Representations of Hong Kong's West Kowloon Cultural District by Local English Newspapers

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Abstract

To enhance cultural development in Hong Kong, the idea of West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD) was mooted in 1998. WKCD is the biggest and most important arts and culture project by the Hong Kong government to date. This paper seeks to examine how Hong Kong newspapers have reported on WKCD since the inception of the Authority in 2008. The purpose of this research is to identify the common issues on WKCD as reported by the newspapers, in order to deduce the possible effects of news reporting on the public perceptions of the district. This study employs the concept of *agenda-setting theory* in its theoretical approach on how newspapers direct attitudes towards a particular issue. A total of 744 news reports from three local English newspapers bearing the keywords *West Kowloon Cultural District* and *WKCD* were subjected to content analysis, of which 576 relevant articles are further classified into seven categories. To better achieve the research objective, semi-structured interviews were carried out with two specialists. Research revealed that the majority of the news coverage of WKCD focuses on political issues, rather than the arts and culture. Further analysis uncovered two major reasons for this focus. First, political issues are generally more newsworthy than arts and culture, and politics-oriented coverage gives WKCD more editorial space in the news media. Second, centering politics in the reporting of WKCD functions as a way to articulate to the public the power of the media to monitor the government. The qualitative interviews also suggest that newspapers are still more impactful than other media forms.

Keywords: West Kowloon Cultural District, Public Opinion, Agenda-setting Theory, Hong Kong's News Media

"The way in which the world is imagined determines at any particular moment what men will do."

Walter Lippmann (Lippmann, 2012)

Introduction

The idea of West Kowloon Cultural District (WKCD) was first announced in 1998 by the Chief Executive of Hong Kong at the time, Tung Chee Hwa, in response to the need to provide more cultural opportunities and exposure for the local Hong Kong population, as well as to put forward a world-class arts and cultural hub for tourists (Kong, Ching, & Chou, 2015; Leong, 2013). Several rounds of planning and consultations, including public engagements, took place in the years thereafter, with the official formation of the WKCD Authority in 2008, and an initial budget of HK$21.6 billion (USD$2.8 billion) approved by the Legislative Council in 2011 (Du Cros & Lee, 2014).

This public project was not without challenges. Between 2003 and 2006, before the inception of the Authority, there were debates amongst the public about the awarding of the WKCD development project. One particular concern was about WKCD becoming yet another commercial property project in Hong Kong. In recent years, the initial planned phases of completion were delayed several times. The construction of Xiqu Centre and the M+ Museum, with the targeted first phase completion by 2015, was further delayed to 2017. A subsequent announcement in 2015 indicated that the opening of the M+ Museum is likely to be pushed back till 2019, potentially resulting in further delays to the completion dates of the second and third phases. Another concern is that the WKCD project has exceeded the initial

budget of HK$21.6 billion (approximately USD$2.75 billion). In November 2015, Hong Kong's Chief Secretary at the time, Carrie Lam, announced that the budget for WKCD might overrun by another HK$400 million (approximately USD$51 million) during the completion of the first phase in 2018/19. Last but not least, there has been a high turnover within the Authority's senior leadership team over the course of the seven years, including several changes in the Authority's Chief Executive Officer (CEO).

By sheer size of the capital input, WKCD is, no doubt, the biggest and most important arts and culture project by the Hong Kong government. Moreover, the performing arts venues in the district are intended to be comparable to performing arts venues in the Sydney Opera House and the Lincoln Centre (Deloitte Consulting and AMS Planning & Research Corp, 2010), while the M+ museum aims to rival Tate Modern and MoMA (Tsui, 2013). Up to 2016, public engagements of WKCD were limited to collecting views on the choice of developer(s) (2003-2005), the needs of the public in terms of space usage (2009-2010), and the conceptual and final plans of the district (2010-2011). Previous studies on WKCD focus more on the discourse of the possible impacts of WKCD on Hong Kong's creative industries and city branding.

The media is also an inevitable stakeholder of public projects and plays a crucial role in agenda building and, possibly, influencing public perceptions of these projects (Hopwood, Skinner, & Kitchin, 2012; Mutz, 1998). Since the idea of WKCD was first mooted, it has received a lot of media attention. Similar research was carried out by Lee and Silva (2017) on newspapers' representations of the Express Rail Link between Hong Kong and Mainland China. The authors categorize this project as an infrastructure project by the government, and it is hence worth studying. Incidentally, both the Express Rail Link and WKCD are infrastructure projects built next to one another on the same site. This paper, therefore, undertakes an initial investigation to find out how newspapers have represented the district since the inception of the WKCD Authority in 2008.

New Media and Consumption

Cultural theorist and sociologist Stuart Hall (1997) has focused on how social groups interpret and read mass media texts such as newspapers, with the findings of his research proposing that audiences of the mass media tend to read such texts in three key ways:

(1) through a dominant reading, where the reader accepts the text in a straightforward way as the writer intended
(2) through a negotiated reading where the reader partially accepts the text but interprets it from their own viewpoint and position
(3) through an oppositional reading, where the reader rejects the text due to their social position

Hall calls this process *encoding* and *decoding*, which is an idea that is rooted in the field of semiology (Chandler, 2001; Nöth, 1990).

At the same time, such ideas also have some resonance with the work of Baxandall (1972), who proposes that people view the world from the unique lens of their own time and culture – meaning that cultural and social factors also have an impact upon how people see texts, and how they interpret them. Washbourne (2010) also accounts for how Hall's theory has assumed that society's dominant ideas will be encoded in media messages, such as in newspaper reports, which means that stories such as workers' strikes, for example, tend to be depicted as disruptions of the ordinary legitimate workings of a business (which is represented as the victim) – or at the very least, the strike is painted in a negative light.

On the other hand, Cohen (1963) summarizes that news media may not be successful in telling people what to think, but at the very least, they tell the public what to think about.

Cohen's summary relates directly to the main discourse of McCombs and Shaw's (1972) *agenda-setting theory*. This paper adopts this theory, which suggests that the media is capable of creating the public agenda and telling the public what to think about. The media is able to achieve this through accessibility, which is a cognitive process. An issue that is more frequently reported by the news media will leave a greater impression in the minds of the audiences. Hall asserts that the function of the media in general is to create, rather than reflect the reality of the world of the reader or viewer (Davis, 2004). In other words, those who control the mass media can create a certain world view, which feeds into politics and helps to maintain hegemonic powers. Hall (1978) has remarked that the media does not only possess a near-monopoly over social knowledge, as the primary source of information about what is happening; they also command the passage between those who are in the know and the structured ignorance of the general public due to the objective and authoritative statements from accredited sources, such as institutional power and position of certain people or organized interest groups.

Aligning back to the context of this research, it is essential to consider how arts and culture navigate this ecology. While arts news is considered less newsworthy than sports news (Szántó & Tyndall, 2000), arts and culture coverage adheres to the criterion of human interest. A relevant view is that women are more attracted to softer issues reported in the newspapers (Poindexter, Meraz, & Weiss, 2010; Nicholson, 2009), and arts news fit the category of 'soft' (Ksiazek, Peer & Lessard, 2016; Sjøvaag, 2015; Turow, 2012). Some newspapers have a culture section, which includes not only the arts, but also other lifestyle topics such as travel and food. Straw (2005) associates arts coverage in America with the concept of lifestyle journalism. This just means that even in the culture section of newspapers, the arts do not get all the attention. Moreover, the arts are difficult to define and describe and journalists have the responsibility to explore them, and thereafter, make the arts comprehensible to readers. Straw uses the term *centripetal* to describe this current scenario, in contrast to *centrifugal*, under which arts journalists in the 1950s reported mainly on the successful events of well-established arts organizations.

Methods

To explore the concept of *agenda-setting theory* in relation to WKCD, the method of content analysis is adopted in this research. Stories reported in newspapers tend to have an ideological and political bias, with the hope of shaping the opinions of their readers. Nevertheless, such encoding is subtle and not easily detected via a cursory read – although a content analysis of such texts over time can reveal the extent of these biases via word frequency use and the type of vocabulary used (Drisko & Maschi, 2016). Content analysis, unlike evaluation studies, is a quantitative method used to examine trends and patterns from a selected sample. This research adhered to the 10-step content analysis process as described by Wimmer and Dominick (2013).

A total of 744 news reports between 2008 and 2016 from three local English newspapers, namely *China Daily*, *SCMP* (*South China Morning Post*), and *The Standard*, were collected based on a keyword search of *West Kowloon Cultural District* and *WKCD* from WISERS Information Ltd, which archives the majority of newspapers in Hong Kong, as well as from the SCMP's web archive. After the sample was determined, the content was read through once to establish a preliminary understanding. A total of eight categories were identified, each with a clear set of criteria. Table 1 shows the categories and their respective criteria.

Category	Criteria
Politics	Articles that focus on the discussions on WKCD by the Hong Kong government, including the legislative council are included in this category. Interviews conducted with politicians about WKCD are also included in this category.
Arts	Articles that specifically discuss WKCD's contributions to the arts and cultural development are included in this category. Articles that preview or review artistic events and activities by WKCD are also included.
Legal	Articles that focus on (suspected) WKCD legal cases are included in this category.
HK's Development	Articles that link the development of WKCD to Hong Kong's future economic and city development are included in this category.
Human Resource	Articles that report on WKCD human resource matters, including new appointments and departures, are included in this category.
Construction	Articles that discuss and provide updates on WKCD's construction, including matters pertaining to the finances of the construction, are included in this category.
Venues and Arts Spaces	Articles that describe and highlights WKCD's venues and spaces for arts events are included in this category.
Others	Irrelevant articles that mention WKCD, but without further elaborations.

Table 1. Categories and criteria for content analysis

Thereafter, the 744 news reports were read again, reviewed, and classified accordingly. One main issue considered was the scenario of overlapping, when the content of a news report seems to fit in two or more categories. In such a situation, the category that is the most prominent in the report was selected. Here, prominence refers to the category that is mostly directly relevant to the headline, sub-headings, or that which warranted the most number of words in the report.

Besides the researcher, the coding was also done by an assistant who has a Masters degree in Cultural Management. Cohen's Kappa coefficient was used to test the reliability of the two coders involved in the content analysis. A Kappa value of 0.9125 was observed, which represents an almost perfect agreement between the two coders. This is likely due to a set of clear criteria listed for each category. Moreover, it is not the aim of this research to determine whether the issues on WKCD create a positive and/or negative impression, which would definitely lower the agreement between the two coders. Though negligible in actual numbers, the main disagreements between two coders were evident in the categories of *Arts* and *HK's Development*, as well as *Construction* and *Venues and Arts Spaces*. With a high Kappa value, the eventual findings were based on the researcher's results.

The content analysis is an effective tool to locate the issues and their frequency of report in the newspapers. In order to infer the possible public perceptions on WKCD adequately, qualitative in-depth interviews were carried out with two specialists. One of them is currently a professor of journalism with a university in Hong Kong, with research interests in public opinion and discourse. The other is currently a news editor of one of the newspapers that was

included in the content analysis. This respondent also wrote about WKCD back in the 2000s, including some of the news reports reviewed in this research. The interviews were carried out with two specific intentions. First, before any analysis could be made on the public perceptions, it was essential to find out from the specialists if Hong Kong's print journalism could still direct the public what to think about, especially in this digital age, where citizen journalism was gaining prominence. The second intention relates directly to WKCD. The two specialists were asked if newspaper reports on WKCD could have an effect in forming public perceptions on this public project.

Findings

From the 744 newspapers reports, a total of 168 reports fall under the category of *Others*, in which WKCD was mentioned but not further elaborated in the report. The remaining 576 articles were classified into the other seven categories as summarized in Table 2.

Category	Number of Articles	Percentage
Politics	207	35.9%
Arts	85	14.8%
Legal	26	4.5%
HK's Development	60	10.4%
Human Resource	91	15.8%
Construction	71	12.3%
Venues and Arts Spaces	36	6.3%

Table 2. Results of content analysis

The results of the content analysis show that the category of *Politics* was the leading focus of Hong Kong's English-medium newspapers when reporting on WKCD, with 207 such articles (35.9 per cent). More specifically, with the exception of 2011, 2015 and 2016, this category was most reported in all years, as shown in Table 3.

Category	Number of Articles per Year								
	2008	**2009**	**2010**	**2011**	**2012**	**2013**	**2014**	**2015**	**2016**
Politics	52	21	16	19	35	21	23	12	8
Arts	2	3	2	5	11	21	8	16	17
Legal	0	0	0	0	7	0	17	2	0
HK's Development	6	8	3	5	9	7	13	6	3
Human Resource	8	16	11	26	1	1	4	18	6
Construction	3	8	15	14	9	9	5	5	3
Venues and Arts Spaces	6	3	0	6	7	1	3	2	8
Total	**77**	**59**	**47**	**75**	**79**	**60**	**73**	**61**	**45**

Table 3. Results of content analysis by year

In 2011 and 2015, the category of *Human Resource* was most frequently reported with 26 and 18 articles respectively. This could be attributed to the resignations and appointments of the CEO of WKCD in these two specific years. In 2011, Graham Sheffield, who is currently the Director (Arts) of the British Council (UK), resigned from the CEO post, and Michael Lynch was appointed to the position in the same year. In 2015, Lynch resigned and was succeeded by the Chief Operating Officer at the time, Duncan Pescod. Reports on *Human Resource* are also evident in 2009, with 16 articles, just four short of the *Politics* category. This can be attributed to the sudden resignation of Angus Cheng Siu-chuen in 2009, just one week into the job.

While WKCD is an arts and cultural district with a number of venues congregated together as well as its own in-house activities, it can be observed distinctly from the results that there were not many articles reporting on the district's arts and cultural activities and venues. Over the course of eight years, only 121 reports covered these two categories. In hindsight, it may be unfair to conclude that the media was not paying attention to the arts and cultural development in WKCD. Indeed, the cultural district will eventually house more than 10 arts institutions, such as the Xiqu Centre, M+ Museum, and a number of performing arts venues, but at the time of writing this paper, most of the venues and spaces are not completed. In 2017, there was an increase in the news about WKCD's venues. This is due to the scrapping of the initially planned mega performance venue, and instead, the space was replaced by the Hong Kong Palace Museum, which will exhibit artefacts from Beijing's Palace Museum. This decision triggered many of the politically-driven articles in late 2016.

WKCD had their first events in 2012, almost five years into the establishment of the Authority. The results of content analysis reveal that 56 of the 68 reports in the *Arts* category were from 2012 onwards. On further review, the number of news reports per year on arts events is disproportionate to the actual number of unique events in WKCD, with 11 news reports on 11 unique events in 2012 (1:1 ratio), 21 news reports on 31 events in 2013, 8 news reports on 48 events in 2014, and 16 news reports on 69 events. This could be due to novelty during early years, particularly in 2012 and 2013, where the media was interested in what programmes WKCD had to offer, and the reporting rate per event was high. It is also likely that the media will continue to report on WKCD arts events in the future, though definitely not at the ratio of the earlier years.

WKCD Politicized: A Discussion

Hong Kong is commonly known as a media-saturated city (Chan, 2014; Weaver & Willnat, 2012; Shapiro, 2010). Turning the attention solely to newspapers, there are a total of 52 daily newspapers, of which 25 are in Chinese, 12 are in English, 10 are bilingual (Chinese/English) and 5 are in Japanese (Information Service Department, 2015). Papers such as *Apple Daily*, *Oriental Daily*, and *The Standard* are amongst the highest in terms of circulation, while *South China Morning Post* (*SCMP*) has the most subscribers. In Hong Kong, it is not uncommon to spot people reading newspapers on public transport or when they are out for breakfast, or 'morning tea' in the Hong Kong context. Free newspapers are on the rise in the city, with many providers setting up distribution booths in both train and bus stations during peak hours. More people also read news on digital platforms, often managed by the newspapers themselves. According to Cheung (2016), newspaper readership increased in Hong Kong between 1975 and 2005. Moreover, with the rise of digital editions of newspapers in recent years, readership has continued to rise exponentially. Cheung attributed this increase of readership to the fact that the Hong Kong people are not allowed to choose their government, and therefore the media has become a key avenue to express the opinions of the people.

Compared to most cities and countries in Asia, the media in Hong Kong enjoys more leeway in terms of content restrictions and government interventions. Out of the 180 countries/regions assessed, Hong Kong is ranked 69th on the 2016 World Press Freedom index, which puts it second in Asia, after Taiwan (ranked 51st). China, on the other hand, is ranked 178th on the index, which puts it near the bottom of the list. This press freedom in Hong Kong is likely to be inherited from its time as a British colony, which ended in 1997. Despite this, press freedom during the British rule is not a given. During the first half of twentieth century, Chinese newspapers faced strict censorship from the government, especially during times of turbulence, such as the seamen's strike of 1922 (Zou, 2015). Even till the very last day before the return of Hong Kong to China, English law gave the Governor of Hong Kong the absolute right to censor the press whenever necessary (MacKinnon, 1988).

From the index, it is also clear that press freedom is directly linked to the level of democracy: the more democratic a country or city is, the more freedom the media enjoys (Stier, 2015; Donno, 2013). News media is often considered an important aspect of democracy, as it collects information and deliberates on what is to be collected and released to the public (Fenton, 2010). Particularly in more democratic societies such as Hong Kong, the media also takes on the role of the Fourth Estate, which makes the intentions and actions of the government known to its people through close monitoring (Steel, 2012; Willis, 2007; Kieran, 1997). In places with authoritarian political systems, such as Singapore, the media becomes more of a mouthpiece of the government and play down their monitoring role (Kenyon, Marjoribanks, & Whiting, 2013; Tan, 2010; Gunaratne, 2000).

When deciding what to report, journalists and news editors consider newsworthiness, which is usually dependent on a number of criteria, such as currency, cultural proximity, impact, human interest, and shock value (Whittaker, 1993). Political issues in Hong Kong are generally more newsworthy than arts and culture, even for cultural projects such as WKCD. For newspapers, representing WKCD from a political standpoint projects this arts and cultural project as hard news, which can attract more interest from the public. In a way, politics-oriented coverage also allows for more editorial space in the newspaper to review WKCD. One notable cultural project that is overwhelmed by political discussions was the Umbrella Festival held in Hong Kong over two weeks in May 2015. The arts festival was meant to be a platform for both artists and the people of Hong Kong to reflect and respond to the 79-day Occupied Movement six months after it was over. By the end of the festival, there were more than 30 substantial news reports in print, online and broadcast media, and at least half of the reports were in prominent news media outlets. Nonetheless, despite the seemingly successful media exposure, they were interested in the festival because of its political alignment with the Umbrella Movement. Thus, even though the media was willing to report on the arts festival, they were only keen on the stories related to the politics behind the festival, rather than the actual arts and cultural events. In fact, the festival only managed to secure less than five reports that covered the artists and their works.

Another underlying reason for this substantial focus on political discussions of WKCD is that newspapers in Hong Kong are largely funded by advertisements. They avoid offending other commercial entities at all cost, as these companies may be potential advertising clients. It is also worth noting that capitalists own the majority of the news media in Hong Kong. Regardless of their personal political affiliations and agenda, these businessmen tend to avoid offending Beijing, as they may have to pay a high price should their businesses be blocked or banned in China (Mathews, Ma & Lui, 2008). Self-censorship, therefore, is becoming increasingly common in Hong Kong newspapers when it comes to reporting on Mainland China. Corporate entities in China have also been entering the Hong Kong media market. In April 2016, Jack Ma's Alibaba Group bought *SCMP*, the city's most influential English newspaper.

Instead, the criticality is aimed at the government and its projects. When Hong Kong was returned to China in 1997, many feared that the media in Hong Kong, like that in China, would be strictly monitored and controlled by the Chinese government. Today, the media in Hong Kong is largely autonomous from China's intervention, mainly due to China's 'One Country; Two Systems' policy on Hong Kong. Nevertheless, this does not mean that China has no effect on Hong Kong media. While the Hong Kong newspapers can be very critical of the Hong Kong government, they tend to be more careful towards the Chinese government. *Wen Wei Po* and *Sing Tao Daily*, for example, are known to be pro-Beijing. *Apple Daily* remains the only newspaper that is clearly anti-China. Many newspapers take on a more centrist approach, and avoid being overtly pro-Beijing or anti-Beijing (Chan, Lee & So, 2012; Fung, 2007). Siapera (2010, p. 71) states that "hegemony is not exercised through outright

coercion, but through a consensus based on dominant common-sense understandings". Thus, newspapers have the autonomy to dictate the stories that they want to print, and this is in itself a form of coercion, as it forces the populace into thinking about certain issues more than others. As such, although journalistic standards are to be adhered to, there is plenty of flexibility with regard to how these stories are to be encoded, and what powers they assist in supporting.

The in-depth interviews with the two experts also triggered constructive discussions. Both of them agree that while citizen journalism is on the rise in Hong Kong, newspapers are still more impactful as they have greater access to different resources. This validates the use of newspaper reports in this research. Yet, with regards to whether the newspaper reports have an effect on forming the public's perceptions on WKCD, the two experts have somewhat different views. The news editor highlights that WKCD was more hotly debated during the earlier years between 2003 and 2006, at the stage of appointing the developer, and the public's concerns about government collusion with the property developers were of more interest than the issues discussed in recent years. It must be noted that during WKCD's earlier controversies between 2003 and 2006, citizen journalism was yet to be prominent in Hong Kong. The journalists during that period were the authority that created and sent the message (Jordan, 2013). Drawing on the concepts of Carey's (2009) ritual view of communication, which describes the regular and habitual consumption of newspapers as the norm, it can then be inferred that WKCD's earlier debates were better able to influence public perceptions. The professor, on the other hand, mentioned that WKCD, being an arts and cultural project, is not something that is part of people's daily lives. Hence, the media naturally is a crucial source of information for the public to learn about this project. Indeed, people rely on the mass media to gather information that is distant from their daily lives (Hobolt & Tilley, 2014). Employing the concepts of Ball-Rokeach and Defleur's (1976) *media dependency theory*, the readers' reliance on newspapers for 'correct' information enhances the impact and effects of media in the readers' perceptions. This indicates that the newspaper reports on WKCD in recent years may have a direct impact on forming public perceptions.

Conclusion

This research has excluded Chinese newspapers in Hong Kong because they tend to over-sensationalize the news, and news is made to be more entertaining in order to generate additional revenue by attracting more readers. Research has shown that the credibility of the Hong Kong newspapers, especially Chinese media, is declining year after year. One major reason for this drop is the rise of tabloid-style reporting. There are more reports that infringe on individuals' privacy, alongside the rise of erotic news, otherwise known as 'yellow' news. From this study, it can be concluded at this stage that the majority of the reports on WKCD in the English newspapers are political in nature, focusing on the directions, discussions and interviews by politicians.

Based on the research outcomes, the focus on politics has an effect on what the public think about WKCD, thus forming specific perceptions on this public project. It can be deduced that readers of the three English newspapers investigated here would associate WKCD with political issues, rather than the district's artistic directions, events, venues or benefits to the development of Hong Kong. The researcher argues that this overemphasis on politics may have an adverse impact on WKCD, and it is certainly unhealthy for the district's (and Hong Kong's) long term cultural development. With more completed venues (and arts events) in the next few years, one can only hope that media reports will shift their focus towards the district's artistic directions and activities.

Acknowledgements

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