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Abstract

This paper examines how modern media technology is used to influence and control perception of major public events. Drawing on original documents, interviews and direct observation, it examines the operations of Hong Kong's Government Information Service during the handover to China in 1997. It represents the latest chapter of the author's work examining the role of foreign correspondents in Asia.

Hong Kong's Government Information Service sought to minimise "bad" publicity by controlling journalists covering events. It did so by a selective accreditation, which lacked transparent criteria and was not subject to open appeal. Accredited journalists were subject to further strict controls; balloted entry to events, cordoned off "press zones", and invited access to key participants. Journalists were merely observers at the key events, with little or no opportunity to ask questions.

While doing so, the GIS encouraged the perception of "open" coverage, by supplying journalists with officially approved and created text, audio, vision and internet. Lavish spectacles were staged to manipulate the images broadcast by live television.
FROM INFORMATION RICH TO INFORMATION POOR?

Spin controlling Hong Kong’s Transition

Handling representations of the Hong Kong handover posed delicate and complex problems for the British and Chinese governments. Both countries wanted unimpeded profit taking. Yet both had been engaged in long running and virulent media campaigns against the other; with one characterised as a corrupt tyranny and the other seen as inheriting the spoils of the Opium trade.

The end of century handover event was emblematic of the end of European empires, attracting the largest media contingent seen in Eastern Asia. More than five thousand foreign journalists and support crews descended on Hong Kong, pursuing news agendas framed by a globalised spectrum of political and cultural assumptions. Many western journalists raised the cold war spectre of communist domination, while in China, the official media talked of “washing away one hundred years of shame”¹ of western colonialism.

Hong Kong was moving from being a colony operating within liberalised Western paradigms to a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the last Stalinist world power. Both British and Chinese governments sought to present an orderly transition. Responsibility for government public relations fell to British trained civil servants who themselves faced an unpredictable future; destined to become part of China’s rapidly evolving system of government.

¹ This official slogan refers to the “shame” imposed on China by its defeat in the Opium Wars which resulted in treaties establishing Hong Kong. It was repeated everywhere in China; on radio, television, in newspapers, on posters and banners in the run up to the handover. Citizens repeated it “spontaneously when interviewed on CCTV (state television).
The Official Farewell

The sun set for the last time in British colonial Hong Kong on June 30 1997. At the British Farewell Ceremony, Chris Patten delivered his last speech as the Governor in driving rain. Patten’s voice echoed at the Prince of Wales Barracks at East Tamar Base where some 10,000 people gathered for the Farewell Ceremony. Looking on were 1,000 journalists from 48 countries and territories.

An Australian documentary maker, Phillip Robertson was behind a camera filming the Ceremony from on a scaffolding erected nearby. His crew was one of 20 foreign TV organisations that were given access to the event. To reach his assigned position, Robertson had to obtain a press accreditation, and negotiate with his fellow journalists from Australia and New Zealand to represent them as the pool crew, before going through three security check points:

Since we had never seen the place before, we didn’t know where we were. It turns out we were on a scaffolding, very high, six stories high. In fact, we couldn’t see people, stands anything like that. You were miles away, and it was like filming a rock concert. (Nakano : 1997)

The Hong Kong Government designed the Ceremony to be photographed as a visual spectacle, and assigned camera positions. Robertson was caged up during the Ceremony, and was not allowed to wander down to film faces in the crowd:

It was done deliberately, I think, so that you were excluded from covering, so that you would take their [official] footage. And that was my main feeling that they organised a spectacle. They had 6 to 8 cameras. That was only wide spectacle shot. No human interest there. Close shots of Charles, and the Governor, but no close shots of ordinary people, no audience shots whatsoever. If you took the feed, what you got was spectacle. (Nakano : 1997)
The task of handling the diverse and competitive media which would descend on Hong Kong, fell largely to a department of the rather prim and proper civil service, the Hong Kong Government Information Services (GIS). The Farewell Ceremony was one of the official events whose coverage was tightly controlled by the GIS. Founded and run on British lines, GIS’s News Division had in colonial times sought to influence domestic an international opinions about what Government House defined as Hong Kong’s aims and achievements. It did so by channelling information by teleprinter to the press and dealing with press inquiries. The GIS sought to continue this tradition at the biggest and last colonial event, the handover.

GIS was not merely a public relations department that produced glossy annual reports. It also had direct access to the public itself by preparing local news bulletins broadcast on Hong Kong’s radio and television stations. By 1966, it was responsible for eleven radio bulletins in English and eight Chinese bulletins each day. These included ten minute news bulletins, as well as one minute news summaries. This service evolved into the BBC style news and current affairs produced by the SAR’s Radio Television Hong Kong (HKGP 1966:208).

Meanwhile, the Hong Kong civil service provided cradle to grave support for the families of GIS senior employees; offering a package which included private schooling, medical care, housing and even a burial plot for those who died in the course of duty. The GIS training manual promised an exciting career, with civil service security:

On any given day, GIS staff might find themselves locked in meetings discussing high level government policy, dealing with the media at the scene of a major disaster, conducting visiting journalists round a refugee camp, planning a major advertising campaign, out with a camera crew making a promotional film, or even
travelling abroad to attend an international conference or exhibition. Through all these activities GIS carries out its task - helping the government communicate with the people of Hong Kong. The message is put across through press releases, films, television, and radio announcements, posters, leaflets and books. GIS also organises community activities such as outdoor rallies and stage shows. (GIS undated)

The handover project would seek to draw together these diverse skills, becoming the GIS' top priority and involving all of its 350 staff. A bureaucracy of career information officers, it had been asked to transform itself into a modern media handler during the governorship of Chris Patten.

Patten arrived in Hong Kong on 9 July 1992 - five years before the handover. The last governor, a politician accustomed to playing to the Westminster Gallery, thought the GIS lacked a sense of direction, not to mention professional skills. At his first governor's news conference, journalists were herded together by a GIS which seemed incapable of even getting the microphones to work. It had ended in a shambles. (Dimbleby: 1997) To an extent, the smug behaviour of the information officers reflected that of an anachronistic colonial government which saw little need to court public opinion or even communicate effectively through a media which was expected to dutifully wait for official news from Government House. Many GIS information officers were recruited directly from university, with negligible experience in journalism and apparently even less concern about journalists' need for quick, accurate and colourful material. The former editor of the Far Eastern Economic Review, Derek Davies, claimed that the pre-Patten civil service preferred to ignore journalists. He said most saw journalists as irrelevant to the process of government:

Any criticism was by definition uninformed, because the critic had not seen the files. If any criticism did penetrate the official thick skin, it ran the risk of being damned with the worst condemnation a government spokesman could offer: it was described as being "unhelpful." Protestations that it was not a journalist's function to be helpful met with puzzlement. (Davies: 1997)
Patten the politician thought that GIS was ‘hopeless’ at conveying the confronting messages he had to make through the period of transition. ‘The operation tends to be fire fighting and damage limitation, rather than getting out and selling what we are trying to do,’ Patten said later (Dimbleby: 1997). He moved quickly to create the position of Governor’s press secretary to more effectively play the media. The last person to hold the job, Kerrie McGlynn, a former Australian journalist known as an astute political operator, became GIS’s Deputy Director (Overseas) after transition to Chinese sovereignty. Before the handover, he was undoubtedly the best connected conduit for information available foreign correspondents in Hong Kong: a certain source of off the record information, a talented fixer, and a well regarded raconteur at the bar of the FCC. Afterwards, he was to keep his job but lose most of his high level connections.

Some journalists were relieved to see GIS in control of the hand over ceremonies. Prior to the hand over, the independent Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA) was concerned that GIS could be taken over by Xinhua, the Chinese central government’s media muscle. Although both organisations were engaged in promoting the views of arms of the Chinese government, the Association believed there were obvious differences in news handling by the two organisations. In China, media outlets were part of the Party machinery and consequently expected privileged access to information and events. In post hand over Hong Kong, there was still a line drawn between media operations and government interests. Even at Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK), a civil service broadcaster directed by a former GIS official, journalists operated independently and sought to criticise government.

The HKJA saw the appointment of career civil servant, Thomas Chan, as GIS Director as evidence that the organisation would continue to operate as an informer rather than
an enforcer or Hong Kong media. It asked Mr. Chan how he responded to China Central TV (CCTV) reporters who were used to privileged access in mainland China. They complained they had not received special treatment in coverage of handover events:

I told them: there is a notice board over there and press activities are announced there. There will not be special notifications. If you want to sign up, you should do so at the right time. This is the rule of the game in Hong Kong. Later on, people from CCTV were used to this system, and were happy during the whole process of interviews...

The media knows exactly what the standpoint of the [Hong Kong] government is. They respond to the policy and information released by the government. Both sides accept the working style of each other. The media does not want to see stringent press restrictions being imposed on reporters; the government does not want self-censorship of the media due to commercial or other reasons. (HKJA 1997)

Under the spotlight of the world media, mainland journalists were at least supposed to be seen to playing by the same rules of access. There were supposed to be no unwritten rules requiring Hong Kong reporters to write their stories in officially approved ways, thereby engaging in self-censorship.

The Rules of the Game

The GIS was however determined toweed out unruly reporters. It sought to control press coverage through a system of accreditation which it initiated in 1995. An Australian GIS information officer, Jonathan Lange, conducted a survey of international and local media organisations, he thought might be interested in covering the events. Lange said that the Hong Kong Government prepared an extensive list of official contacts from which journalists could be accredited:

We sent out the survey to all of the foreign correspondent representatives we know about in Hong Kong and all of the local media. We sent it to our overseas offices. We have ten and they can distribute it to their contacts. We sent it to the European
Broadcasting Union, the Asian Broadcasting Union, the North American Broadcasters Association and all of the agencies. (Knight: 1997)

It followed that the GIS process of selection relied on journalists' employers rather than journalists' own organisations to identify legitimate reporters. Since accreditation was initially by invitation only; the process inevitably resulted in unexpected applications as freelance journalists arrived from around the world to cover the story. In addition, all journalists covering the event were subjected to a security check made with the police in their home countries. Accreditation, therefore, was sometimes flatly denied to latecomers. They received letters from the Handover Ceremony Coordination Office which said:

At the close of application deadline on 7 April, we have received about 8,500 submissions for accreditation. Unfortunately the number has far exceeded our anticipation. Accreditation will give access only to the Press and Broadcast Centre from where journalists/broadcasters file their stories. Coverage of events such as Handover and Farewell Ceremonies will require separate and additional accreditation. Since space at these venues are very limited, I regret to inform you that your application is unsuccessful. (GIS: 1997)

Chief Information Officer, Daniel Sin said these last minute applications ironically caused the GIS the most problems:

Even in the last week of June we were still getting calls from people wanting accreditation. Some media staff who had not applied for accreditation with us thought they could arrive on June 29 or June 30, get accredited and walk straight into the Handover Ceremony. However, we tried to help them as much as we could and short of giving them accreditation, ensured that most could make use of the facilities at the PBC [Press and Broadcast Centre] and receive all of the information available to accredited media workers. (Free 1997)

Unaccredited journalists were subsequently allowed limited access to the PBC, and could collect press releases there. However, they had to wait in a queue to reapply each time they sought to enter the premises. They were denied press kits, unable to attend
press briefings, ask questions or take part in the organised visits. They were also automatically excluded from the pooling system organised for access to the key events.

Marshalling

The Hong Kong GIS had quietly assumed the right to decide who could work as a journalist in the opening hours of the Special Administrative Region. This approach contrasted strongly with media handling in other international news events. In Cambodia, the United Nations which provided accreditation to reporters who could prove membership of the International Federation of Journalists. In South Africa, individual political parties such as the African National Congress, provided accreditation. The result was an open if somewhat anarchic coverage of the Mandela inauguration. In South Africa everybody got in, but most people had to wait a long time. ITN News producer, Glenda Spiro, was caught in the media scrum.

It was over the top. We had to stay up the whole night to get into something that started at noon. [Journalists had to queue for media buses which left at 5 am.] If you have to go from one event to another it becomes impossible. Traditionally here [Hong Kong] they want you to be early to all the events. But not that early. (Knight 1997b)

The 300 media employers' responses to the Hong Kong GIS survey were used in planning for the Press and Broadcasting Centre (PBC), which was located at Hall Seven in the Hong Kong Exhibition and Convention Centre. The responses formed the basis for selecting a list of media organisations which were invited to nominate journalists who would be considered for accreditation, allowing them security passes to at least get them into the PBC. From these accredited journalists, GIS selected an elite group to directly cover the key events such as the handover event and the subsequent British departure.
GIS described its mass media handling as ‘press marshalling’. ‘We had to strike a balance between giving the photographers and reporters access to events while making sure their presence did not interfere,’ according to Assistant Director (News), Mak Kwok-wah, who was responsible for the press marshalling teams:

We have never dealt with such large groups of media before but I’m happy to say that we managed pretty well. We encountered the usual problems such as reporters or photographers trying to get beyond cordon lines or jostling for better positions, but we expected this and could deal with it quickly and effectively. (Free: 1997)

The GIS identified four major events for journalists: the Farewell Ceremony, the Handover Ceremony, the Inauguration Ceremony and the Celebration. Among one thousand seats available for media at the Farewell, a half of these places went to the host countries, in this case Britain and Hong Kong. The remainder of the seats were allocated proportionally to foreign countries whose press corps balloted for spaces. ‘It was a very tedious process,’ Mak said later.

The media were not unruly. Most of them were very understanding. Those who came to Hong Kong to cover the handover understood our problem. They realised the efforts Hong Kong had put into organising these events. From the experience that I got from individual media sessions with them, they deserved some praise from us. (Free: 1997)

Control through Support

During the peak period from June 28 to July 2, more than half of the Information Services Department had been on duty in the Press and Broadcasting Centre (PBC). The HK$85 million PBC had space for about six hundred reporters at any one time, as well as providing 160 booths for individual Broadcasters. It was staffed around the clock by the GIS to field questions and provide answers on subjects ranging from the Maipo Marshes to the new Chek Lap Kok airport; from the economy to the social
welfare system; or from the price of flats to the cost of a beer. GIS Assistant Director, Ella Tam, led the team of officers seconded to the Handover Ceremony Office:

There was heavy interest in a lot of the nitty gritty about the events such as the exact timing and program rundown of the Farewell Ceremony and the Handover Ceremony.... There were also technical aspects which had to be handled such as making sure radio journalists could get good, clear sound, ensuring TV broadcasters were able to transmit their signals by satellite or helping print journalists send their stories by modem...(Free: 1997)

GIS staff organised a program of 70 package tours for visiting media which included 30 briefings and 40 visits over a three week period. 1,900 journalists attended the briefings and 1,200 took part in the visits. The most popular tours were those to see the border that divided Hong Kong from China, and the new airport under construction.

Journalists who came to the PBC were greeted with a bag-full of souvenirs - a polo shirt, a watch, and a binder containing fact sheets including biography of Governor Patten and Chief Secretary Anson Chan, but not one of incoming Chief Executive Tung Chi-hwa. The journalists also received a copy of Hong Kong Advantage - a positive portrayal of Hong Kong’s economic future by Harvard scholars. However, some Japanese visiting journalists saw no use of it, because they could not read English books. They simply gave their copies to their local assistants.

Press releases were made available in printed form, on a continuous news feed supplied to news organisations and on a special internet home page. GIS began an internet service in 1995, progressively providing separate pages for individual departments. It established two home pages for the handover; a general information page for the public and a specialist service to journalists which included a search function with access to speeches and press releases. The unit operated twenty four hours a day during the handover, providing updated information within minutes of
release. An accurate transcript of Governor Patten’s speech at the Farewell Ceremony was available to anybody who logged on to the site. Internet team Leader, Christine Cheung said that graphics had been intentionally simplified to allow quick downloads for impatient reporters:

We found that many of the overseas journalists were tapping into the web site quite often because it had all the information as soon as it was available. In the end, we had almost 190,000 hits on the web site over a three week period, which was encouraging. (Knight: 1997 b)

Digitalised photographs were also available on the net site. GIS’ team of twenty six photographers attended and recorded all of the major events, working more than twelve hours a day for the five day peak period. Unit leader, Samuel Pang said that the photographs were shot in 35 ml and scanned for digital transmission:

We used more than 600 rolls of film during that period - that is over 20,000 frames. Our biggest problem now is that we have to do all the filing, which will take much longer than to take all the photos. (Free:1997)

The Press and Broadcast Centre provided live television links to all major events. RTHK acted as host broadcaster, heading a consortium which included 200 staff from the Hong Kong commercial stations ATV, TVB and Wharf Cable. To aid coverage, ten outside Broadcast units were set up using 103 cameras to cover more than 25 events. The core feed was beamed over a continuous 96 hours to satellites covering 80 percent of the globe. The service was free of charge.

In practice, this meant that news organisations could cover the multifaceted events from their news rooms; drawing as RTHK Radio did, on the television live feed, news agency material, electronically delivered speeches and news releases. With access to the main events strictly controlled, a limited number of journalists were able to actually witness the events on which they were reporting. There were very few opportunities to
ask questions. Those outside the pool relied on the GIS information feed supplied on giant screens in the PBC, to create the 'on the spot' reports on events happening elsewhere. These journalists, many of whom were presenting live coverage, were as a result heavily dependant on the material fed to them. They might pretend that they were on the site, but many were just as isolated from the action as their news editors half a world away.

This control of information and access gave the GIS unprecedented leverage over how the drama was reported as it was unfolded. The Joint Liaison Group had written the plot some time previously. The public relations teams attached to the respective leaders supplied the scripted dialogue for their respected news actors. The event planners provided the spectacle for the cameras. RTHK made sure that the microphones worked this time.

The official message to be sold by GIS had already been outlined by Hong Kong’s Chief Secretary, Anson Chan, in a speech delivered to the Pacific Basin Economic Council in Manila in May 1997. If Hong Kong could survive the media onslaught, it could survive anything, she said:

Of course we know that a lot of journalists will be looking for a juicy story and Hong Kong has already had its fair share of those. But the headline I’ll be looking for, at least in sub-text, will say: ‘Hong Kong goes back to China; Nothing Happens’. (Chan 1997)

Press Release Reality

The handover was a series of staged events.
The British *Daily Telegraph*’s Graham Hutchings, saw these spectacles; the marching pipe bands, the fireworks and the dancing as intentional distractions for the world’s media.

This was not a spontaneous news story. The script was written thirteen years before it happened. There wasn’t going to be any blood. There probably weren’t going to be any unexpected developments. So in a way, you were doing a bit of theatre criticism, a review of some sort of performance rather than trying to rush around and keep pace or keep a step ahead of a moving story. (Knight: 1997 b)

Press release reality prevailed.

Consider the coverage of Governor Patten’s departure from Government house, the colonial administrative nerve centre which some reporters chose to style simply as his ‘home’. The report for the BBC’s main lunch time domestic bulletin was loaded with a long standing affection for an empire passing. In this context, it might be remembered that the BBC's contemporary World Service began life in 1932 as the Empire Service.

Now the BBC journalists were reporting on the last Governor leaving Britain’s last major imperial outpost. But once again the script came from a respected colonial source. The final shots from the departure sequence revolved around an event heralded by a press release from the Government Information Services. The release titled ‘Brief on Government House Departure ceremony’ had been issued the day before. The expected departure was precisely timed (4:20 p.m.) and included musical accompaniment (Auld Lang Syne). The press release noted:

Mr. Patten will also follow the tradition of doing three rounds in his car in the grounds of Government House to signify that he will return.

(Government Information Services 29 June 1997)

However, Governor Patten on this occasion, did not follow the script, the BBC did.

*Sound*         *Vision*
And one last leaving ritual for the governor.
His car circled the courtyard, three times, a Chinese custom which means ‘hope to be back’
The gates of government house were closed. End of era.
(BBC 30 June 1997)

Union Jack flag on limousine bonnet.
Patten looks through rain streaked car window as vehicle appears to circle the drive.
Limousine leaves gates. Shot taken from outside looking in.
Gates close. Shot taken from inside looking out.

Even the New York Times also the reported the Governor’s Departure as:

Slowly, the long black car flying the governor’s ensign from the hood circled the courtyard before Government House three times a Chinese ritual performed by all previous governors to signal ‘we shall return’.
(The New York Times 1 July 1997)

America’s Cable Network News live coverage also echoed the press release. It sought to milk the departure for it emotive potential. CNN’s fawning commentary, provided by presenter, May Lee, could be only loosely described as reporting:

Lee: I would like to bring in Caroline Courthaud. She is a very close friend of the Pattens. Caroline, what is Mr Patten thinking right now? What kind of emotions are going on? We have seen his daughters and they were very emotional.

Courthaud: I sure that when he was handed the Union Jack by his ADC there with the strains of God Save the Queen, I am sure he would have longed to fall through the floor. He has grown to love the people of Hong Kong. Although he’s had a very difficult time from a political point of view, in other senses he has had a very interesting time, as he often says

Lee: Tell me about Governor Patten behind the scenes. What was he like when he was in the spot light?

Courthaud: I think he’s an incredibly caring man, a very spiritual man and I think that without that spirituality, he would have found the strain of the relationship with the China impossible. He’s a very close family man with a wonderful wife and a supportive family.
(CNN 30 June 1997)
Sadly for journalists who failed to use their eyes to check press releases against real events, the governor’s car did not circle the court yard three times on this occasion. *Time* Magazine had a different version of the story:

But when onlookers by failing to go around the circular drive in front of Government House three times - a colonial ritual signifying, 'I shall return.' Without informing his staff, Patten ordered the driver to make only one-and-a-half circuits. Loathed by Beijing for the democratic reforms he instituted, Patten had no illusions about returning to this symbol of colonial power.’ *(Time 14 July 1997)*

Perhaps Patten was signifying that he would not be back. This otherwise insignificant aspect of his departure indicated that many television journalists preferred the government sanctioned narrative rather what they might have seen had they been looking.

**Conclusion**

Hong Kong’s Government Information Service sought to minimise “bad” publicity by controlling journalists covering events. It did so by a selective accreditation, which lacked transparent criteria and which was not subject to open appeal. Accredited journalists were subject to further strict controls; balloted entry to events, cordoned off “press zones”, and invited access to key participants. Journalists were merely observers at the key events, with little or no opportunity to ask questions.

Veteran China hand, Steve Vines, said that GIS “spoon fed” journalists who should have been interested in the things which were *not* on the government agenda. Vines, who covered the handover for the British *Independent*
newspaper, said the GIS rapidly abandoned the “open government” approach he said had been encouraged by Governor Patten:

Patten forced them to act against their natures, as far as they were concerned. There was a big relief and as soon as he was out the door. They bolted it. I can tell you that for the most elementary things, I have the most trouble getting things these days. People don’t want to go on the record. You have to speak to flunky number six. You are not allowed to speak to whoever ever is doing whatever it is. Of course they whinge like drains if you say anything they don’t like. They complain that you haven’t given their point of view which the haven’t given to you. By the time of the actual handover, and by that I mean the period from May until June, they were already China mode. The quality of information you got from them went very sharply into decline. (Knight: 1997 b)

Meanwhile, the GIS encouraged the perception of “open” coverage, by supplying journalists with officially approved and created text, audio, vision and internet. Lavish spectacles were staged to manipulate the images broadcast by live television. American ABC Asia correspondent, Jim Laurie, agreed that the demands of live television encouraged superficial reporting which focussed on the created spectacle. Laurie said the images often obscured the spectacle:

Because you can go live, you do go live. I remember in 1991, during the coup in Moscow and then the so called parliamentary attempted coup against Boris Yeltsin. We and CNN were going live. We did not know what was going on inside the White House which we could have got to had we not been chained to camera positions. I don’t think that many correspondents are very good when they are doing live television. They would be much better to take time to think, not have to be extemporaneous, to write something, craft it and be out there to see and talk and come back, digest and then get on with it. There is very little digestion of information possible when you are going live all the time. What we now have at the BBC and CNN, we have more of this around the clock revolving news. I don’t think all news is better news. It is simply more news and often worse news in terms of content. (Knight: 1997 b)
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ASIAN MEDIA: COPING WITH THE ECONOMIC CRISIS?

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