustified imprisonment, exile or torture, whether by groups that support or oppose the system, and freedom from war or insurgency situations?
7. Are there free trade unions and peasant organizations or equivalents, and is there effective collective bargaining?
8. Are there free professional and other private organizations?
9. Are there free businesses or co-operatives?
10. Are there free religious institutions and free private and public religious expressions?
11. Are there personal social freedoms, which include such aspects as gender equality, property rights, freedom of movement, choice of residence, and choice of marriage and size of family?
12. Is there equality of opportunity, which includes freedom from exploitation by or dependency on landlords, employers, union leaders, bureaucrats or any other type of denigrating obstacle to a share of legitimate economic gains?
13. Is there freedom from extreme government indifference and corruption?

Sources: Freedom House, Freedom in the World: The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties 1995-1996.

Web Site Address: <http://www.freedomhouse.org/library/freedom96/method.htm>