

# PRESERVING OUR COLLECTIVE MEMORY: THE CASE OF HK MAGAZINE

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**Abstract :** Founded in 1991, HK Magazine was one of the major English-language publications on local affairs, social issues and entertainment listings published weekly in Hong Kong for a quarter of a century. Apart from providing local entertainment information, it also witnessed the rapid social and political changes of Hong Kong when Britain handed over sovereignty of Hong Kong to China in 1997. In July 2013, HK Magazine was sold to the South China Morning Post (SCMP) Group which was subsequently purchased by Alibaba Group in December 2015. However, the SCMP Group announced on 28 September 2016 that the magazine's final issue would be released on 7 October 2016. The closure of the magazine was viewed by many as the loss of a "fun, independent and free-thinking" publication. In response to the huge reaction from the community, the SCMP Group agreed that the content of HK Magazine would be migrated to the SCMP website before the HK Magazine website was removed. It was however revealed that the SCMP website did not preserve the full archive of HK Magazine as promised. A public appeal was launched to help preserve the collective memory of Hong Kong by archiving the back issues of the magazine. Apart from reviewing the discussion arising from the close down of HK Magazine, this paper also points out the critical role of library in long term preserving HK Magazine on one hand and providing access to its digital content on the other.

**Keywords:** Collective Memory, HK Magazine, South China Morning Post, Hong Kong

## 1.0 Introduction

Founded in 1991, *HK Magazine* was one of the major English-language publications on local affairs, social issues and entertainment listings published weekly in Hong Kong for a quarter of a century. Apart from providing local entertainment information, it also witnessed the rapid social and political changes of Hong Kong when Britain handed over sovereignty of Hong Kong to China in 1997. This paper gives a brief account of the history of *HK Magazine* and the acquisition of the magazine firstly by South China Morning Post (SCMP) Group and subsequently by Alibaba Group. The author also reviews the discussion arising from the close down of *HK Magazine*, and points out the critical role of library in long term preserving *HK Magazine* on one hand and providing access to its digital content on the other.

## 2.0 HK Magazine: A Short Review

The first issue of *HK Magazine* was published in June 1991 under the title *HK: the indispensable Hong Kong Guide* by Asia City Publishing Limited which was a private publishing company based in Hong Kong. (See Fig. 1) Apart from *HK Magazine*, Asia City Publishing Limited also published a portfolio of free lifestyle publications in the city including *Where Hong Kong* (an international travel magazine), *Where Chinese* (a magazine for Mainland China tourists), *The List* (a bi-weekly women's magazine), etc.



Fig. 1 First Issue in June 1991

Initially, *HK Magazine* was designed as a small scale monthly English guides with only 24 pages. It consisted of both entertainment listings with feature stories about social and cultural issues, and articles about various entertainment in Hong Kong ranging from music, movies, dining, travel to fashion. In November 1992, the magazine was renamed *HK Magazine* and started to publish as a bi-weekly publication for the next three years. In September 1995, it changed to a weekly magazine until it ceased publication in October 2016. The increase in the publication frequency of *HK Magazine* from an initially monthly to a biweekly and then a weekly publication indicates that it was a popular title in Hong Kong.

Targeting at expatriates and those Hong Kongers with fluent English, *HK Magazine* had a circulation of 15,000 in early years. The weekly circulation reached about 80,000 in 2006 and then dropped drastically to about 40,000 in 2015. (Tsoi 2016) The readership of *HK Magazine* are mostly university graduates. In a survey conducted in 2004 by *HK Magazine*, it was reported that 87% of the readers had at least one university degree. *HK Magazine* was distributed freely at bars and restaurants, coffee shops and bookshops and retail stores all around the territory but mostly concentrated in commercial and business areas. As noted by Sarah Fung, the then Managing Editor at *HK Magazine*, flexibility was the key to its longevity of the magazine. She commented that:

“HK has never rested on its laurels, and we’ve made sure to diversify our offerings for an audience that increasingly relies on the Internet for its information. While people still love picking up the print edition, we also have our rich-media iPad edition, our website and social media channels. We also make a point of hiring talented young people and training them up to be excellent journalists, which keeps us in the know about what the kids are into these days. Everyone in our department is under 30. Of course, as long as we create a fun, relevant, quality magazine, people will still want to pick it up.” (Yee 2013)

### **3.0 New Buyers: SCMP and Alibaba**

In July 2013, Asia City Media Group together with *HK Magazine* and other affiliated media assets in Hong Kong were acquired by the SCMP Group for a sum of HK\$13 million. After selling to SCMP Group, Asia City Media Group changed its name to HK Magazine Media Group and was governed by a board of SCMP directors. This acquisition was however seen as a bad news by many in terms of media plurality and diversity in Hong Kong. (Grundy 2013). Two years later, SCMP Group was sold in December 2015 for a sum of HK\$2.06 billion (€242 million) to Chinese-owned Alibaba Group which is an e-commerce giant headed by Jack Ma in China. According to the spokesperson of the SCMP Group, the “deal includes the century-old newspaper, outdoor advertising, digital assets and magazines (Bloomberg Reporter 2016). *HK Magazine Media Group* as part of the SCMP Group was also sold to the Alibaba Group in this deal.

As viewed by some media, this acquisition was an effective way to raise the profile of Alibaba’s growing media enterprise and to “help the Post full long-held ambitions to be a global English-language window for the world into China.” (Bloomberg Reporter 28 September 2016; Hicks 11 December 2015) To pave the way for global readership, the Post brought down its 10-year-old paywall subsequently on 5 April 2016 giving public free access to its content. In an interview by SCMP, Jack Ma, Executive Chairman of Alibaba Group, commented that the “Post is a great media outlet - one of the best in Hong Kong” and Alibaba wanted to “make it a global media outlet through our technology and resources. (SCMP Reporter 2016) Apart from its editorial independence, Joseph Tsai, Executive Vice Chairman of Alibaba Group who is now the Chairman of the Post, also stressed that the Post would maintain its objective, fair and impartial reporting and coverage. (Hicks 2015) In Ma’s words, “[i]f the Post can play the role of a connector between the West and the East, I have confidence in the paper’s future success.” (SCMP Reporter 2016) Despite of the promise that Alibaba’s management would not involve in the Post’s newsroom operations, Zach Hines, the Editor-in-Chief of *HK Magazine* from 2005 to early 2015, commented that the Post has been “shifting its focus away from Hong Kong” and “their new priority is to target Western readers overseas to present coverage of mainland China.” (Tsoi 2016)

### **4.0 The Closure of HK Magazine**

Ten months after selling to Alibaba Group, SCMP Group announced on 28 September 2016 that the final issue of *HK Magazine* would be released on 7 October 2016, putting a full stop to its quarter of a century history. According to the SCMP spokesperson, the closure of *HK Magazine* was primarily due to very competitive market environment:

“In the past few years, *HK Magazine* has been subjected to very challenging market conditions, which were especially dire for English-language lifestyle print media. Furthermore, the volatile advertising landscape, diminishing profitability from display advertising and event business further thwarted the magazine’s sustainability in the foreseeable future.” (Anonymous 2016). (See Fig. 2)

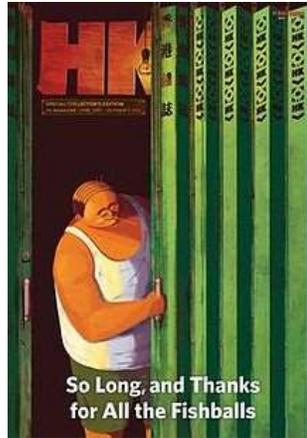


Fig.2 Last Issue Number 1,166 on 7 October 2016

Though the circulation of *HK Magazine* has been dropped to 50,000 at the time of buy-out, the announcement was still shocking to the media profession at that time and the “death of *HK Magazine* has led to disbelief and outrage among its loyal readers”. (Grundy 2016a; Tsoi 2016) It was the third *SCMP* subsidiary to close down since the Alibaba Group acquired the SCMP Group in December 2015. The other two were the *48 HOURS* weekend magazine and the Chinese language edition of *SCMP*. As described by its former reporter Grace Tsoi who is now a reporter of BBC Chinese, the closure of *HK Magazine* was the loss of a “fun, independent and free-thinking” magazine in Hong Kong. (Tsoi 2016) It is worth noting, in Tsoi’s comment, that: “[i]t is obvious that *HK Magazine* has faced difficult times, but the closure still prompted questions from some who believed the magazine did not make losses, even in its worst year.” (Tsoi 2016) If *HK Magazine* did not have any major financial challenge, what are the reasons behind the closure of the magazine? There were many speculations floating around about the close down. Would it be because *HK Magazine* has offered “some of the best independent, critical reflection of HK politics and policies”. (Grundy 2013) For many years, *HK Magazine* were very vocal in many social and culture happenings. For example, there has been increasingly concern about heritage preservation in Hong Kong in the past two decades. When the issue about the destruction of Wing Lee Street in the Central District of Hong Kong came out, there were a lot of oppositions from the media especially from *HK Magazine*. After having huge public pressure, the entire urban renewal plan for that area was halted. (Yee 2013) *HK Magazine* also addressed other “hot topics” such as “Hong Kong’s relationship with mainland China, the staggering income inequality found in the city and LGBT issues, at a time when few mainstream outlets were interested.” (Tsoi 2016) Sarah Fung, the then Managing Editor of *HK Magazine*, regarded press freedom as a core value of media profession and is something that every media practitioner should fight for. She said:

“As for press freedom, increasingly in the past year or so, it’s true that we’ve heard many more stories about editors spiking or diminishing stories that they feel are too politically sensitive, and there have also been attacks on journalists and photographers. But as long as journalists continue to report these cases, we are standing our ground for press freedom in Hong Kong. This is something the entire city cares deeply about – Hong Kongers are very politically aware and civic-minded. The things we say in *HK Magazine* are things we couldn’t get away with saying in so many other parts of Asia, such as Singapore and most certainly the mainland, and I am very proud and grateful for that.” (Yee 2013)

Having mainland China as a new business focus of SCMP Group under Alibaba management, it is not entirely surprising that SCMP subsidiary would be less critical of Beijing in recent years. (Phillips 2016) As Hines sadly put it: “[t]o be a truly independent press, you cannot be beholden to anyone except your readers. But, to my great dismay, this is becoming an increasing impossibility in Hong Kong, in both the mainstream Chinese and much-smaller English media.” (Hines 2016).

### 5.0 What Can We Do?

Being a highly popular and free English-language magazine, both the media profession and the public responded strongly to the decision to shut down *HK Magazine*. When the SCMP Group decided to cease publication of *HK Magazine*, the SCMP spokesperson said “[t]he last issue of *HK Magazine* will be published on 7 Oct, 2016 while the operations of its website and social media platforms will cease in a few days afterward.” (Anonymous 2016). It is hardly possible to imagine that a media publisher will consider deleting the content of its publication

from its website even though the publication has ceased publication. This decision has caused a strong reaction from the Hong Kong Journalists Association to lodge an inquiry with SCMP management. In view of the enormous pressure and negative comments from the community, the SCMP Group finally decided that the online content of *HK Magazine* would be migrated to the SCMP website before the *HK Magazine* website was removed. (Grundy, 2016b). (See Fig. 3)



Fig.3 *HK Magazine* Archive hosted by SCMP Group

It was however found out that SCMP Group did not preserve the full archive on their website. For example, the issue 1,103 which featured Leung Chun-ying, the then Chief Executive of Hong Kong SAR Government, on the cover was not accessible in the archive hosted by SCMP Group. Mart van de Ven, a data scientist Hong Kong, helped archive the entire *HK Magazine* website (<https://hkmag-archive.com/>) just before the original server was closed down. Apart from archiving the online content of *HK Magazine*, Mart also initiated the *HK Magazine* Archive Project (<https://goo.gl/FA43T3>), a public appeal to save the print copy of the magazine. (See Fig. 4) Mart has saved 122 issues and enlisted public effort to source 1,043 missing issues. (Grundy 2016c) All these efforts indicate that the content of *HK Magazine* is part of the public history and becomes the collective memory of Hong Kong people.



Fig.4 *HK Magazine* website Archived by Mart van de Ven on 16 October 2016

## 6.0 Concluding Remarks

According to the Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders, Hong Kong has dropped from the 18<sup>th</sup> place when the index was first published in 2002 to the 70<sup>th</sup> place in 2018. There has been a significant decrease in press freedom in Hong Kong in the past sixteen years. Although it was announced publicly that the closure of *HK Magazine* was due to the very difficult business environment in Hong Kong, this case, as viewed by many media practitioners, has a negative impact on press freedom in Hong Kong. Ying Chan, the founding director of the Journalism and Media Studies Centre at the University of Hong Kong, also indicated that the closure of *HK Magazine* “reflects the demise of the print media. All print media are losing circulation or they are closing for one reason or another.” (Tsoi, 2016) So what is the role of the library in long term preserving *HK Magazine* on one hand and providing access to its digital content on the other? Apart from the archival website of *HK Magazine* by Mart van de Ven which only provides part of its content, the library community can take a more proactive role to collaborate with the media professionals by providing wider access to the magazine currently kept in both public and academic libraries in Hong Kong. As

stipulated in the copyright ordinance of Hong Kong, library can also provide access to the digital counterpart of the print copy of *HK Magazine* within the library premise to facilitate easy access to the magazine.

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