

Hyperlocal citizen journalism in Hong Kong: Resilience through community newspapers

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Abstract

Despite severe political pressures on journalism and civil society after the implementation of the National Security Law in Hong Kong, over 20 community newspapers have continued their operation. Through content analysis of 60 issues of the papers and in-depth interviews with over 20 individuals involved in their establishment and operation, this study aims to unravel their intriguing resilience. Findings reveal that these papers adopted two non-confrontational content strategies: identity politics and life politics. On the one hand, by publishing “soft” content, they construct local identities and provide counternarratives to official discourse. On the other hand, they foster discussions on everyday life issues, bridging personal experiences with political engagement. Operationally, the voluntary nature and decentralized, collaborative structures cultivate a strong sense of community. We argue that community papers in Hong Kong represent an intersection of citizen journalism and hyperlocal journalism, which creates a unique resilience under political pressure.

Keywords

Community newspapers, citizen journalism, hyperlocal journalism, resilience, Hong Kong

Introduction

Journalism in Hong Kong has faced immense political pressure since China enacted the National Security Law (NSL) in June 2020, which seriously curbed the autonomy of the Special Administrative Region (Lee and Chan, 2023; Lo, 2021). Pro-democracy media outlets including *Apple Daily* and *Stand News* were forced to close their doors, and their

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leaders were arrested. Hundreds of pro-democracy activists and civil society leaders were also imprisoned. Despite the bleak prospects for press freedom and social liberties in the city, some journalistic initiatives persist in producing quality reporting and demonstrating remarkable resilience (Chan et al., 2022).

Among these projects are a group of “community newspapers” (社區報) that focus on local issues within geographic areas equal to or smaller than districts. These newspapers are operated by community volunteers, most of whom are not media professionals. According to our research, despite the unprecedented challenges posed by the NSL and the COVID-19 pandemic, there are at least 20 titles of community papers that have continued their operations since 2020. Their content and operational principles exhibit a significant level of civic participation and offer alternative narratives to official discourse. This study aims to explore the intriguing resilience of the community papers in Hong Kong under the repressive political environment. Through content analysis of 60 issues of community papers and in-depth interviews with over 20 individuals involved in their establishment and operation, we present their content features, operational strategies, and resilience factors.

We examine the phenomenon through the theoretical lenses of citizen journalism and hyperlocal journalism. While both concepts refer to practices that fill the gaps left by declining mainstream journalism, citizen journalism emphasizes the participation of ordinary citizens as a positive form of civic behavior and an alternative to mainstream narratives (Gillmor, 2004; Wall, 2015), whereas hyperlocal journalism addresses the diminishing coverage of local communities by mainstream media (Metzgar et al., 2011; Van Kerkhoven and Bakker, 2014). We propose that community papers in Hong Kong are a manifestation of *hyperlocal citizen journalism*, where citizen journalism and hyperlocal journalism intersect to create unique resilience under political pressure. The publication of community papers in post-NSL Hong Kong can be seen as a process of collectively constructing local identity by community members, who express their perspectives that diverge from official narratives in a non-confrontational manner through articulating and sharing their memories, cultural traditions, beloved community members, consumption preferences, and lifestyle choices. This process empowers community members and provides a means to sustain a meaningful, reflective, and even critical public life on a hyperlocal level, which ultimately contributes to the maintenance of civil society in the context of democratic backsliding.

Literature review and research context

Citizen journalism and hyperlocal journalism

Citizen journalism refers to the practice of non-professional individuals actively engaging in the news production process (Allan and Thorsen, 2009; Bowman and Willis, 2003). It not only supplements professional journalism with first-hand accounts of news events as valuable sources but, more importantly, serves as an alternative to the works by professional journalists in mostly commercialized mainstream media organizations (Chung et al., 2018; Min, 2016). Despite concerns over its credibility (Carr et al., 2014), its

deviation from traditional journalism norms, such as objectivity and distance, can serve as a counterbalance to the problems found in mainstream journalism, such as favoring the powerful and upholding the status quo. While criticized for emotional bias (Holt and Karlsson, 2015) and potential co-optation by mainstream journalism (Kperogi, 2011), citizen journalism remains important for democratic engagement (Mutsvauro and Salgado, 2022).

Similarly guided by normative expectations in service of democracy, hyperlocal journalism addresses the deficit in local and community-level reporting, which is often overlooked by mainstream media due to their national or regional focus and increasingly limited resources. It encompasses “geographically-based, community-oriented, original-news-reporting organizations... intended to fill perceived gaps in coverage of an issue or region and to promote civic engagement” (Metzgar et al., 2011: 774) and provides reporting on “the minutiae of local people, events, trades, and community happenings” (Hess and Waller, 2019: 1). The rise of hyperlocal journalism is associated with the popularity of digital tools and the efforts to revitalize community life (Nygren et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2015). It aims to inform and involve communities, holding local powers accountable (Carpenter et al., 2015).

Many hyperlocal journalism projects are managed and operated by professionals, taking the forms of digital start-ups or even subsidiaries of larger media companies (Williams et al., 2015). However, citizen journalists can also be involved in these initiatives. For instance, in the case of a Belgian regional newspaper, citizen volunteers were used for soft news coverage, while hard news reporting, such as crimes, fires, and accidents, was reserved for professional journalists (Paulussen and D’heer, 2013). In other instances, citizen journalists may cover a broader range of issues for local communities. In Wall’s (2015) terms, citizen journalists involved in hyperlocal journalism projects can be seen as “deputy journalists,” whose only significant difference from professional journalists is that they can work without pay. Moreover, recognizing the gap between news organizations and citizens, professional journalists can engage in hyperlocal participatory journalism. These endeavors aim to involve citizens in the news creation process and foster community deliberation to find solutions to societal challenges (Nip, 2006).

While existing studies have primarily focused on liberal democracies, it is crucial to consider the added layer of political repression when examining the dynamics between citizen journalism and hyperlocal journalism in the context of global democratic backsliding. Despite declining press freedom, restricted civil society, and a lack of media trust, citizen journalism can play a vital role in fostering civic engagement by providing alternative voices. This, in turn, facilitates bottom-up mobilization against authoritarianism (Khamis and Vaughn, 2011). When mass mobilizations are forced into abeyance, activists may form abeyance structures to maintain their networks, goals, tactics, and collective identities. These structures serve as critical resources for future waves of activism when political opportunities arise (Valiente, 2015). In this process, the persistence of community-based initiatives, including community newspapers, may help cultivate a strong sense of local identity and sustain community networks (Yuen and Mok, 2023). In other words, hyperlocal citizen journalism may serve as part of abeyance structures to uphold civil resilience in adverse political environments.

In summary, although citizen journalism and hyperlocal journalism are concepts that have separately received abundant scholarly attention, the intersection between the two concepts remains relatively understudied, even though they share similar normative expectations.

Community newspapers in Hong Kong

The history of community papers in Hong Kong dates back to at least the early 1970s when residents of the Tai Hung Tung resettlement estate published *The Voice of Tai Hung Tung* to engage community members and express their demands for improved living conditions.¹ Following the handover in 1997, community papers experienced a resurgence within grassroots movements that opposed government development plans. For example, during the movement against the redevelopment plan of Lee Tung Street, artists collaborated with local residents to publish a community publication, *Street Post*, which documented the local scenes and sentiments. After the Tsoi Yuen Village resistance movement, which aimed to protect the village from demolition for the construction of a high-speed railway, several community papers were launched in nearby areas, focusing on discussions related to urban development, the local community, and civil society issues.

The largest surge emerged in the aftermath of the Umbrella Movement in 2014, which ultimately fell short of achieving its goals of democratic reformation. Frustrated activists shifted their approach to community activism, laying the groundwork for democracy (Yuen and Mok, 2023). Within this context, community papers assumed a crucial role in the broader strategy of transforming territorial communities into arenas for social and political participation. From their inception, these papers embodied the spirit of citizen journalism, as they were mostly operated by non-professional citizens with minimal budgets, covering issues that were either deemed too trivial or too sensitive for mainstream media. Most of the community papers that continued to operate after the implementation of the NSL were established during this period. Consequently, these papers generally align with the pro-democracy camp and possess a clear mission of engaging with local communities. Regarding the definition of “community,” some adhere to the boundaries of official districts, while others encompass smaller areas that have organically emerged as recognized communities by the residents.

In fact, the professional news values of objectivity and neutrality have been perceived as problematic by certain journalists and citizens in the past decade, particularly as state power exerts increasing control over the press and civil society, thereby putting journalists themselves at risk. The rise of citizen journalism and alternative media since the 2010s is closely related to these contested news values and the informal alliance formed between local journalists and civil society in response (Chan, 2022).

The Anti-ELAB movement and the NSL fundamentally changed the political landscape in Hong Kong. Pro-democracy politicians disappeared from the legislative council, and numerous pro-democracy activists were jailed on charges related to national security. Facing this, civil society and media have adapted. Mainstream outlets now cautiously select topics and words to mitigate risks (Lee, 2023). While it could be expected that citizen journalism also responds to these changes by increasing self-censorship, the

specific ways in which they manifest risk management may differ significantly, given their distinct content styles and operational approaches.

Community papers in Hong Kong distinguish themselves from previously studied hyperlocal citizen journalism projects in various aspects. First, while previous cases are mostly digital news outlets, community papers in Hong Kong are primarily print media, though they may also maintain a presence on social media platforms. Second, despite a few cases involving members with journalistic backgrounds, community papers stand out by being purely voluntary projects without formal organizational structures, which sets them apart from most other cases examined earlier. While the sustainability of hyperlocal citizen journalism projects has been a subject of concern (Wall, 2015), whether voluntary-based operations contribute to or potentially hinder the resilience and sustainability of the projects presents an intriguing question. Third, previous studies are mostly based in liberal democratic contexts, whereas community papers in Hong Kong present a case in an authoritarian or semi-authoritarian environment.

Through examining a case of hyperlocal citizen journalism in Hong Kong, our objective is to not only gain insights into the state of journalism and public discourse within a politically pressured context but also advance our understanding of how citizen journalism and hyperlocal journalism can interact and generate socially meaningful impact. To investigate the state of the community papers and comprehend their resilience after the political changes, this study poses the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What types of content are published by community newspapers in Hong Kong?

RQ2a: Have there been any changes in content after the implementation of the NSL?

RQ2b: How do community newspapers operate in a restrictive environment in the post-NSL era?

RQ3: What are the major contributing factors to the resilience of community newspapers?

Data and methods

We employed a combination of content analysis and in-depth interviews to address the research questions. Throughout the year 2022, we collected 121 issues from 20 different community paper titles from various sources, including the papers' editors, bookstores, and collectors.² All 20 titles have been in operation after 2019. The 121 issues were published between September 2017 and November 2022, a period that covers the Anti-ELAB Movement, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the establishment of the NSL. We randomly selected 60 issues for analysis and extracted all the content, resulting in a total of 421 pieces of editorial content and 110 advertisements. An advertisement is defined as a message disseminated by a commercial organization with the intent to influence attitudes towards the advertised product or service and to prompt actions beneficial to the advertising organization. Promotions for community activities (such as book club events) that do not generate profit are not considered advertisements in this study. In addition, we documented the clients who purchased the advertisements and their industries.

The three authors closely read the papers and developed an inductive coding scheme for the editorial content. We recruited two undergraduate students, who are Cantonese native speakers majoring in journalism and communication, to perform the coding tasks. After multiple iterations of testing and refining the codebook, the measured variables achieved Krippendorff's alpha of at least 0.7 (See [Appendix](#) for detailed results), indicating satisfactory inter-coder reliability. Aside from objective information such as publication date and page number, the operationalization of the key variables examined is outlined below.

Symbols of democracy

A dichotomous variable is utilized to indicate the presence or absence of symbols for democracy in the images attached to the texts. An example of such symbols is the colorful sticky notes on the "Lennon Walls."

Genre

We categorized the editorial content into four types: (a) hard news articles that resembled mainstream media content, providing narration of events that are of public interest by reporting factual information, typically including the six elements of who, what, when, where, why, and how, without further commentary; (b) soft news articles that were written in a non-professional style and did not have the conventional "news value" for mainstream media, including community stories, essays about local culture, and conversations with community members; (c) opinion pieces and letters to the editor; and (d) other genres, including games, recipes, community activity promotions, and useful living information. We then excluded the last type from the subsequent analysis, resulting in a sample of 377 texts for the remaining analysis.

Topic

The topic refers to the central and dominant themes addressed in the text. Through a meticulous examination of the papers, the authors identified topics including community livelihood, small shops, history and geography, health, environmental protection, local or Hong Kong politics, culture, entertainment and sports, personal features, and others.

Region

In terms of the geographic focus of the articles, we identified five main types: local (community), Hong Kong, China, international, and others. For example, an article published in a community paper in Lantau Island addressing an issue specific to part of the island would be categorized as covering a local affair. Immigration, which is a matter of concern for the general public of Hong Kong, would be categorized as Hong Kong affairs.

Source

A source is defined as any individual or document that provides information in the articles. The authors who offer personal feelings, experiences, or observations are not considered news sources. Coders identified all sources in the articles and categorized them into the following types: government officials, official documents, politicians, business sector, non-governmental organizations, grassroots and ordinary people, scholars and professionals, professional media, and social media.

During the process of collecting the community papers, the authors sent interview invitations to their editorial teams through email, social media, or personal networks. We managed to recruit and conduct in-depth interviews with members from eight community papers between October 2022 and May 2023. Among these interviews, four were conducted individually with the founders or core members of the papers, while the remaining four were group interviews with team members ranging from two to five people. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted for 1-2 hours. They were either conducted face-to-face or via Zoom. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim subsequently for analysis. The interview questions covered various topics, including the background of the community paper and its members, the editorial and publication process, topic selection and reporting style, sustainable resources, perceived challenges and difficulties, as well as factors that hampered or motivated the teams, among others. The objective of these questions was to gather comprehensive information about the community newspapers and their operations. One noteworthy observation was that these community paper teams demonstrated a strong commitment to equal participation and valued each member's voice. They expressed a genuine willingness to involve all available members in the interviews. During the interviews, they frequently encouraged each other to share their opinions and experiences.

Furthermore, to gain insights into the origin and evolution of the community journalism ecosystem in Hong Kong, we conducted two additional interviews with key figures in initiating a supporting and mentoring project for community papers in 2018. In total, we conducted 10 interview sessions involving 21 individuals (please see [Appendix](#) for the list of interviewees). The authors closely and iteratively examined the transcripts to identify the main themes that emerged from the interviews. The two modes of data, namely the analysis of paper content and the in-depth interviews, were then triangulated to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the topic. In answer to [Haapanen and Manninen's \(2023\)](#) call to integrate *etic* and *emic* views, our data enabled us to not only describe the content published by the papers but also delve into the motivations and considerations behind the production process. For instance, through content analysis, we observed a substantial presence of soft news content in the papers, including on their front pages. This observation was further validated through the interviews, which also allowed us to identify the factors that contributed to this phenomenon.

Due to the political sensitivity surrounding the topic, when reporting and discussing the findings, we anonymize all papers and interviewees and refrain from providing any identifiable information.

Findings

Corresponding to the research questions, we present the findings in three parts: content features, changes resulting from the NSL, and factors contributing to the resilience of community papers in Hong Kong.

Content features of community newspapers

Reading the community papers, one would immediately notice their distinctiveness compared to mainstream newspapers. Aside from their lively and occasionally amateurish design and layout, the content of community papers often deviated from the professional conventions of placing the most “hardcore” political and economic issues on the prominent pages and positions, as well as amplifying elite voices. A front-page story in a community paper could focus on the lack of public transportation in specific areas, but it could also be a heartfelt essay introducing the historical background of a building within the locality. Big names might be less commonly seen than owners of local small businesses. To answer RQ1, we summarize the content features of community papers along two dimensions: one focused on delving into culture and history and constructing an inclusive local identity, and the other on filling the gap left by mainstream media and promoting civic engagement. Both dimensions involved non-confrontational challenges to official narratives and provided alternative perspectives.

Cultural focus and local identity. Results of the content analysis indicated a clear emphasis on “soft” issues such as community livelihood, local culture, and historical traditions. In comparison to the 25.4% of articles that followed the hard news genre, much more of the texts (41.8%) fell into the category of soft news, such as essays about local culture and history. Notably, letters to the editor written by community members accounted for 8.8% of the texts, ranking third among all genres (Figure 1). These letters often shared personal living experiences or interesting memories associated with the community. For example, one letter written by an individual identifying as an “indigenous resident” shared a childhood memory of attending a local rural school. In another letter, the writer nostalgically recalled their summer job experience at a local cinema a decade ago.

In terms of topical areas, the primary focus of the community papers centered on the daily lives as well as cultural and historical elements within the local communities (Figure 2). Articles on local history and geography accounted for 15.4% of the texts. Introduction to small shops in the community constituted 12.5% of the articles and held the third position in terms of prevalence. In contrast, articles on local or Hong Kong politics only represented 9.8% of the sample. Comparing the distribution of topics between community and mainstream media, we could observe a clear overrepresentation of content related to local culture and identity in community papers.

According to the interviews, several factors contributed to the focus on cultural and “soft” topics rather than political and economic issues. First, some papers deliberately chose to focus on softer stories to attract a wider audience. One interviewee who was a media practitioner shared their experience of initially featuring hard topics like rodent infestation, transportation,

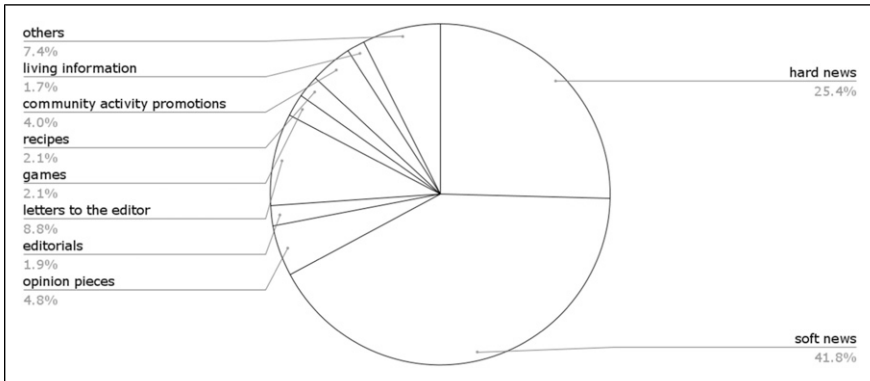


Figure 1. Distribution of genres of community newspaper articles.

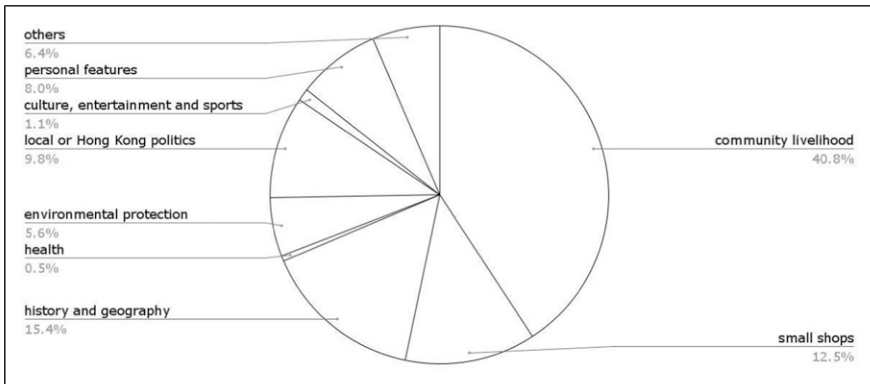


Figure 2. Distribution of topics of community newspaper articles.

and housing estate planning on the front page of their paper, based on their professional knowledge. However, they received feedback from the local audience indicating little interest in reading them. In response, they shifted their focus to softer community topics in subsequent issues, such as personal stories of district councilors and interviews with famous idols who were residents. They continued to cover community matters but in a softer and more human-interest way, which was more friendly to audiences of all age groups and backgrounds, particularly the elderly, who might not prefer lengthy and complex news articles.

Second, all community papers in the interviews were run by residents from diverse backgrounds, who possessed varying levels of proficiencies and knowledge in journalistic practices. From an operational standpoint, embracing the reporting of soft issues in flexible formats lowered the barrier to participation for more members. It also reduced the time and effort required for tone-alignment and editing, while maximizing the capacity of the team. This inclusivity also helped foster a stronger commitment among team members, as everyone was able to find their interests and contribute articles on various topics.

Third, according to the interviews, the coverage of historical and cultural stories served important purposes including preserving collective memories and cultivating a sense of belonging. One interviewee emphasized the significance of covering topics related to the community's unique culture, such as "an elderly woman making Hakka dumplings during the Qingming Festival." By highlighting these stories, community papers contributed to the preservation and recognition of local traditions. Another interviewee stated that:

"Through our reporting on the historical and cultural stories of this district, residents can be aware of the uniqueness and value of this place." (interviewee D1)

Some other interviewees emphasized the value of featuring stories about grassroots individuals, often referred to as "little people." They showcased the hidden talents and extraordinary contributions of individuals who might go unnoticed in people's daily lives and traditional media coverage. The objective was to instill a sense of pride among residents for being part of a remarkable district, where remarkable people and their stories abound. In summary, the soft focus of the community papers can be viewed as a way of constructing local identity by actively involving as many community members as possible and uncovering the uniqueness of each community.

Grassroots voices and issues for community advocacy. As seen in Figure 3, the most significant proportion of sources in the community papers were grassroots individuals. This echoes previous research on citizen journalism and stands in stark contrast to mainstream media, which favors elite voices. Politicians at the district level and Hong Kong government officials were the subsequent prominent categories. In contrast, legislative councilors were quoted only 4 times, while politicians from outside Hong Kong appeared only once. In terms of the regional focus of the articles, the majority (89.9%) focused on local (community) matters. Hong Kong-specific issues constituted 9.5%, while a mere 0.5% were on international affairs. None of the articles discussed matters pertaining to China. This heavy focus on local voices was echoed by the fact that a substantial 82.7% of advertisements were purchased by local business advertisers, especially small businesses in the communities.

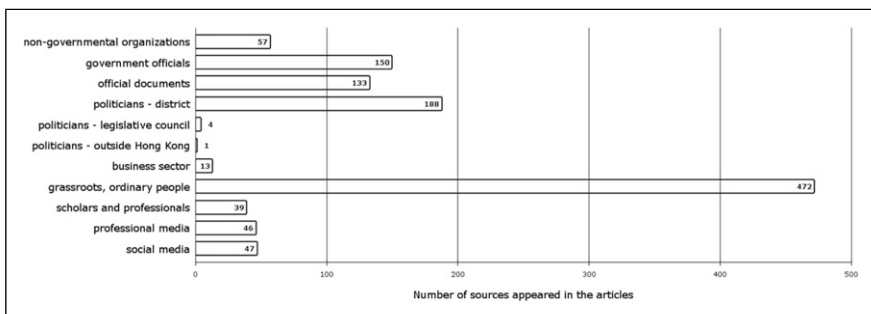


Figure 3. Number of sources in community newspapers.

According to the interviewees, community newspapers had a primary function of covering local stories that were relevant to district residents but might not receive attention from mainstream media. As explained by one interviewee, they “focus on more specific and small issues. For example, the MTR station in our district is not necessarily something that mainstream media would cover.”

Another interviewee further elaborated on the role of community papers in response to Hong Kong’s evolving media landscape caused by political and financial changes:

“Mainstream media used to have resources to assign reporters to attend district council meetings. However, this practice has become increasingly difficult. I feel that community newspapers have taken on this role.” (B2)

Members from one community paper saw themselves as a pressure group aiming to increase transparency in district affairs by ensuring proper policy-making procedures and sufficient assessments. They achieved this through interviews with residents to gather their opinions. Beyond conveying information, community papers were viewed by many interviewees to foster a sense of community belonging and promote civic awareness among local residents. As A1 shared, “The coverage of community planning and development could encourage more people to participate in imagining how the community can be developed.”

Another interviewee hoped that residents should not merely treat the district as a place to sleep, but as their “home.” They believed that only when residents felt a strong recognition and connection to the place would they have the willingness to pay attention to district affairs and participate in discussions. Those issues did not have to be political or confrontational; instead, they were mostly likely everyday life matters, such as expressing preferences for the development of a specific road or demonstrating the value placed on their traditional way in life. As reflected in [Figure 2](#), a substantial proportion (40.8%) of the articles revolved around matters directly impacting the individuals’ lives in the community, including clothing, food, housing, transportation, and elderly care. As one interviewee shared:

“Our simplest idea is making this place better. We make great efforts to let everyone feel a greater sense of belonging and pay more attention to the events happening in our community.” (G1)

Interviewees emphasized that it was crucial for residents to understand the different stages they could participate in public consultations. If residents felt that a particular matter did not concern them, they might choose not to reach out to their district councilors or express their opinions. This lack of engagement could be addressed by community papers, which provided information and encouraged residents to ask questions and participate actively. In summary, the focus on local grassroots voices and issues not only filled the gap left by mainstream media but also served as a form of community advocacy. Centering on everyday life issues, community newspapers played a vital role in promoting civic engagement, empowering residents to voice their concerns, and actively participating in shaping their communities.

Operation in a Restrictive Environment: Adjustments and Adaptations

Like their mainstream counterparts, community papers also underwent a significant shift in the political environment following the implementation of the NSL. Two papers we interviewed had made the difficult decision to cease operations, explicitly citing reasons including political pressure, the need to protect their members, an unwillingness to self-censor, and difficulties in navigating the redlines. Others were striving to survive by different strategies.

To address RQ2a regarding changes in their content since July 2020, we conducted a series of chi-square tests to examine the disparities in genre, topic, and region between pre- and post-NSL eras. Three notable findings emerged. Firstly, there was a significant increase in the genre of hard news reporting, rising from 14.3% before NSL to 29.1% after its establishment ($\chi^2(1, N = 421) = 9.14, p < .01$). This shift may be attributed to a tendency of self-limitation, whereby community papers adopted a more “objective” approach to news reporting that resembled mainstream media. Secondly, there was a significant decrease in opinion pieces, declining from 9.5% before NSL to only 3.2% after NSL ($\chi^2(1, N = 421) = 7.04, p < .01$). This decrease could be attributed to a deliberate avoidance of expressing opinions. Thirdly, and unsurprisingly, there was a significant reduction in political topics, decreasing from 16.3% in the pre-NSL era to 7.7% after the implementation of the NSL ($\chi^2(1, N = 377) = 5.79, p < .05$).

Our interviewees also shared that they had to refrain from discussing certain politically sensitive topics, such as the NSL and district election. The aforementioned shifts in focus towards local voices and grassroots stories actually reflected the adaptation of community newspapers to the restrictive political environment:

“In earlier issues of our newspaper, we covered more political issues and took a stronger [pro-democracy] political stance. However, after the implementation of the NSL, we became less explicit. For example, we replaced the term ‘yellow shops’ (shops that support pro-democracy movements) with ‘small shops.’” (C1)

This observation was further supported by the content analysis, which revealed a very limited occurrence (2.6%) of texts containing symbols associated with democracy. The editorial team of a community paper considered such adjustments and self-censorship as necessary compromises to ensure the survival of the newspaper and preserve its value:

“When you effectively communicate community issues and establish a relationship with residents, I believe it already has an impact, not necessarily by being overtly confrontational without any self-censorship. It’s more like an exchange. You have something to compromise, and you know you’re exchanging [for survival] rather than simply giving away.” (H2)

According to the interviewees, restrictions did not only apply to topic selection but also to sourcing. We conducted a series of independent sample t-tests to investigate the variance in source use before and after the implementation of NSL. Quotations of government officials after the NSL ($M = 0.45, SD = 1.022$) were higher than before ($M =$

0.25, $SD = 0.689$), $t(228.9) = 2.082$, $p < .05$. The trend suggested a strategic, precautionary measure adopted by the papers. An interviewee in outlet H shared the experience of removing a significant amount of content about an interviewee in an article on immigration at the interviewee's request.

To provide a more comprehensive answer to RQ2b, it is important to note that these adjustments and adaptations were primarily strategic moves aimed at self-protection. For instance, the increase of government officials as sources was not significantly different from what Tuchman (1972) referred to as "strategic ritual." These adjustments did not fundamentally undermine the contributions of community papers to civil society and civic participation. The interviewees generally believed that the compromises had led to meaningful outcomes. They fostered solidarity and connections among civic-minded community members within the restrictive political environment. These adjustments also helped maintain a space for discussions and reflections on public issues that community members cared about.

Factors contributing to the resilience of community newspapers

To answer RQ3, other than the risk management skills and the content strategy of avoiding confrontations, we identified two key factors contributing to the resilience of community papers.

Post-movement political bonding. Despite the undesirable outcomes of the Anti-ELAB movement, the political bonding generated in the movement has provided important financial and human resources for community papers in its aftermath. Financially, all the papers we interviewed were initially supported by start-up funds from a project launched by a Hong Kong online media outlet, with the aim of promoting citizen journalism and civic engagement. After the initial project ended, the papers actively sought available financial sources by developing subscription plans, organizing community cultural tours, applying for funding from NGOs or the district council, or selling cultural products such as tote bags, t-shirts, and postcards.

The financial resilience of the community papers was ironically related to the political changes. Following the logic of the "yellow economic circle" (Chan and Pun, 2020), pro-democracy supporters participate in political consumerism by paying for pro-democracy news during and after the 2019 protests (Lee et al., 2022). In particular, some papers explored opportunities in local businesses and advertising. One interviewee attributed their success in attracting local advertising to the authorities' crackdown on pro-democracy media:

"The closure of *Apple Daily* made people realize that such a large media outlet could suddenly disappear. They deliberately turned to support us. One straightforward way is to place advertisements with us." (G1)

The adverse political environment also ironically fueled the strong motivation and commitment of the members, which is a key factor in keeping the papers continuing

operations despite all the pressures and challenges. An interviewee claimed that they did not have much determination to join the team until the crackdown on *Apple Daily*. They saw the community paper as a way to preserve media space and bring hope. For many interviewees, keeping the community papers “alive” was extraordinarily valuable and meaningful in the current political environment:

“By continuously existing and surviving, it sends the message to others that we are still here and we have not died.” (C3)

Many interviewees highlighted the sense of belonging and “love” for the community. The strong community commitment was related to the identity politics nurtured through community activism during previous social movements (Yuen and Mok, 2023). One interviewee continued to participate in the project after emigrating because they felt a deep connection to the place and wanted more people to appreciate its beauty.

The political climate also made the members particularly appreciate the opportunities for working towards a common goal with people who shared similar beliefs. An interviewee mentioned that they did not put extra effort into “drawing commitment.” Close bonds were developed naturally among team members in the process of working together for the newspapers, as another interviewee said:

“It was firstly out of love for the community. Then it became a habit and eventually became a part of life. These people are not just colleagues. It feels more like a group of friends doing things together.” (D1)

Moreover, positive feedback from readers and residents was a critical motivator for the members. An interviewee expressed how fulfilling they felt when they heard from readers who resonated with their articles: “It made me realize that there are so many people around us sharing the same feeling. It’s a heartwarming sense of community.” Such a sense of solidarity is meaningful in coping with the frustration of facing dramatic political changes.

Organic and collaborative operation. Most of the papers we interviewed operated with an organic and decentralized structure, where every member was encouraged to assume their own role based on individual interests and talents. For instance, an interviewee explained how they allocated tasks:

“There is no one acting as the boss. The division of work is based on the preference of each member, depending on their capacity, interests, and expertise. Some new members bring their expertise in photography and videography. Some are better at design, so they handle design-related tasks.” (D3)

The flexibility helped members find their most suitable roles, thereby strengthening the team’s capabilities. In cases where there were news professionals in the teams, such as outlets B and H, the professionals mainly performed gatekeeping and proofreading roles. They may provide advice on areas that may require professional input, such as typesetting and title-making, but they did not assume a higher hierarchy than other members. The leaderless

decision-making process allowed members a high level of autonomy. Moreover, many interviewees believed that participation in community papers, as a form of civic engagement and empowerment, should honor and value the opinions and agency of all participants. A few interviewees mentioned that every member was welcome to pitch ideas during editorial meetings and choose topics aligned with their interests. The process of deliberate discussion itself also helped establish a sense of community among members. For instance, an interviewee shared their feeling after a fruitful discussion session:

“I suddenly felt energized after the meeting. Regardless of whether the articles are published in the end or bring about any impact, our gathering has already reflected the meaning of the community newspaper, which is ‘getting warmth from each other.’ It deepened our understanding of the community and sparked a new kind of imagination.” (C2)

Furthermore, the papers actively encouraged residents to participate in ways that suit them best, including writing articles, taking photos, and newspaper distribution. An interviewee highlighted that they often received tips from residents. As mentioned earlier, letters to the editor from residents accounted for 8.8% of the overall content. This indicates that community papers have made efforts to foster their community networks, engaging with local readers and fostering a collaborative environment. These endeavors have played a significant role in enhancing their resilience.

However, it is important to note that the voluntary-based and flexible nature of operations contributes to their resilience but also leads to high turnover and a lack of discipline among team members. Some papers initially planned to publish every 2 months but struggled to maintain this frequency due to members procrastinating in submitting articles. When asked about the biggest challenges they faced, many interviewees emphasized that it was not political pressure or financial constraints, but rather a shortage of manpower.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study set out to unravel the intriguing resilience of community papers in Hong Kong and examine it as a case of hyperlocal citizen journalism. The findings can be summarized in two aspects: content and operation.

Regarding content, two non-confrontational strategies have emerged as major means of sustaining the operation of the papers while maintaining their democratic spirit: identity politics (Fung, 2001) and life politics (Giddens, 1991). The local “Hong Kong people” identity has been developed to resist the imposition of the national Chinese identity through waves of community-based activism since the handover, including protests demanding the preservation of historical districts and diverse street life (Chen and Szeto, 2015; Cheng et al., 2022). As the goal of community journalism is to “facilitate the process of negotiating and making meaning about community” (Lowrey et al., 2008, p. 275), hyperlocal citizen journalism, by publishing “soft” content like personal memories, essays on local history and culture, and features on small businesses and beloved figures, serves to preserve the informal yet crucial community networks and a

sense of local identity when confrontational tactics are not viable. While this identity is primarily cultural in nature, it serves as a powerful alternative to the dominant narrative of assimilation into Chinese identity.

The idea of life politics highlights how politics permeates individual lifestyles. It recognizes that personal choices, such as consumption patterns, the continuation of local traditions, and preferred ways of life, carry political weight and influence public opinion and policies. Political consumerism, for example, is regarded as a form of “individualized collective action” that links everyday life and activism (Micheletti, 2003, p. 25). By supporting local businesses and encouraging local consumption, community papers extend the tactic of political consumerism cultivated in the pro-democracy movement to the post-NSL era. By fostering discussions on everyday life issues, community papers establish connections between personal lives and political engagement, highlighting the potential for transformative change through individual and collective actions across various spheres of life. Despite the absence of immediate prospects for democratic reform, life politics offers a sense of hope and thus serves as a valuable source of resilience.

Regarding operation, the strength of community papers lies in their voluntary nature and decentralized, collaborative organizational structures. These papers exhibit a distinct operational style compared to mainstream media. Their rejection of hierarchy and inclusive production processes provide a high level of flexibility, enabling them to better withstand external pressures. Additionally, the non-profit and minimal-budget model means that they are not significantly threatened by potential declines in revenue. The operational features facilitate the creation of a “positive echo chamber,” where community members with similar ideological orientations can get together to share their feelings and opinions, thus fostering a strong sense of community. To use our interviewees’ words, they can “get warmth from each other” while working at the papers. This sense of warmth is particularly precious when the larger social environment is harsh.

This study extends the understanding of citizen and hyperlocal journalism in the context of global democratic backsliding. It uncovers the transformative role of citizen journalism under rising authoritarianism, highlighting a “soft” focus on cultural and human-interest content that supports community inclusion and local identity. The research compares citizen journalism’s adaptive strategies to those of mainstream media in restrictive environments, offering insights into their resilience.

Additionally, the study demonstrates hyperlocal journalism’s role in preserving democratic values by maintaining community ties and collective identities, which are vital for sustaining opposition in oppressive regimes (Valiente, 2015; Yuen and Mok, 2023). It also explores how hyperlocal journalism contributes to the local identity narrative.

Most critically, the intersection of citizen and hyperlocal journalism is shown to create a robust journalistic practice. This synergy is seen in post-NSL Hong Kong’s community papers, which provide alternative narratives and promote solidarity. The research suggests that this model’s efficacy in various contexts warrants further exploration, especially against the backdrop of global democratic backsliding.

This study has several limitations. First, we did not interview community members who were not directly involved in the editorial work or did not align with the pro-democracy camp. Therefore, it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss how ordinary

community members perceive and interact with the papers, nor does it aim to explore the potential impact of these papers on the communities and society at large. Second, the long-term sustainability of the papers remains a question, as our study was conducted only 2-3 years after the implementation of the NSL. Third, our focus was solely on a single context, and future studies could explore the potential of hyperlocal citizen journalism in other political contexts.

Despite these limitations, this study makes important contributions to our understanding of journalism and public sphere in post-NSL Hong Kong, as well as our comprehension of citizen journalism and hyperlocal journalism. The alternative ways to foster civic engagement and preserve democratic values in adverse political environments can inspire practitioners and academic researchers to envision new possibilities amidst global democratic backsliding.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. See the editor's words for the resumption of publication of *The Voice of Tai Hung Tung*: https://sspcatv.blogspot.com/p/blog-page_29.html (in Chinese).
2. We chose not to include the list of titles in this paper because such a list could potentially be used by the authorities to target community papers. Interested researchers may contact the corresponding author for access to the list.

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