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**A bleak future**

In 2018, the late chef, traveller and television personality, Anthony Bourdain, made a programme about Hong Kong in which he interviewed members of a local post-punk band. One of them spoke of concerns about disappearing freedoms and the lack of venues to perform in. But, they declared, they were free to say and play anything they wanted.

By mid-2020, the COVID-19 pandemic had decimated Hong Kong’s live music scene, and a Beijing-imposed National Security Law (NSL) meant citizens were no longer free to say anything they wanted. Many protest slogans had been banned, a Hong Kong “national anthem” forbidden, and protesters had been arrested for holding up blank pieces of paper.

The NSL is as sweeping as it is vague: It outlaws secession, subversion, “terrorism” and “collusion with foreign forces”; it forbids people from inciting hatred against the central and Hong Kong governments; it establishes a national security office in Hong Kong outside of local jurisdiction and it gives law enforcement officers expanded powers, including wire-tapping and conducting surveillance without a court order.

The government said very few people would be targeted, but I saw friends and acquaintances quit longstanding general discussion groups on WhatsApp even before the law was enacted. By the time it came into effect an hour shy of the 23rd anniversary of Hong Kong’s handover to the People’s Republic of China, many groups had disappeared altogether.

The space for open expression of dissent has shrunk dramatically in the seven months since then. Earlier this month, police said 97 people had been arrested for breaching the NSL since it came into force and more arrests are being announced every few days.

The police chief denied this constituted a “white terror”, but many Hongkongers now live in fear that their words could get them in trouble, or even cost them their liberty. The use of VPNs and encrypted messaging apps – which had started becoming popular during the 2019 protests – have surged.

But even as people in Hong Kong seek ways to express themselves without running afoul of the NSL’s red lines, recent government actions suggest freedom of expression and freedom of and access to information are only going to shrink further.

At the end of January, the government launched a month-long consultation on plans requiring people to provide their full names, date of birth, and copies of their identity documents when buying mobile phone SIM cards, bringing the city in line with rules in mainland China. Each person would also be limited to having three SIM cards. Officials say the move is necessary to tackle crime, but unregistered pre-paid SIM cards are widely used by activists and by protesters, as well as those who are concerned about their privacy when expressing political opinions, especially under the NSL.

A week later, Chief Executive Carrie Lam announced a “bold” slate of measures in her first address to the city’s legislature since four pro-democracy legislators were disqualified for “threatening national security” and over a dozen others quit in protest. The measures she announced included plans to tackle “fake news” and doxxing but could involve measures making it harder to access public records, such as vehicle registrations, property transactions and corporate filings – standard tools used by journalists conducting public interest investigations. Lam also hinted the privacy commissioner could get greater powers to order offending websites and platforms to remove content.

This has spooked those for whom a free internet and press are central to Hong Kong’s identity as “not just another Chinese city”. Despite the attempts to remake the city politically and culturally, Hongkongers cling to the fact that they can freely access platforms and websites that are banned in mainland China.

The prospect of increased internet regulation follows news that a Hong Kong internet service provider (ISP) had blocked access to a pro-democracy website in January to comply with the NSL, the first time a Hong Kong ISP has done so. The law empowers police to force ISPs to take “disabling action” if the content may endanger national security.

The blocked site HKChronicles.com documents incidents from the protests that grew from the anti-extradition bill movement of 2019, but also published personal information and photographs of police officers and pro-government individuals it claims has harassed protesters. There is at least one pro-government site that publishes personal information of pro-democracy figures and even journalists they see as supportive of protesters, but it has not been blocked.

Lokman Tsui, assistant professor at the School of Journalism and Communication at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, told me while he does not agree with the practice of doxxing, he thinks “this is not an NSL matter, it is a privacy matter, and using the NSL in this context to block and censor the website is not appropriate”.

Tsui says he worries about the future of the free internet in Hong Kong. “The NSL has been used and abused offline to silence dissent,” he says, “and the fear is that the NSL will now be used to silence speech online too.”

This would deal a serious blow to a city that has been watching its freedoms erode at a frightening pace. For Chris Yeung, the chair of the Hong Kong Journalists Association, the free internet, freedom of the press and the independence of the judiciary, are the “ultimate test” of Hong Kong’s survival as a city that is still recognisable as Hong Kong.

As Yeung says and I have described elsewhere, newsroom self-censorship has increased and sources have clammed up in the wake of the NSL. Attacks on press freedom continue. Last month, officers from the police national security unit visited four local news organisations and demanded they hand over materials, with the unusual order that they do not disclose the nature of the information requested.

News reports say police were seeking materials related to candidates who stood in a pro-democracy camp primary election last year. A total of 53 candidates and activists involved in the election were arrested for allegedly violating the NSL on the same day.

Excerpted: ‘In Hong Kong, freedom of expression is shrinking fast’

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