



Monthly newsletter: October 2019

Message from Keith

For me, the split screen images of the past few weeks were two dramatic news events happening more than 8,000 miles apart.

In Washington, D.C., House Democrats began an impeachment inquiry into whether President Donald Trump pressured a foreign leader to help with his presidential campaign. And in Hong Kong, more than four months of unrest turned increasingly violent with the October 1 Chinese National Day protests and the government's imposition of an emergency ban on face masks.

The two unrelated events had one thing in common; the rapid proliferation of disinformation and “fake news” through social media sites that served to further the political and societal polarisation.

In the U.S., if you are a Trump supporter, you can subsist on a steady diet of misinformation and discredited stories, like how the “whistleblower” who started the impeachment inquiry is actually a Democratic operative, how former Vice President Joe Biden and his son corruptly profited from their Ukraine dealings, and how the entire process amounts to a coup attempt by the “deep state.”

And here in Hong Kong, I've seen fake news swirling on social media sites falsely alleging that an elderly man beaten by protesters had died, that local “fanatics” were planning a [9/11-style terrorist attack](#) in Hong Kong, and that the protests were all being [secretly funded and enabled](#) by the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Endowment for Democracy.

In the past, it was easy to dismiss or ignore the wildest crackpot conspiracy theories. That was back when a few major news outlets dominated the agenda, when people still trusted the now-maligned “mainstream media” to get the story straight, and before social media were able to supply rocket fuel for the zaniest fringe ideas. But those days are long gone. Online platforms now allow people to retreat into their own information echo chambers, only hearing—and disseminating—whatever fits their preconceived notions.

The irony for me is that when the Internet and social media sites first became popularised two decades ago, they were seen as democratising tools, empowering ordinary citizens by breaking up the monopoly on information exercised by the mainstream media in the West, and by authoritarian regimes such as China. But what we have seen instead is the collapse of the old gatekeepers has led to a new kind of information anarchy—let a thousand nutty conspiracy theories bloom!

How to combat this torrent of rumour, nonsense, disinformation and craziness is one of the most vexing questions facing journalists, and journalism educators, today. We are unlikely to ever get back to a system where a few reputable media outlets once again become trusted by the vast majority, not now that anyone with a mobile phone and an Internet connection can spread fake news with a few clicks. And journalists also have enough real news to cover—is it really their job to try to debunk every rumour swirling around?

In the long term, the problem will really only be solved by news consumers, who have to learn to do their own fact-checking and not to believe every unproven or wacky item that gets forwarded to their inbox. And that starts by people being willing to get out of their partisan corners, and to be willing to believe something they might not agree with.

At the moment, I find it awfully hard to be hopeful.

Keith Richburg
Director of the JMSC

Highlights



Over 300 people attended our first event of the academic year, *The Protests and The Press: Maintaining objectivity in a polarized society*. The panel discussion was held on 12 September at the Meng Wah Complex. Our panellists [Antony Dapiran](#), [Erin Hale](#) (replacing [Kristie](#)



Lu Stout), [Jeffie Lam](#), [Dr. Francis Lee](#) and [Damon Pang](#), along with moderator [Keith Richburg](#), discussed how reporters can remain objective when the media itself has become part of the story throughout the anti-extradition bill protests in Hong Kong.



[Watch the entire event here](#)



[Washington Post](#) global affairs columnist [David Ignatius](#) gave a talk on 16 September about the state of Sino-American relations, U.S. foreign policy under President Trump and the current shape of the race for the 2020 Democratic



presidential nomination. He told a packed audience at the Rayson Huang Theatre that there is now a consensus in Washington that the old policy of engagement with China no longer works, but American foreign policy elites are uncertain what should replace it.

A promotional graphic for a lecture. The background is dark blue. On the left is a circular logo with a yin-yang shape, where the top half is the American flag and the bottom half is the Chinese flag. To the right of the logo is a white play button icon inside a circle. Text to the right of the play button reads: "U.S.- CHINA RELATIONS IN THE 'AMERICA FIRST' ERA", "Speaker: David Ignatius, Associate Editor and Columnist, The Washington Post", "Time: 6:30 - 8:00pm", "Date: 13 September 2019", "Venue: Rayson Huang Theatre, The University of Hong Kong". At the bottom, there are logos for the Journalism and Media Studies Centre (The University of Hong Kong) and the U.S. Consulate General Hong Kong and Macao.

[Watch the entire event here](#)

Student & Alumni News



JMSC alumnus Ko Swe Win (MJ 2009), editor-in-chief of [Myanmar Now](#), was among five recipients of the prestigious [Ramon Magsaysay Award](#) this year. He was lauded for "building the quality and force of media's truth-telling." The Award, now in its 61st year, honours "greatness of spirit and transformative leadership in selfless service to the peoples of Asia."



Gabriel Fung and Antonia Tang, both in their second year of the [Bachelor of Journalism](#) programme, were part of a [HKU team](#) whose mini-doc [Diversity in Sham Shui Po](#) was among nine entries selected



for the [MY World 360°](#) playlist. The United Nations initiative invites young people to share their perspectives on how the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) are relevant in their communities. The HKU doc was screened during the [UN General Assembly in New York in September](#).



The [Hong Kong Documentary Film Festival](#) will be screening the directorial debut of our recent Master of Journalism graduate, Mak Ru Yin, on 10 October. Ru Yin and her teammates Sophie Li, Sha Miao and Elise Xia produced the 18-min



mini-doc [Her Tenth](#) for [Ruby Yang](#) and Nancy Tong's documentary video production class last semester. A second screening scheduled for 15 November will be followed by a Q&A session with the team and the subject of the film, Hong Kong's Thai boxing champion Kwok Hoi Ling.

Faculty & Staff News



Dr. Masato Kajimoto spoke at the first [Global Media Literacy Summit](#) on a panel about "How can we shape the future of media literacy together?" The one-day event on 5 September in London was hosted by the [Google News Initiative](#) and Google.org to help "build a connected community of leading media literacy practitioners from around the world."



Masato also took part in a [panel discussion at the Foreign Correspondents' Club Hong Kong](#) on 12 September about "Information Wars – How Fake News and Disinformation Have Been Weaponized in the Hong Kong Protests". Watch [here](#).



Dr. King-wa Fu spoke at the "Anti-extradition Bill Movement: Straight Facts or Biased Rants" Forum along with JMSC alumnus Andrew Lau (MJ 2010) on 11 September. The event, held at the HKU Student Union, was organized by the [HKU Sociology Society](#). Watch [here](#).

JMSC in the news



(4 September) CNN: [Zara apologizes for 'misunderstanding' after Hong Kong stores close during protests](#), co-written by Vanesse Chan (BJ 2020)



(4 September) Financial Times: [Old messages, new memes: Beijing's propaganda playbook on the Hong Kong protests](#)



(5 September) U.S. News & World Report: [China's halting leap forward with childhood cancer care](#), by Ting Shi



(10 September) South China Morning Post: [China Daily newspaper criticised over claim Hong Kong protesters are planning 9/11 terror attack](#)

(10 September) South China Morning Post: [Why China went on a global media blitz over the Hong Kong protests – and why it probably won't work](#)



(12 September) [OZY: China's outsourcing its propaganda war against Hong Kong to online soldiers](#)



(9 October) [Inkstone: Why some Hongkongers are taking their chances with the mob](#), by Robin Hibberd (MJ 2020)

Coming up



Keith Richburg will be moderating one of the panel sessions at the [AsiaGlobal Dialogue 2019](#) that will be held on 13 November at Loke Yew Hall. This year's theme is "Building a Sustainable Framework for a Globalized Economy".



King-wa Fu will be speaking at these upcoming events: the [Atlantic Council's StratCom 2019](#), 23-24 October, Washington, DC, on the panel "[Understanding China's Information Operations](#)"; the World Economic Forum's [Annual Meeting of the Global Future Councils](#), 3-4 November, Dubai, UAE; and the



[Halifax International Security Forum](#), 22-24 November, Halifax, Canada. On 27 November, King-wa will give a talk on "[China's '360-degree' Digital Governance and Information Operation](#)" at the University of Copenhagen.

