

# HKU Journalism

Newsletter  
November 2020

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## Message from Keith

The most unusual American election in a lifetime—conducted during a pandemic, with record high early voting and no official conclusion after 48 hours of counting—is now one for the history books.

In the messy aftermath, there will now be plenty of media flagellation, and deservedly so, for all their miscalls. We were first told that fears of the coronavirus pandemic might suppress turnout or that mail-in votes would create chaos. We were assured that President Donald Trump was heading for an historic defeat. And many media outlets were predicting a Democratic “blue wave” that might retake control of the Senate and flip solidly conservative states such as Texas and South Carolina.

True, journalists covering U.S. politics will have some explaining to do. They need to self-examine for confirmation bias—meaning talking only to sources who reflect their own views and prejudices. They need to dial back the near-obsession with opinion polls, which are at best snapshots of the public mood, not predictors of future voting behaviour. They also need to get out of their comfort zone more and try to better understand the nearly 70 million Americans who voted to reelect Trump.

But I’ll leave the media flaying to others. Here, I want to instead celebrate all the things the media this year did right.

First, unlike 2016, campaign reporters showed remarkable discipline in not getting distracted by last

minute so-called “scandals”. Trump’s operatives tried hard during October to peddle unverified allegations involving supposed emails found on a laptop purportedly belonging to Vice President Joe Biden’s son Hunter.

Only the tabloid *New York Post* and Fox News, both Republican mouthpieces owned by Rupert Murdoch, ran with the story. Mainstream media outlets, doing their job as information gatekeepers, found the story too fishy, and the sources too compromised, and rightly gave it a pass.

This was in sharp contrast to 2016, when journalists jumped to repeat every conspiracy theory involving Hillary Clinton, helping to undermine her campaign.

Second, media fact checkers became more sophisticated about calling out lies and disinformation in real time. Trump’s repeated claims about widespread fraud involving mail-in ballots were usually instantly debunked as “untrue” or “without evidence”. Likewise, social media giants Twitter and Facebook became more aggressive about removing Trump’s misleading posts, or slapping them with warning labels. This was another hard-earned lesson from 2016, when disinformation was allowed to swirl unchecked in the social media swamp.

And finally, the media—especially the networks—did an exemplary job not rushing on election night to try to call a winner in the contest. Repeatedly, journalists like John King on CNN have cautioned viewers to be patient and for everyone to wait until all the votes were counted.

This self-restraint goes entirely against the normal tendency of the networks to want to be first to make the calls and predictions when the polls close. This time, the admirable restraint has helped calm the public mood as this unpredictable campaign slogs towards a finish.

The media didn’t do everything right this cycle, and there will be plenty of time to reflect. But let’s celebrate everything that went right, and hope lessons have been learned for the future. Journalism this year is better for it.

Keith B. Richburg  
Director, Journalism and Media Studies Centre

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## Highlights



In light of social distancing requirements, HKU moved its annual [info day for undergraduate admissions](#) online this year. Faculties and departments presented a full day of programming on Saturday, 31 October, which included live and recorded events. At Eliot Hall, our Bachelor of Journalism team put together full schedule of activities for our prospective applicants,



including a live Q&A chat for prospective students, live interviews by Programme Director [Jeffrey Timmermans](#) with current undergrads, video interviews with our staff and alumni, a virtual building tour and an overview of our bachelor's programme. Big thanks to our undergrad volunteers who staffed the live chat and helped out with the other events!



[Annie Lab](#) and [CitizenNews](#) agreed to a new cross-posting partnership starting October. The Hong Kong online news outlet will publish select stories by our team on their [website](#) and social media platforms, including Twitter and Facebook. This partnership is part of our efforts in news literacy education in Asia and will also help raise the profile of our of student-run fact-checking newsroom.

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## Alumni & Student News



Congratulations to [Varia Bortsova](#) on her new book *Soviet Visuals*. Varia graduated from the Bachelor of Journalism programme in 2014, and the book is based on her experiences since starting a Twitter account in 2016 called "Soviet Visuals" to share trivial aspects of life behind the Iron Curtain. It has since evolved into a Twitter, Facebook and Instagram community of a million people sharing content from the former Soviet Union. Her publisher, Bloomsbury, calls it "a funny, nostalgic and strange glimpse at life behind the Iron Curtain".

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## Faculty & Staff News



UNESCO recently published a booklet on *Media and information literacy education in Asia* of which [Masato Kajimoto](#) is the chief editor and also author of the Japan chapter. The publication explores policies and practices in Japan, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. In conjunction with the publication, Masato also facilitated a [workshop](#) organized by the UNESCO Offices in Jakarta and Bangkok on countering disinformation for journalism and mass communication educators in ASEAN countries from 27-29 October.



[Keith Richburg](#) was in high demand the last couple of weeks leading up to the US elections. He moderated a discussion during the October 22nd presidential debate for the American Club Hong Kong. On 28 October, he was on Zoom panels organized separately by the American Chambers of Commerce in [Hong Kong](#) and [Singapore](#) to round up the campaigning and discuss polling forecasts and other factors that may shift the outcome of the election.



Keith also took part in the *Financial Times's* annual news conference, *Future of News*, on 14 October. He was on a panel with Jennifer Creery of Hong Kong Free Press and Gary Liu of *South China Morning Post* to discuss "[The Future of News in Asia: Holding power to account in an increasingly challenging environment](#)".

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## HKU Journalism in the news



(7 October) Coda: [Disinformation from China floods Taiwan's most popular messaging app](#) (Masato Kajimoto)



(14 October) Asialink: [China feels it no longer needs the foreign media. But it still can't hide.](#), by Keith B. Richburg



(20 October) The Correspondent: [Hong Kong's National Security Law: Implications for Journalists](#) (Sharron Fast and Keith B. Richburg)



(22 October) Inkstone: [Inkstone Explains: How WeChat censors content for over a billion users](#) (King-wa Fu)



(26 October) Rest of World: [Control, Alter, Delete](#) (King-wa Fu)



(28 October) Radio Free Asia: [Hong Kong university appointments spark fears of Chinese Communist Party control](#) (King-wa Fu)



(30 October) The Strategist: [US media shows it's learned the lessons of 2016 in denying Trump an 'October surprise'](#), by Keith B. Richburg

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## Coming up



Hong Kong International  
Literary Festival  
香港國際文學節

Keith Richburg will be moderating three events at this year's [Hong Kong International Literary Festival](#), which will be a hybrid festival of online events and live events at Tai Kwun held from 5-15 November. "Rebel City: Hong Kong's Year of Water and Fire" and "Superpower Showdown: How the Battle Between Trump and Xi Threatens a New Cold War" on 7 November and "How to Talk about Race" on 14 November. More info [here](#).



**Telegram and Teargas:  
Roles of the social media in the  
2019 Hong Kong Anti-ELAB Movement**

**17 Nov 2020  
TUE**

Dr. King-wa Fu will be speaking with [Professor Francis Lee](#) of the [School of Journalism and Communication](#) at The Chinese University of Hong Kong on 17 November on the role of social media in the anti-extradition bill movement in Hong Kong. The Zoom event is part of the "Communication Seminar Series" organized by the [Centre for Chinese Media and Comparative Communication Research](#) at CUHK. Details [here](#).



Sharron Fast will be speaking at the [Hong Kong Internet Governance Forum](#) Roundtable on 18 November. The event titled, "Is the National Security Law Hong Kong's Great Firewall?", is co-organized by the [Internet Society Hong Kong](#) and legislator [Charles Mok](#). Sharron will speak about how the National Security Law is affecting the journalism industry and online news environment in Hong Kong.

