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Mass Media's Role in Stimulating Interest in Solar Energy Uptake: Examination of Feed-in Tariff News Coverage in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Hong Kong's solar energy adoption lags behind its global peers, although the findings of numerous studies show that the city can take up the power on a bigger scale. This manuscript contributes to the research stream by investigating the role that mass media could play in engaging citizens on more healthy debates of solar energy and the Feed-in Tariff (FiT) scheme, in which households and institutions are paid for the energy they generate and is the government's first initiative on renewable energy involving the members of the public. Applying the theories of media framing, media hegemony, and public sphere, I conducted a content analysis of 315 Hong Kong newspaper articles on FiT spanning 55 months since the scheme's implementation. The results indicate that a majority of the articles are framed from enterprises' perspectives, implying that corporate hegemonic power has penetrated through news; criticisms of FiT are slanted towards the economic aspects, such as the financial incentive instead of the environmental and scientific reasons, undermining citizens' comprehension of the importance of the scheme; Chinese state-owned media were more critical on FiT than the pro-democracy one, indicating that politics does not matter to the issue. This study proposes that the media should play a watchdog role by monitoring institutions' ongoing solar power projects and their use of FiT-generated funds to perform the educational function to enhance citizens' scientific literacy on renewable energy to create a thriving public sphere for conversation and debate on the subject.

Keywords: feed-in tariff, solar energy, renewable energy communication, media framing, media hegemony, public sphere

1. INTRODUCTION

Shifting to renewable energy from fossil fuel has been a global trend to mitigate climate change and reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the atmosphere. Among various types of renewable energy, solar energy has been identified as the one that can be used on a large scale in Hong Kong [1]. This is especially true when the cost of solar panels has been declining. The introduction of the renewable energy Feed-in-Tariff (FiT) scheme at the end of 2018, which allows households

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and institutions to sell the solar energy they produced at a price higher than the standard tariff, has spurred some across the territory to install photovoltaic panels. The government has received over 20,000 applications to join the FiT scheme as of March 2022, with 75 percent or 15,000 applications from village houses and detached houses and 1,000 applications involving commercial and industrial premises [2]. However, the FiT scheme could only stimulate a limited amount of citizens' interest in solar energy, which has yet to become a mainstream concept [3]. Existing studies have examined Hong Kong's renewable energy development, particularly solar energy, from social, economic, physical, and policy perspectives. However, studies have yet to focus on the communication perspective of the FiT scheme [4-6]. This paper fills this gap by investigating the role mass media could play to help raise public awareness towards the FiT scheme and renewable energy.

Hong Kong, an international financial center in southern China, has no energy resources. Electricity in the city has been supplied by two listed companies, CLP Power Hong Kong Limited and the Hongkong Electric Company Limited. While CLP supplies electricity to the northern part of the territory, including the Kowloon Peninsula, the New Territories, and some outlying islands, Hong Kong Electric mainly provides power to Hong Kong Island, the core central business district. The government explained that having the private sector as a power supplier can better reflect market demands [7]. A total of 178,301 terajoules of electricity was consumed in 2021, with 66% for commercial use, 26% for residential, 6% for industrial, and 2% for transportation, while consumption per capita is 6,257.8 kilowatt-hours (kWh) [8]. Renewable and nuclear energy account for 28% of the fuel mix of electricity generation in Hong Kong, while natural gas and coal contribute 48% and 24%, respectively, as of 2020 [7]. To achieve carbon neutrality by 2050, the government pledged to cease using coal for electricity generation gradually and to increase the share of renewable energy from less than 1% in 2021 to 10% by 2035 and to 15% subsequently [9]. The 10% target to be reached in 2035 comprises 1-2% from solar energy, 3.5-4% from wind, and 3-4% from waste to energy. Electricity generation contributes 97% of the city's carbon dioxide emissions, which can be reduced by the adoption of renewable energy [10].

2. BACKGROUND

With more than half a day of sunshine on average and ample rooftop space, Hong Kong can potentially have wider solar energy usage. Solar energy is used mainly in two ways: solar water heating, which means heating water by solar radiation, and solar photovoltaic (PV), which uses semiconductor devices to convert light energy into electricity. PV comprises a standalone PV system, which requires batteries to store the electricity generated, and a grid-connected PV system, which ties to the grid. In addition to installing solar panels on rooftops of existing buildings, building-integrated photovoltaics can be incorporated into different parts of buildings, such as façades, windows, and rooftops, and will not take up extra space.

To encourage the adoption of solar energy, the government and the two power companies launched the FiT scheme in October 2018. The two power companies would purchase electricity from customers at a rate of HK\$5 per kWh for renewable energy systems with a generating capacity of 10 kilowatts (kW) or less; HK\$4 per kWh for a capacity of more than 10 kW but not exceeding 200 kW; and HK\$3 per kWh for capacity of more than 200 kW but not exceeding 1 megawatt. However, the government lowered the FiT rate to HK\$2.5, HK\$3, and HK\$4 per kWh in April 2022, claiming that the costs of developing the renewable energy systems have been reduced; thus, the 10-year payback period can still be able to achieve with such offers. The scheme, open to households and corporations, will end in 2033.

In response to a Legislative Councillor's question, the government regarded the scheme as

effective as more than 20,000 applications were received from the end of 2018 to March 2022, and it is estimated that they could generate about 300 million kWh of electricity each year, enough for the use of about 90,000 households [2]. Among the applications, 15,000, or about 70% of the total, were from village houses or detached houses; 1,000 were from commercial and industrial premises. World Green Organisation chief executive William Yu pointed out that the declining FiT rate is a global trend as the costs of solar panels have been lowered by 85% in 10 years, making the payback period reduced from 10 years to 5-7 years. However, Greenpeace officer Tom Ng and legislator Elizabeth Quat Pei-fan worried that the rate reduction would deter people from joining the scheme. Also, the government has introduced the Solar Harvest program, which allows eligible schools and non-profit organizations to install solar energy generation systems for free, after which they can join the FiT scheme.

The government may have underestimated the solar energy generation potential in the city. It is estimated that solar energy's representation of total electricity generation will rise from less than 1% to 2% by 2035. However, a study shows that potential annual solar energy output can contribute to about 10% of local energy consumption, generating 4,674 gigawatt hours [10]. This could be achieved by installing PV panels on 233,000 rooftops, constituting 39 square kilometers, selected from the total 309,000 buildings in the territory. As a result, greenhouse gas emissions can be reduced by 3 million tonnes. Another study found that while many agreed that the FiT is effective, there are barriers that deter people from joining the scheme, which include socio-technical barriers, as people worry about the safety of the PV installation and the potential radiation, and financial barriers as participants need to pay an upfront installation costs of at least HK\$100,000 and the lengthy payback period is a concern [3].

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. Media framing

This research applies the theories of media framing, media hegemony, and the public sphere to investigate mass media's role in forming public opinion on FiT. Media framing is defined as making some aspects of a perceived reality more salient in a communication context. As a result, specific perspectives on an issue are promoted [11]. In other words, it refers to how a news story is told through the angle and perspective it emphasizes while some aspects have been neglected. This influences how people view an issue, shaping the formation of public opinion. A study has found that readers were given simplistic, narrow, homogenous, incomplete, and inaccurate renewable-source electricity news focusing on the political and financial aspects, leaving other stories untold [12]. Another research revealed that relying on economic incentives to boost renewable energy adoption will weigh on the government's balance sheet [13]. In Hong Kong, because the two power companies are responsible for the cost of the FiT, there are worries about FiT driving a hike in tariff.

3.2. Media hegemony

Coined by Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci, hegemony refers to the dominant influence of one group over others through social processes without using force [14]. The leading group exerts its influence by various means, including family, education, religion, and mass media. Media hegemony is defined as prevailing values and thoughts that are put across news stories, shaping a society's culture, values, and ideology [15]. While mass media are regarded as an extension of a capitalistic economic order, it is essential to be aware of the hegemonic power penetrated through

news, which may lose its critical role sometimes [16]. This is especially true when journalists are inclined to report dominant ideology, influencing public opinion.

3.3. Public sphere

The theory of public sphere, developed by German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, is defined as a social space where citizens are drawn together to debate and discuss public issues [17]. Mass media, as one type of public sphere, engages citizens to participate in the dialogue, and it is hoped that a diversity of views can facilitate the formation of public opinion in a democratic society. Nevertheless, public sphere has its own limitations, as those who possess power and money could have more say and influence than their fellow citizens in the realm. Media bias is another concern that undermines democratic ideals.

4. METHODOLOGY

A content analysis was conducted for 315 news articles with the keyword “FiT” from 17 Hong Kong newspapers, including 15 Chinese and 2 English dailies issued from 1 January 2019 to 14 July 2023. This study adopted a mixed-method approach involving both quantitative and qualitative analyses. Since electronic media rarely cover news on the FiT scheme after the government’s announcement in May 2018, probably due to limited airtime, newspapers, which have coverage in various sections, were examined instead. “FiT” was selected as the keyword because this scheme is the first and the most sizable initiative introduced by the government that encourages the locals to use renewable energy. The 55 months was set as this research wants to measure the longitudinal changes in media coverage of FiT. Although there was more coverage before the FiT scheme announcement in May 2018, the discussion may not be relevant to this study, and the relatively large number of stories may also distort the quantitative analysis. The FiT scheme was available for application in the fourth quarter, and most applicants started to receive the payments in 2019, when the financial benefits were realized, making FiT better known. The news articles were extracted from WisersOne, formerly known as WiseNews, a database comprising content from newspapers, magazines, journals, and newswires available mainly in Hong Kong, mainland China, Macau, and Taiwan. Not only does the frequency of the FiT-related stories matter but how the scheme was reported and from whose perspective it was framed would also be examined.

The background of the media, whether they have any bias towards or against the government and the commercial sector, including the two power companies, may also influence how they report the FiT scheme. Among the 17 local newspapers, Apple Daily was the only pro-democracy newspaper the government shut down on 24 June 2021. The others are regarded as pro-establishment as they are mainly owned by mainland Chinese or Hong Kong moguls or the Chinese government. However, there may be a difference in their support to the Beijing and Hong Kong authorities. While supporting the governments on political issues, Oriental Daily has been vocal and critical regarding social issues. This is followed by Ming Pao Daily and HK 01, which have relatively more independent political stances than their local peers. Compared to them, Sing Tao Daily, the oldest newspaper in Hong Kong, is more pro-government, and it also has two other free sister tabloid papers, *Headline Daily*, which has the highest circulation among local dailies, and the English paper *The Standard*. Despite their local news coverage, Hong Kong Economic Journal and Hong Kong Economic Times focus news on the financial markets, and the latter also owns a free paper, *Sky Post*. The other two free tabloids, *am 730* and *Metro Daily*, are also pro-establishment. *Wen Wei Po*, *Ta Kung Pao*, and *Hong Kong Commercial Daily* are owned by Beijing. Except for the state-owned media, profit, which mainly relies on advertising income, is a primary concern

of most news outlets despite the wealth of some of their owners. The background of the media could shed light on whether they have played the role of a watchdog monitoring and criticizing those who are in power, including the government and enterprises such as the power companies, in addition to informing and educating the members of the public, as well as engaging them to participate in debate and dialogue on social issues. This research aims to throw light on the following questions:

- How did Hong Kong newspapers frame news related to the FiT scheme?
- Which hegemonic voice dominated news related to the FiT scheme?
- How did Hong Kong newspapers demonstrate themselves as responsible media when covering the FiT scheme?
- To what extent have the local newspapers helped facilitate public opinion formation of the FiT scheme in the public sphere?

5. RESULTS

5.1. Not a frequently-covered topic

Local media are not very keen on covering the FiT scheme. Only 315 news articles contain the keyword “FiT” in the 17 local dailies spanning 55 months, or on average, less than 6 articles per month. The small number could be explained by the fact that the period does not cover 2018 or before, which is the pre-launch stage of the scheme that usually generates more discussion. As this research aims to study if local newspapers have monitored the authority’s implementation of the scheme and engaged the members of the public to join it, news stories of preparation of the scheme, such as whether to launch it or not, may not be very relevant.

Media more critical of local social issues tend to have more FiT-related stories. Oriental Daily, known for criticizing the government on social issues, has mentioned FiT in 41 articles, the most among its peers. Five papers released less than 10 articles with the keyword “FiT” and may have different reasons behind this. For instance, Apple Daily, the only pro-democracy paper, has 8 articles as it was shut down in June 2021, spanning 30 months only. Another possible reason is that political rather than social news stories, such as those related to the FiT scheme, are the focus of Apple Daily. English newspaper South China Morning Post has 4 articles as it positions itself as a regional rather than a local paper. Two local Chinese freebies, Metro Daily and am 730, also have few articles mentioning FiT; it may be owing to their limited space and editorial manpower. This is in contrast to another three freebies, Headline Daily and her English sister paper, The Standard, and Sky Post, which can use the stories produced by their sister broadsheet papers, Sing Tao Daily and Hong Kong Economic Times. We will analyse later if the media’s bias has any impact on the frequency and their focus on FiT-related coverage.

Among the articles, only 52, or 16% of the total, focus on the FiT. A majority, or 84% of the total articles, have FiT mentioned only fleetingly. For instance, one can find FiT in the results announcement stories of the two power companies and articles about commercial organizations and schools installing PV systems and joining the FiT scheme. Therefore, although articles focusing on the FiT scheme appear most frequently on the local news section, which accounts for 20% of the total, those in the financial news section also represent 18%. However, articles in the financial news sections seldom carry any in-depth discussion about the FiT scheme.

5.2. Whose voice dominated the FiT-related news coverage?

Perspectives of commercial organizations, especially their adoption of solar energy and joining the FiT scheme, receive extensive press coverage. The number of applications received and approvals made by the two power companies were usually mentioned in the result announcement stories, which have been covered by all the local dailies in their financial sections. For instance, the Hong Kong Economic Journal, a paper focusing on financial and economic news, only has 2 in-depth articles on the FiT during the period, with the rest just mentioning the scheme. However, the news angle or the focus of these stories is companies' profit and loss without any details of the FiT scheme.

In addition to the two power companies, other corporate announcements on their commitments to renewable energy and carbon neutrality are almost must-covered items by all the newspapers. These stories include the installation of PV in their facilities by MTRC, Sun Hung Kai Properties, Wellcome Supermarket, Vitasoy, Hong Kong Disneyland, Ocean Park; campaigns and awards ceremonies organized by the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation, Hang Seng Bank, Bank of China (Hong Kong), and the Hong Kong Jockey Club, and they altogether constitute 52 articles, around 16% of the total, the same number as the FiT-focused stories. Almost all newspapers have released a detailed story of more than 1,000 words for an interview with an executive of Sun Hung Kai Properties, which owns the largest area of farmland in the New Territories besides the government. The executive called for the extension of the FiT scheme, which will end in 2033 to 2050, and suggested offering land premium discounts for adopting renewable energy in developments on farmland in the New Territories. In addition to the 1,000-word main story, some media even matched it with a side story to make the coverage more prominent. On average, Chinese newspapers have stories between 400 and 600 words, and an article with 1,000 words is regarded as long and takes up substantial space of a broadsheet.

The coverage of corporate uptake of solar energy even exceeded that of the government departments. For instance, the installation of solar energy systems by the Water Supplies Department and the Drainage Services Department only saw three related articles. Also, extensive coverage could be seen in various schools' solar energy adoption and their joining of the Solo Harvest program, as well as the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology's installation of the city's largest solar energy generation system. There are only 12 articles containing comments from environmentalists, mainly from coverage of the FiT rate cut, and merely 1 story citing comments from an expert on energy storage capacity. Articles about commercial and educational institutions' adoption of solar energy and participation in the FiT scheme seldom come with a third-party view. Instead, they stick to the press releases issued by the organizations. Such coverage shows the domination of corporate voice among FiT-related stories.

5.3. What have been discussed in the in-depth FiT articles?

Among the 52 articles focusing on the FiT scheme, 45, or 14%, carry critical views. They can be categorized into 3 aspects: economic, social, and environmental. The economic aspect is mainly about the installation costs, the cutting of the electricity buying rate, and the payback period. There are 14 related articles covering the government's cut of the FiT rate on 27 April 2022, with 4 solely reporting the announcement without adding experts' views. The other 10 articles carry mixed views. Some reported environmental groups saying that the adjustment was reasonable due to lowering of the PV costs, while others said that this would deter people from adopting solar energy. However, there is not any article elaborating on the financial impact. So far, only 1 article from the Hong Kong Economic Times shows the calculation released before the rate cut, advising readers to join the FiT scheme to hedge against possible tariff adjustment.

From the social aspect, 6 articles are concerned about the lengthy approval process, 4 articles are on the exclusion of buildings in the urban area from participating in the FiT scheme, and another 4 articles are on the complaints of no after-sale service from solar panel installation companies and possible unauthorized building works. Known for its critical views on social issues, Oriental Daily has a story criticizing a loophole of the FiT for letting properties with problematic ownership issue to join the scheme.

From the environmental aspect, 6 stories are concerned about an environmental group's claim of possible pollution created by disposed solar panels. Four articles are about criticisms of renewable energy only accounting for 2% of the total energy consumption by 2035 even with the FiT scheme, of which 2 of them compared Hong Kong's level with that of the European Union and Huangpu District in Guangzhou and have cited opinions from experts, who called for offering more incentives to citizens for renewable energy adoption. There is 1 article from the Hong Kong Economic Journal pointing out that the city's heat wave limits energy storage. The findings indicate that local newspapers are inclined to focus on the economic aspect when covering the FiT scheme, but environmental concerns and scientific explanations are not the priorities. Even so, they failed to offer financial advice to readers on the matter.

5.4. Different media's approach to FiT

The FiT scheme is not a politically sensitive topic. Therefore, media coverage does not necessarily follow the news outlet's political stance. For instance, the longitudinal study of the articles shows that the Chinese state-owned media Wen Wei Po and Ta Kung Po have been more critical than their peers since 2022. While media interest in the FiT may have lost after the rate cut announcement in April 2022, these two papers continue to run stories carrying critical views on the subject frequently. However, most of the viewpoints sound banal, including the lengthy approval process and the lack of attractive economic incentives, except a story suggesting Hong Kong developing renewable energy with Guangdong province by Wen Wei Po, and another article from Ta Kung Po with academics questioning Hong Kong's possibility of giving up coal for power generation amid the slow development of renewable energy in the city. On the contrary, the pro-democracy paper Apple Daily only has 2 negative stories criticizing the lengthy approval process and the potential threat posed by the heavy panels installed on rooftops. The rest of the articles mention FiT descriptively, such as the power companies' result announcement stories.

As for other pro-establishment papers, Oriental Daily, known for its critical stance on social issues, has 41 stories with the term FiT, the most among local dailies. The other broadsheets having a relatively large number of FiT-related stories are Sing Tao Daily (40), Hong Kong Economic Times (37), and Ming Pao Daily (29). Rarely having any FiT in-depth story, Sing Tao Daily covered most commercial and educational institutions' joining of the FiT scheme with the paper's strength in property and education news. Unlike most of its peers, Sing Tao Daily has individual property and education news sections, as other newspapers usually include those stories in the financial news and the local news sections. Similarly, being a paper focusing on financial news, the Hong Kong Economic Times has the 2 power companies' earnings and commercial organizations' adoption of the FiT scheme prominently covered.

Both Sing Tao Daily and Hong Kong Economic Times applied the practice of having a main negative article, such as criticizing the possible pollution caused by solar panels and the lengthy approval process prompting applicants to give up, to be balanced by positive sidebar articles, including the FiT scheme helping to reduce carbon emission and increase people's knowledge of solar energy. Although Ming Pao did not have many articles focusing on FiT, it carried some critical perspectives different from peers, such as calling for the administration to enhance the

civic society's involvement in renewable energy through the FiT and describing the FiT as a "small elephant" with a lengthy 25-year payback period. The findings indicate that the media's approach towards FiT is driven more by consumers and commercial considerations rather than political concerns.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1. Favorable framing for commercial institutions and corporate hegemony

A considerable number of articles were framed from the corporate perspectives. Almost all the newspapers have covered corporate announcements of adopting solar power and joining the FiT scheme without adding any critical viewpoints, such as similar stories released by schools. Although this kind of framing may help raise public awareness towards solar energy, it also enhances enterprises' image building and branding, which is not a media responsibility. There is only a story from Oriental Daily criticizing the FiT scheme of subsidizing enterprises. Media's adoption of corporate frames is as if hegemonic power penetrates through news.

Most of these companies are major media advertisers. For example, Wellcome Supermarket, whose PV installation at its warehouse received extensive coverage, places several pages of advertisements in various newspapers weekly for promotions. Sun Hung Kai Properties also has newspaper cover-page advertisements to promote sales of its residential projects. The author of this manuscript is not absolutely against stories as such but proposes they be framed more critically, for example, having follow-up stories to monitor if the companies have made good use of the FiT funds and the solar energy. This is especially true when many of these companies are listed, and investors have been paying increasing attention to corporate environmental, social, and governance (ESG) compliance. While most criticisms are found in stories in the local news section, financial journalists are also responsible for making enterprises reveal more relevant information to investors. Hong Kong media needs to take one step further in order to frame FiT in a more meaningful way to readers.

6.2. Media as public sphere for discussing renewable energy

Articles offering FiT-related views other than the hegemonic powers are inadequate and limit the media's function as a public sphere. Many stories are about the two power companies and the government announcing the update of the FiT scheme, including the rate cut, the application, and the approval numbers, as well as enterprises' and schools' adoption of solar energy and participation in the scheme. For the rate cut stories, only some newspapers have sought opinions from environmentalists or academics to help readers understand its implications. This shows hegemonic voices from those with power and money dominate the public sphere.

Criticisms towards the FiT include mainly the high costs and the payback period. However, only 1 article from the Hong Kong Economic Times shows the calculations, while experts' opinions and overseas examples are rare. Therefore, these stories have only shown readers the possible economic benefits of joining the FiT scheme. Also, only a few articles have pointed out that renewable energy accounts for less than 1% of the total energy consumption, urging the authorities to set a more aggressive target. As such, Hong Kong media generally needs to offer citizens a big picture of solar power adoption, which is to reduce the reliance on fossil fuels and to mitigate the impact of climate change, otherwise, this can hardly contribute to a healthy public opinion formation.

In sum, Hong Kong newspapers' coverage of FiT may have raised the awareness of some citizens who have adopted solar energy and enjoyed the economic benefits of the scheme. However, whether the community as a whole could see and actively debate the importance of renewable energies, which include other sources such as wind, hydro, and biomass, and the relevant science and technology, is in doubt. The results may indicate that scientific findings by academics, which have the potential to stimulate interest among citizens and enliven the debate, have yet to reach the public sphere. Indeed, media can potentially bridge the gap between academia and the community. However, the findings of this research show that Hong Kong newspapers may have failed to play this role to the fullest.

7. CONCLUSION

As Hong Kong news on the FiT scheme received scant research attention, this paper contributes to the role that mass media could play in accelerating renewable energy adoption, but the research has its limitations. Despite many academic studies on solar energy in Hong Kong, the city is still in the early stages of development. This may be one of the reasons for local media's relatively sluggish response to FiT, posing a limitation to the sample size of this content analysis. Future researchers could base on this study's findings on overseas media coverage of FiT schemes in other major cities. This could cast light on the production of future news stories on FiT and other citizen-involved renewable energy campaigns in Hong Kong.

The media needs to relate solar energy to a broader scope of citizens. Many see the FiT scheme as only benefitting a limited number of people, including those living in luxury houses across the city and village houses in the New Territories. As such, some Hongkongers living in high-rise buildings find the topic irrelevant. This may explain why the FiT scheme receives limited media attention, as the high-rise and high-density buildings have been regarded as challenges for the wide adoption of solar energy. With the introduction of the building-integrated photovoltaics system, solar cells can be fixed on the building façade for energy generation. However, only 1 article from Ming Pao Daily discusses it.

Stories framed in favor of enterprises' interest, usually without third-party comments, can hardly help readers comprehend the matter. Among the limited number of FiT-related articles, commercial and educational institutions that have installed solar energy systems and joined the scheme received the most media attention. However, some readers may wonder about the relevance of this kind of story to them. These articles are a corporate extension of hegemonic power to media as advertising remains the primary source of income. This may explain why the negative stories mainly point to the government instead of corporations, including the two power companies, despite some stories on tariff hikes. No story raised the question of why energy is in the hands of the two power companies when the transition from centralized grid networks to decentralized energy systems is accelerating globally.

The political stance of news outlets has little impact on their FiT coverage as pro-establishment and even Chinese state-owned papers released more negative articles than the pro-democracy ones. Criticisms are slanted towards the economic aspect, including the cost of PV installation and the payback period, as reflected by the number of related articles. The social aspect, including the lengthy application and approval process, and the environmental aspect of the panel disposal as potential pollution received relatively less coverage than the economic aspect. News stories on the importance of solar energy adoption and the negligible role of renewable energy in the power system are scant. These insights, usually from scientists, academics, and environmentalists, are featured less in news stories than corporate perspectives. Media should seek more experts' opinions, which is crucial in engaging citizens to discuss renewable energy-related issues in the

public sphere and even its uptake.

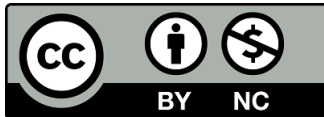
As such, Hong Kong newspapers may have, only to a certain extent, fulfilled the role of informing the members of the public of the FiT scheme and monitoring authorities' implementation. However, the message of more renewable energy uptake and decentralized energy system adoption, which academics and environmentalists have advocated, failed to reach the members of the public. Media have the potential to bridge the gap between experts and citizens, who could participate in more debates on renewable energy and the FiT scheme in the public sphere. This study has practical implications by showing the inadequacy of Hong Kong newspapers' FiT coverage and giving suggestions. As an international metropolis, Hong Kong's renewable energy uptake needs to catch up to many international cities. This research on news stories of the FiT scheme, the Hong Kong government's first and only initiative to engage the public to adopt renewable energy, could shed light on how more effective stories can be produced. The findings and suggestions could be references for media practitioners, who are responsible for encouraging more conversation and adoption of renewable energy in society.

Declaration of interest: None

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