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## **Media Victimization, Risk, and Fear: A Grounded Theory Analysis of Media Content in Hong Kong**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores how media victimization, which involves institutions and individuals, operates to construct risk and fear in society. A grounded theory analysis was conducted to investigate stories of problem in 130 public services announcements and 399 print newspaper articles in Hong Kong. It was found that, along the temporal dimension of story plot, a strong sense of distress is constructed in the narration of preconstructed future under particular essential and intensifying conditions of media victimization. By depicting fear and constructing risk in media content, media victimization is a socially constructed process of narration that enables individuals to anticipate themselves as potential victims. The politics of media victimization is that both government and nongovernment units are two bipolar forces calling for institutionalization in society for better governance.

**KEYWORDS:** Media Victimization, Risk, Fear, Grounded Theory, Public Discourse, Hong Kong

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Risk and its role in society have been widely discussed over the past few decades (e.g., Beck, 1992; 1999; Douglas, 1992; Douglas and Wildavsky, 1983; Giddens, 1990). In an early discussion of risk in society, Douglas (1992) notes that risk, of which its probabilistic sense makes it different from danger, is a politicized term being manipulated by institutions in society. Consistently, Beck (2006) describes our society as risk society in which people inevitably encounter risk as an outcome of modernization. In risk society, risk refers to “anticipation of catastrophe” [Beck, (2006), p.332] in regard to future consequences of human action and unintended consequences of radicalized modernization (Beck, 1999). It means that risk is manufactured in the application of technologies and the sense making of a potential harm, danger or threat (Adam and van Loon, 2000).

The interpretive approach of social theory suggests the significance of how people make sense of the probabilistic nature of risk (Adam and van Loon, 2000). Specifically, at the societal level, risk has been commonly discussed in regard to its “constructed nature” that “[r]isk construction as a practice of manufacturing particular uncertainties that may have harmful consequences to ‘life’ in the broadest sense of the term” [Adam and van Loon, (2000). p.2]. It is argued that “[o]ne cannot, therefore, observe a risk as a thing-out-there - risks are necessarily constructed” [Adam and van Loon, (2000), p.2]. It means that there is a logic or discourse of construction that reveals the existence of risk.

Douglas and Wildavsky (1983) draw attention to the interrelatedness of risk and problem in society. People encounter risks from problems that create potential harms, dangers or threats. A problem is conventionally “a question raised for inquiry” or “a source of distress or vexation” (Baxter, 2007, p. 118). Problems are those waiting to be solved in which “fact and value are dissonant” [McPhee and Zaug, (2001), p.574]. People encounter risk and subsequently experience fear that “is stimulated by a specific and present threat” [Beck, (2011), p.664]. Fear refers to “a negatively-valenced emotion, accompanied by a high level of arousal, and is elicited by a threat that is perceived to be significant and personally relevant” [Witte, (1992), p.331]. It is common that people encounter risk and fear across problems in everyday lives.

The construction of risk and fear has long been attributed to media effects. Risk is socially constructed in the sense that “without techniques of visualization, without symbolic forms, without mass media, etc., risks are nothing at all” [Beck, (2006), p.332]. Similarly, the social amplification of risk framework (J.X. Kaspersen, et al., 2003) suggests that risk is dynamically constructed through communication, in which experts and media are involved, in society. Media has long been regarded as a significant information source that affects public perception and fear of social and crime problems (Elias, 1986). In particular, victims are commonly projected in media in relation to various problems, such as race stereotype (Dixon and Linz, 2000), natural disaster (Davis and French, 2008), and homicide (Foss, 2006).

Victimization has long been discussed as a criminal definition in terms of victims and crimes (Elias, 1986). In criminology, victimization means that, at the interpersonal level, “criminals temporarily force their victims to play roles (almost as if following a script) that mimic the dynamics between predator and prey, winner and loser, and even master and slave” [Karmen, (2007), pp.1-2]. Victimization implies “asymmetrical interpersonal relationship that is abusive, painful, destructive, parasitical, and unfair” [Karmen, (2007), p.1]. In this sense, criminal victimization focuses on “the difference between criminal and legitimate behaviour” [Karmen, (2007), p.28] that “depends on complex determinants, such as the perpetrator, the victim, the harm, and the circumstances” [Karmen, (2007), p.29].

Yet, in addition to illegal acts as crimes, people become victims in a wide range of problems, such as natural disasters, diseases, accidents, and social problems (including discrimination and other kinds of injustices) (Karmen, 2007). The representation of victims in media has been investigated in the contexts of race stereotype (Dixon and Linz, 2000), natural disaster (Davis and French, 2008), and homicide (Foss, 2006). Hence, this study argues that the discussion on victimization should be extended to its relationship with media effects. The aim of this research study is to examine the conception of media victimization, which is defined as a process in which individuals are being presented as victims in the media. Among all information sources in society, media has been criticized for its sensationalized representation that “helps set a base level of fear” [Elias, (1986), p.122]. This paper highlights that media victimization, along with risk and fear, is a socially constructed process based on media representations (Elias, 1986).

Although victimization has been discussed across disciplines, limited effort has been focused on how such process is being constructed in the media and how risk and fear are being narrated through the process of media victimization. Hence, this study explores the discourse in which risk related media content is presented to general public through the process of media victimization. Public discourses, for example news narration, can be narrated as stories of problem in society (Russell and Babrow, 2011). Public services announcements (PSAs) and newspaper articles are two main sources of public discourses that have been investigated by researchers in risk and fear studies (e.g., Dillard et al., 1996; Russell and Babrow, 2011; Sheer and Chen, 2008). This study examines articles in local print newspapers and PSAs in local TV stations in which a sense of puzzlement and even fear could be produced. PSAs, which are public affairs advertisements produced by institutions, is a category of television commercials in which messages are relevant to all walks of life in society (Wong, 2005). Articles in local print newspapers are those sections of forum, opinion, and editorial in which opinion leaders, experts, and laypeople are willing to share thoughts. Such newspaper articles reveal citizens’ expressions on various concerns. In short, this research aims at investigating how public discourses narrated by institutions and individuals contribute to the process of media victimization in which risk and fear are constructed in the media in society.

A fundamental research question is posed in this study: *How does media victimization, which involves institutions and individuals, operate to construct risk and fear in society?* The following sections, which present results from a grounded theory analysis, illustrate that problems can be narrated under particular conditions in which risk and fear could be communicated to audiences. The central research question could be analyzed in relation to *three significant domains: the temporal dimension of media stories of problem, the conditions of media victimization, and the role of institutions* depicted in stories of problem. Critical to this paper is how this study enriches the understanding on media victimization as a process of narrating risk and fear in media, and how such results advance knowledge in cultural theories of media effects in risk society.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

Consistent with the interrelationship between problem and risk (Douglas and Wildavsky, 1983), this research examines public discourses in forms of stories of problem in which a sense of distress or vexation is embedded (Russell and Babrow, 2011). Two trained researchers started this research by extracting articles in local print newspapers and PSAs in local TV stations in which puzzlement and fear are produced in society. All stories of problem depicted in the 399 newspaper articles and 130 PSAs embed a sense of vexation or distress to audiences. Firstly, appropriate PSAs, which had been broadcasted in three local television channels (namely the ATV, the TVB, and the Cable TV) in Hong Kong, were

extracted from the Admango database. Altogether 130 PSAs broadcasted during the period from 1 January 2001 to 25 February 2010 were extracted. These 130 PSAs were produced by a range of government units in both Cantonese and English versions (see Table 1).

Newspaper articles are popular channels for citizens to express their concerns on various issues. Opinion leaders, experts, and laypeople are willing to share thoughts in the sections of forum, opinion, and editorial. To examine news articles written by opinion leaders and experts, this study used section names and column names of the sampled print newspapers as search terms in the WiseNews database. Subject to the search period available in the WiseNews database, related articles since 2006 were collected by using stratified sampling. Stratified sampling was carried out by picking articles in only one single newspaper in each month from February 26, 2006 to February 25, 2010. Altogether 167 appropriate articles in forum, opinion, and editorial sections of the 17 local print newspapers in Hong Kong were collected (see Table 1).

Similarly, for letters to the editor in print newspapers, the researchers used section names as search terms to download related articles in the WiseNews database. At the moment conducting this study, there were only 7 local print newspapers in Hong Kong that consisted of the letter to the editor section, namely *The AM730*, *The Sing Tao Daily*, *The Hong Kong Economic Journal*, *The Apple Daily*, *The Standard*, *The South China Morning Post*, and *The Oriental Daily News*. Altogether 232 articles from these 7 newspapers were extracted from the WiseNews database (see Table 1).

Table 1 Media Outlet, Language(S) and Number of Sample Cases

Media outlet	Language	Number of cases	
<i>Public services announcements</i>		<i>Total: 130</i>	
Buildings Department	Chinese, English	7	
Environment Bureau, Environmental Protection Department	Chinese, English	6	
Civil Engineering and Development Department, Electrical Mechanical Services Department	Chinese, English	6	
Department of Health	Chinese, English	10	
Drainage Services Department	Chinese, English	2	
Fire Services Department	Chinese, English	38	
Health, Welfare and Food Bureau, Food and Environmental Hygiene Department	Chinese, English	12	
Home Affairs Bureau Department	Chinese, English	4	
Hong Kong Police Force	Chinese, English	4	
Labor Department	Chinese, English	4	
Narcotics Division Security Bureau	Chinese, English	5	
Road Safety Council	Chinese, English	13	
Social Welfare Department	Chinese, English	16	
Transport Bureau, Transport Department	Chinese, English	3	
<i>News articles</i>		<i>Columns Total: 167</i>	<i>Letters to the editor Total: 232</i>
Headline Daily	Chinese	10	
Hong Kong Commercial Daily	Chinese	15	
Hong Kong Daily News	Chinese	10	
Hong Kong Economic Times	Chinese	5	
Metropolis Daily	Chinese	7	

Ming Pao Daily News	Chinese	10	
Sing Pao	Chinese	1	
Ta Kung Pao	Chinese	11	
The Sun	Chinese	8	
Wen Wei Po	Chinese	6	
AM730	Chinese	14	14
Apple Daily	Chinese	11	90
Hong Kong Economic Journal	Chinese	15	28
Oriental Daily News	Chinese	11	39
Sing Tao Daily	Chinese	15	16
South China Morning Post	English	12	24
The Standard	English	6	21

This study used grounded theory approach, which was proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), for data analysis and theory formulation. Based on the method proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990), two researchers studied all PSAs and newspaper articles in the data set and formulated categories by open coding. Constant comparative method was used to compare and refine categories throughout the coding and theorizing process. By using constant comparative method, the researchers could ensure comprehensiveness and reliability of the coding scheme in which all categories were applicable to all cases in the data set. A coding scheme was developed to describe stories of problem in which a sense of distress or vexation was depicted (see Table 2). The two researchers coded all cases and discussed coding differences to enhance inter-coder reliability. Differences among coders were resolved by updating the coding scheme and rechecking the inter-coder reliability for all coding items in this analysis. Lastly, by conducting axial coding and selective coding, this paper theorized the relationships among media victimization, risk and fear in media content (see Figure 1).

Table 2 Coding Categories and Related Options

Coding categories	Options for the categories
Topic of the problem	Housing; Family violence; Health care/disease; Environment; Technology; Security/law and order; Economy; Finance; Employment; Population (youth, ageing); Human rights; Social welfare; Poverty; Infrastructure/transportation; Policy formulation/consultation; Governance (including government departments, legislative council); Political issues; Media; Education; Tourism; Others
Players in the problem: Problem creator (the one who posed, created, or initiated the problem)	Individual; group; nongovernment institutions; government; society
Players in the problem: Influenced (or victim, the one who is affected by or suffered in the problem)	Individual; group; nongovernment institutions; government; society
Players in the problem: Problem solver (the one who can solve the problem by taking certain action)	Individual; group; nongovernment institutions; government; society
Context	District; Local; China (includes Hong Kong issue related to mainland China, mainland issue related to Hong Kong and the issue between mainland and Hong Kong); International
Duration (It refers to the period of time since the problem emerged and has been reported until it is solved)	urgent; short-term; long-term
Accumulation effect (The period of time since the underlying factor has been invoked)	Immediacy; recently(e.g. this month); a few months in the past; some years in the past; more than a decade in the past
Unexpectancy (It refers to the extent to	none; low; high

which the problem emergent without expectation)	
Uncertainty (It refers to the extent to which the problem will be solved and how it will be solved)	none; low; high
Life threatening	none; low; high
Degree of punishment	none; light; heavy
Legality	un-institutional(e.g., norm); institutional (e.g., law)
<i>The Problem Narrator</i>	
Narrator involved	citizen; opinion leader/expert; media; commercial organization; nongovernment/noncommercial organization; government
Position	Professional; experienced person; stander-by
Narrator voice	first voice (I); second voice (You/we); third voice (he/they)
Standpoint	Individual (minority); group; society (majority)
Attitude	Positive; mixed; Negative
Actual involvement (How relevant the problem is to the narrator?)	Low; high
Emotional involvement (To what extent the emotion of the narrator(s) expressed in the text?)	Low; high
<i>The Problem Appeal</i>	
Information type	Statistics; factual; descriptive
Emotional appeal	low; high
Informational appeal	low; high
<i>The Presentation of the Problem</i>	
Wording	Positive; negative; mixed
Character (facial expression)	Fear; relaxing; none Unhappy; happy; none Anxious; relaxing; none
Audio (sound)	None; Few; a lot
Visual (graphic)	None; Few; a lot
Visual (color)	Colorful; mixed; black/white
<i>Problems Related Values</i>	
The values embedded in the problem	behavior (e.g., individual's behavior): collective behavior/phenomenon (e.g., at group level); institution (e.g., rule/regulation); norm (at social level); spiritual value (e.g., at universal level)
The standpoint of values	we value; others values
The acceptance of values in society	minority (it refers to just one group in society): majority (it refers to mass or general public in society)

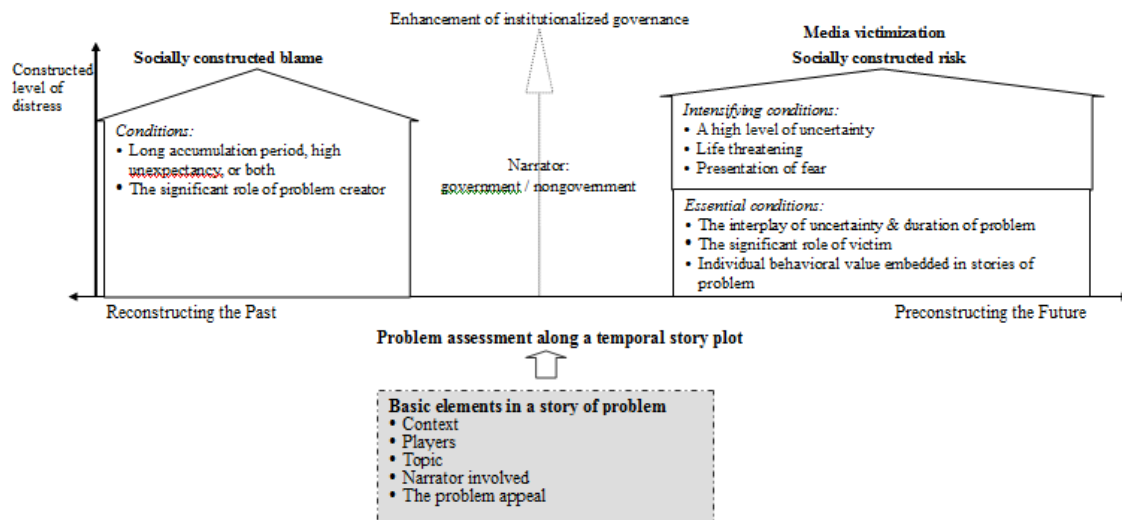


Figure 1: Theoretical relationships of media victimization, risk, and fear

### 3 STORIES OF PROBLEM IN THE MEDIA: AN OVERVIEW

Each unit of analysis in this study represents a story of problem. Based on the conventional definition, a story of problem refers to the narration that embeds a sense of distress or vexation (Baxter, 2007). Past studies suggest that some particular narrative elements should be depicted in stories of problem, for examples, the five Ws and H (who, what, when, where, why, and how), characters, plots, and moral values (Russell and Babrow, 2011). Hence, all stories of problem in this study were coded into particular categories which are parameters for stories of problem (see Table 2).

Fundamentally, a story of problem should be coded in terms of *topic of problem*, *players of problem*, *context of problem*, *problem narrator*, and *problem appeal*. In other words, the logic of discourse is that the narrator first identifies topic, players and context of problem, and further assesses their interrelationships by presenting a particular problem appeal in the media. The narrator of the story makes value judgment on the interrelationships among different problem parameters and expresses such judgment through different ways of presentation in the story. This is a process of problem assessment through which the narrator identifies a sense of distress carried in the story of problem.

### 4 FINDING I: RECONSTRUCTED PAST AND BLAME ASSIGNMENT

In addition to the basic parameters, the temporal dimension of the stories is a significant element that should be analyzed. People estimate risk in relation to time scale of the problem that extends from the past to the future (Douglas and Wildavsky, 1983). Time is defined as “a concept inextricably bound up with anticipation and memory” [Douglas and Wildavsky, (1983), p.86]. Although there is no clear conclusion on the temporal effect in risk studies, discussion on narratives suggests that “past events are understood as causes of current events, and future events are understood as determined by past and present action” [Russell & Babrow, (2011), p.241]. Temporal reality is being constructed in narratives in terms of “temporal-causal explanations” [Russell and Babrow, (2011), p.243].

This study suggests that time is the story plot along which the narrator assesses the problem. Time is an important super-category in which some particular categories construct a significant “past” sense, whereas some construct a “future” sense. The strong influences of



*accumulation effect* and *unexpectancy* can construct the past of the problem. A long accumulation period refers to a long period of time since the underlying factor of the problem has been invoked, whereas a high level of unexpectancy generally refers to a great extent to which the emergence of the problem is out of expectation. Prevailing narration of reconstructed past leads to blame assignment in which a strong sense of distress is embedded. Blame assignment in narratives of reconstructed past usually associates with a long accumulation period, high unexpectancy, or both. In a PSA produced by the Buildings Department in 2004, a window appeared in the first shot narrates the voiceover:

I've been standing here for several years now...braving the wind and rain and sun. But, nobody cares ...Hey!! I can't support your weight!! You can't just patch me up with sticking plaster. Don't try to force me open when I'm stuck. Oh No! I am falling...Ask a qualified contractor to inspect your windows and replace if necessary. And make sure you use aluminium windows properly.

The video ends with an endsuper 'well-maintained windows keep us safe'. The narrator assigns the blame to the residents who create dangers to street passers-by due to poor maintenance of windows in their own residence. The poor maintenance of windows is an accumulative problem that led to falling windows from the building. The home owner or the resident should be solely responsible for the problem and bear the blame. Consistent with Russell and Babrow's idea (2011), blame assignment in this story of problem is a fundamental way of reconstructing the past in which causes of past events in terms of past-related categories are depicted. The narrator assigns the blame to the resident who had ignored the maintenance of windows for a long time. This is an accumulative problem that the unexpected fallen windows finally pose dangers to street passers-by. A strong sense of distress is created. Such a story of problem illustrates that both long accumulation period and high unexpectancy are parameters of constructing a past-related scenario for blame assignment.

It is worth noting that blame assignment is just one of the situations in which a strong sense of distress can be presented. The levels of distress vary across stories of problem. In contrast to past reconstruction, at the other end of the temporal dimension, prevailing narration of future-related categories means the preconstruction of the future. Media victimization, which is closely associated with risk and fear, is indeed the narration about victims and what victims will encounter in the future. A strong sense of distress is presented in future-related media victimization.

## **5 FINDING II: CONSTRUCTED FUTURE AND PRINCIPLES OF MEDIA VICTIMIZATION - THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF RISK AND FEAR**

In addition to the constructed past, a strong sense of distress can be depicted in stories of future problem in which future-related categories are prevailingly narrated. Such kind of narration is the preconstruction of the future based on the dominant depiction of future related categories, namely uncertainty and duration. In stories of future related problem, victims occupy a much more significant role than other players. The process in which individuals are being identified as potential victims in media stories of future problem, which is known as media victimization, will possibly deliver a sense of risk to audiences. Furedi (2006) argues that to label anyone who is at risk is to define him or her as a potential victim. The society is full of "anticipation of victimization" [Furedi, (2006), p.5] that people anticipate if they will be victims. Narrators of media stories construct a sense of risk by presenting particular types of future related categories. Such narration subsequently exaggerates the sense of distress in the process of media victimization.

Risk has long been defined in relation to three interrelated conceptions, namely uncertainty, possibility, and negative outcomes (Douglas, 1992; Knight, 1921/1985; Slovic, 1987). From an epistemological perspective, risk is something observable to audiences that should be defined as the possibility of being the victims or the influenced who will suffer from the negative outcomes or effects associated with the problem. Risk can only be constructed in media content if the narration focuses on preconstructing the future, instead of reconstructing the past. By using different ways of presentation, narrators can make audiences think that they are potential victims of the problem. Epistemologically, media victimization refers to the stage of problem assessment at which a sense of being at risk, which refers to audiences' anticipation on being potential victims of the problem, is created through particular ways of presentation delivered by the narrator.

The construction of risk in media stories of problem enables the process of media victimization in which audiences perceive they are at risk of the problem. In other words, media victimization is a narration process that inevitably involves the social construction of risk in stories of future problem. However, among different problems being assessed in the media, only some of them follow the principles of media victimization. Such principles of media victimization include the essential conditions that enable the process of media victimization, and the intensifying conditions that magnify the sense of distress in assessing future problems. The following discusses the principles of media victimization in terms of essential and intensifying conditions of such narration process.

## 5.1 Essential conditions of media victimization

### The interplay of uncertainty and duration of problem

Media victimization takes place when there is a dominant narration of preconstructed future in which uncertainty and duration of problem are interrelated. Problems have long been discussed in regard to uncertainty (e.g., Babrow, 2001; 2007; Russell and Babrow, 2011). With a focus on analyzing media content from an epistemological perspective, this study defines uncertainty as a narrative parameter for describing problems in a temporal dimension. Uncertainty refers to the extent to which a problem will be tackled properly in a future sense. The uncertainty level depicted in stories of problem can be high, low, or nothing. The narration is classified into 'no uncertainty' if the related problem has been solved and its solution has been stated in the story.

Some stories in this study are embedded with a high level of uncertainty. In a PSA produced by the Buildings Department in 2001, the story depicts that ignoring the maintenance of building structure would lead to life threatening accidents. In the PSA, a sweet couple encountered many life threatening accidents in their neighborhood. Their car was hit by a piece of concrete fallen from a building, and the balcony of their apartment at which they were standing at that moment collapsed all of a sudden. The PSA illustrates a high level of uncertainty in the sense that neither concrete way nor suggestion of tackling the problem has been presented. Instead, only scenarios of dangers and accidents were shown.

In addition, uncertainty is a narrative category that is closely associated with duration of problem. Duration of problem, or duration needed to solve the problem in the future, refers to the period of time within which the problem has emerged or has been reported until it is solved. Coding categories of duration, namely "recent", "short-term", and "long-term", refer to the amount of time required to solve the problem. For

problems waiting to be solved after they have been reported in the media, narrators usually create a sense of anticipation on the duration required to tackle the problem properly. Specifically, long-term duration means that the action required to tackle the problem takes a lengthy period of time. For such problem to be solved in a long period of time, a sense of insecure is presented in the story that heightens the level of uncertainty embedded in the problem. The following example from the opinion section in a local newspaper *The Sun* on 9 May 2008 illustrates the interplay of high levels of uncertainty and duration of problem:

Recently, many government organizations and large private corporations frequently leak information from their computers. HSBC and the Immigration Department are involved in such problem, in addition to government units namely the Department of Health, the Hospital Authority, and the Civil Service Bureau. ... The influence of such events should not be underestimated. The biggest worry is that the leakage of personal confidential information could hardly be verified. People suffered in these issues are difficult to argue for the responsibility. Such negative influence is long lasting that may only be revealed after a long period of time. Hence, it is difficult to blame for the related organizations at that moment. The victims in such issues of personal information leakage are innocent.

The above story illustrates that it is not optimistic to solve the problem of privacy leakage in short term. The duration required to solve the problem is lengthy and the trouble being created is unpredictable. The duration of problem is described as short-term only if the narrator expects that it takes some time to solve the problem, though immediate troubles will be involved in the meanwhile. Lastly, recent duration of problem refers to the time within which the problem can be tackled by taking recent or immediate actions. The following story reported in the editorial section of the *Hong Kong Economic Times* on 5 August 2006 illustrates the idea of recent duration of problem.

In the past two days, nearly a thousand flights were delayed or cancelled due to the typhoon. The airport was crowded with around 120,000 passengers. There were long queues and complaints about the situations.... The Airport Authority should demand the police to increase the manpower for both assisting the queuing up and controlling the order.

The story demonstrates the mismanagement of the Hong Kong International Airport during the typhoon. The problem should be solved by taking urgent actions to resume normal services immediately and minimize negative effects.

### **The significant role of victim**

The victim, or the influenced, is one of the essential players in stories of future problem. Victims are people being influenced by or suffered from negative effects of the problem. The depiction of victims in the media story can trigger a strong sense of distress in media victimization. In regard to the poverty problem in Hong Kong, Dr. Lam Pun-lee, Associate Professor at the School of Accounting and Finance, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University writes in the forum section of the *Ming Pao Daily News* on 7 February 2007:

Almost 10 years after the handover, there has been a drop in the Median Domestic Household Income. A majority of households face the problem of declining income. Only a small proportion of households, which are the most

affluent ones, receive an obvious increase in household income. Although individual political parties exaggerated the problem of wealth disparity in Hong Kong, the government should not remain a passive onlooker to problems such as uneven distribution of wealth and income, inability of the middle class and grass roots to share outcomes of economic growth, and declining growth of professional vacancies.

The above story depicts that the grass roots are the victims of poverty in Hong Kong. The narrator explains the problem of poverty in terms of difficulties faced by the victims, for examples, “a drop in the Median Domestic Household Income”, “a majority of households faced the problem of declining income”, “wealth disparity”, “uneven distribution of wealth and income”, and “inability of the middle class and grass roots of sharing outcomes of economic growth”.

### **An individual’s values embedded in stories of problem.**

An individual’s anticipation of being a victim also depends on the extent to which values embedded in a particular story of problem is relevant to his or her behavior. Broadly speaking, *values embedded in stories of problem* can be categorized into five levels, namely individual behavioral values, collective behavioral values (that can even be identified as a phenomenon), institutional values, norms, and spiritual values. Such values embedded in stories of problem are always depicted in terms of personalized elements relevant to an individual’s basic needs on a specific everyday life topic, for examples, contaminated food and illegal building structures. The values embedded in stories of problem are possibly the underlying factor that leads to some particular misbehaviors. With the strong sense of distress being attached to the story, individuals will subsequently anticipate that they are at risk of being the victims.

In a PSA produced by the Social Welfare Department in 2009, a couple are ready to leave their child at home. The first shot shows the mother talking to her son “We’ll be back soon, be good.” Then, the mother leaves home and talks to her friend over the phone “Don’t worry, he’ll be alright. He always behaves himself. We usually leave him without neighbors. Yes, sometimes at day care centres. But we’re only leaving for a while... We’ll be back soon. There’s no point worrying. Nothing bad will happen.” After finishing the call, the couple witness that their child’s doll is falling from the window of their apartment to the ground. The video ends with an endsuper “You may be lucky once, but the second time maybe not. Neglect once, regret forever. Please don’t leave children unattended. Child neglect is a criminal offence.” This PSA shows the misbehavior of the couple. For their own convenience, the couple go out for shopping but leave their son unattended at home. The value embedded in this story refers to the couple’s concern on self convenience over child care. Such personalized behavior and its related values give cues for audiences to identify themselves with the characters in the video. The level of distress presented in the story is amplified when the video shows the doll falling to the ground.

## **5.2 Intensifying conditions of media victimization**

Media victimization, through which audiences anticipate the possibility of being potential victims of the problem, can only be completed when there are both essential conditions and intensifying conditions of narration. Results from the analysis show that, if a story of problem can be narrated under either one of the following three intensifying conditions, the story will be able to include a high level of distress and create a sense of risk for media victimization.

### **A high level of uncertainty.**

In this analysis, a high level of uncertainty is one of the intensifying conditions of media victimization in which a sense of risk is embedded. Uncertainty has long been a conception in the definition of risk (Knight, 1921/1985). In the above discussed story about privacy leakage in the opinion section of *The Sun* on 9 May 2008, the narrator writes that both private and government organizations, including HSBC, the Immigration Department and the Hospital Authority, pose a sense of risk to all citizens due to the insecurity of privacy in society.

The biggest worry is that the leakage of personal confidential information could hardly be verified. People suffered in these issues are difficult to argue for the responsibility. ...it will be difficult to blame for the related organizations at that moment.

The story highlights that it is uncertain how and when such privacy leakage will be solved. It means that people are at risk for a long period of time. With the presentation of a high level of uncertainty, the story has constructed a sense of risk in media victimization, though fear or life threatening descriptions are not shown. Overall, a high level of uncertainty acts as a force that heightens the sense of risk in media victimization.

### **Life threatening**

The degree of life threatening is closely linked to recent duration and local context. Audiences perceive a threat based on their perceived severity and perceived susceptibility about an external stimulus variable of which they know or believe in its existence (Witte, 1992). Perceived severity refers to “an individual’s beliefs about the seriousness of the threat” [Witte, (1992), p.332], whereas perceived susceptibility means “an individual’s beliefs about his or her chances of experiencing the threat” [Witte, (1992), p.332]. Audiences form their perceived threat based on the information shown in stories of problem.

In this grounded analysis, life threatening is a category which is generally presented in personal stories under several local topics, for examples, housing safety and food contamination. Along with essential conditions of media victimization, narrators can make use of life threatening descriptions to construct stories of future problem in which risk is narrated. In a life threatening personal story about gas leakage in a letter to the editor in the *Apple Daily* on 17 April 2008, a housewife complained about the improper maintenance of a Towngas repairman that put her in danger.

A reader Mrs. Kui reported that some days ago the Towngas sent a repairman to her apartment for regular check. She then smelled a thin gas, but at that moment the staff reported that no problem was found. Two days later she stayed at home and smelled a stronger gas. She then felt dizzy and called the Towngas to follow the case. The repairman this time reported that it was the staff last time who did not shut off the gas burner properly and caused the gas leakage.

The above narration illustrates a personal story about an individual who encountered a life threatening danger. Gas leakage is a danger of extreme severity which will threaten the victim’s life. Although there is no extreme presentation of emotion or fear, audiences can personalize such a problem and identify themselves as potential victims who are susceptible in scenarios of regular repairs for household equipments.

Interestingly, life threatening is a condition that is possible to compensate the effect of uncertainty on risk construction. There are several stories that illustrate how risk can still be constructed in narrations in which life threatening descriptions combine with a weak sense of uncertainty. In a PSA produced by the Fire Services Department in 2002, a burning home is depicted in the video of mysterious music background. This is a life threatening story that illustrates a housewife's misbehavior of ignoring home safety. The housewife leaves cooking machines on when she is going out for shopping. In the first shot, a housewife is leaving her apartment without switching off the table top cooker. Then, alternative shots are used to depict the relaxing shopping behavior of the housewife and the burning kitchen in her apartment. The voiceover finally announces "beware of your home, beware of fire safety". Although there is no indicator showing a high level of uncertainty in the video, the story undoubtedly indicates that the threat could be removed properly if housewives are cautious when cooking. The sense of risk in this story is very strong because of the life threatening scenario.

### **Presentation of fear**

Stories using emotional appeal can be further illustrated by a number of presentation categories and elements related to the narrator, including audio and visual elements, characters' facial expressions, wordings, and types of information. By using these narration categories, negative emotions, such as fear, unhappiness and anxiety, can be exaggeratedly depicted in media stories of problem. Emotional appeal can be used in PSAs, which possess visual and audio properties, to dramatize a sense of uncertainty. In the previously discussed PSA produced by the Buildings Department in 2001, the level of uncertainty is prevalently strong because of an extensive use of special sound effect and audio elements in the video. A roaring wolf appears at the beginning of the video, followed by screaming characters in the scenario of an accident with mythical background music. All these combine to create a stage of danger and uncertainty. In the last shot, the collapse of the residential building without showing the fate of victims demonstrates an extreme sense of uncertainty. Although special sound effect and audio elements are significant elements of emotional appeal, visual elements, namely graphic and color, are not unique to the presentation of emotion in this study.

Fear is an example of extreme negative emotion that is usually presented with a high level of uncertainty. Overall, past studies define fear appeal in terms of message contents and audience reactions (Kline and Mattson, 2000; O'Keefe, 1990; Sheer and Chen, 2008; Witte, 1992). As a piece of content analysis, this study investigates fear appeal based on its "gruesome content", including language and pictures [Witte, (1992), p.331]. To study contents about fear, past research suggests that "fear may be expressed physiologically (as arousal), through language behavior (verbal self-reports), or through overt acts (facial expressions)" [Witte, (1992), p.331]. Such expressions of fear can be operationalized in terms of anxiety, physiological arousal, mood adjectives, and concern or worry (Witte, 1992). Beck (2011) notes that "[f]ear is stimulated by a specific and present threat: a vicious dog you encounter in a park, or a car driving toward you at high speed" [Beck, (2011), p.644].

Based on the above discussion on fear, this study suggests that fear is a strong sense of a negatively-valenced emotion observed in media content in forms of physiological arousal, language behavior, or overt acts. Fear can be elicited by perceiving a threat (Witte, 1992). In a 15-second PSA produced by the Fire Services Department in 2002, simply two shots are used to illustrate how people in a burning building are deprived of the chance of fleeing due to an obstructed fire escape route. In addition to the sensational use of background music, the facial expressions of characters showing exaggerated pain and anxiety brings a strong sense of fear to audiences. Overall, along with those essential conditions of media victimization, the

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depiction of fear is able to intensify degree of distress in stories of problem. It should be noted that the expression of fear is mostly found in PSAs, instead of stories in newspapers.

## 6 FINDING III: THE OUTCOME OF MEDIA VICTIMIZATION – BIPOLAR ENHANCEMENT FOR INSTITUTIONALIZED GOVERNANCE

Undoubtedly, risk has long been argued and defined in relation to uncertainty and adversity. Furedi describes risk in terms of “the impossibility of predicting future outcomes” [Furedi, (2006), p.176]. However, the findings in this study reveal that risk could be made visualized and observable in the media. This analysis concludes that narrators can amplify sense of distress and construct risk for media victimization in stories of problem. Audiences can anticipate risk in terms of the possibility of being the victims who suffer from negative outcomes or effects of the problems. In this sense, risk is nothing unpredictable, instead, audiences can anticipate risk and identify themselves with possibilities of being potential victims suffering from negative effects and outcomes in various scenarios of problem.

Overall, this study concludes that problems can be narrated along the temporal continuum of the past and the future. A prevailing narration of past reconstruction will lead to blame assignment, whereas an extreme narration of future preconstruction will construct risk and contribute to victimization. It is worth noting that most stories of problem, no matter narrating the past or the future, present situations associated with some undefined rules or relationships. By revealing problems in the media, narrators actually demand for institutionalization in society in which there is “a lack of clarity about the rules of engagement” [Furedi, (2006), p.115]. Such institutionalization means that rules should be further defined by institutions such as the government, as well as better institutionalized for problem solving and reduction of distress in society.

Furthermore, there are two supercategories of narrators, namely government and nongovernment. All the PSAs in this study are produced by government departments to promote precautions or ways of problem solving. Contrastingly, articles in print newspapers are mostly narrated by the nongovernment units, such as opinion leaders, professionals, journalists and citizens, that attempt to reveal problems and urge for better ways of problem solving. This analysis found that the two bipolar forces, namely government and nongovernment, both call for institutionalization in society for better governance. The government announces a number of institutionalized practices for problem solving through broadcasting PSAs in a top-down manner, whereas the nongovernment units representing all walks of life demand for better governance in a more institutionalized way. Anti-smoking is a very typical example that can illustrate the ways in which government and nongovernment units call for institutionalization for governance. In a letter to the editor titled “How can the young be put off smoking?” in South China Morning Post on 3 October 2009, a citizen R. Hau in Kowloon Bay writes:

Following the extension of the smoking ban and the increase in tobacco tax, the number of smokers, especially young people, is decreasing (“Gradual fall in number of teens smoking”, September 29). These two very good measures have motivated people to quit the bad habit. However, there is still room for improvement. Some under-18s are still able to buy cigarettes from newspaper vendors and convenience stores, and they are not asked for proof of their age. The government could do more to prevent this happening, such as prosecuting those vendors who sell cigarettes to minors. The government could bring out more hard-hitting adverts to try to impress upon young people the risks involved in smoking.

This story reveals that a citizen as a nongovernment unit requests for a more institutionalized arrangement by the government against smoking. Similarly, in a PSA produced by the Department of Health in 2009, the department as a government unit also uses institutional practice to control smoking in public areas. The first shot narrates the voiceover:

In statutory no-smoking areas and on public transport carriers, if anyone commits a smoking offence a Tobacco Control Inspector will issue them with a Fixed Penalty Notice for \$ 1500. Apart from Tobacco Control Inspectors and Police officers, specified officers of the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department and the Housing Department can also issue notices in venues they manage. The fixed penalty for smoking offences is \$1500.

It is worth noting that, similar to some other sample cases, the above PSA of no-smoking mentions the item of penalty to warn and control the problem. The story of problem narrates the use of *punishment* to support institutionalization in society for better governance.

In terms of *legality*, problems in this study were either related to improper institutional behaviors or violation of social norms. Mostly, improper institutional behaviors, which require further institutionalization of rules to fix problems, are voiced out from citizens to the government. Contrastingly, violation of social norms requires establishment of rules or regulations by institutions, especially the government, to control or regulate improper social behaviors. In a letter to the editor in the *Oriental Daily News* on 28 January 2009, a reader reports a life threatening case about snakes in her housing estate.

During the investigation, the journalist witnessed that there was a 2-feet long snake hiding along the roadside, and then turned to a hole peeping through to see street passers-by. The representative from the Hong Kong Reptile and Amphibian Society explains that ... the ideal method to handle [this problem] is to let experts confirm the species of the snake and its poisonness.

This is a typical case that illustrates how nongovernment force demands to tackle the problem by means of institutionalization in society. The journalist and the expert both urge for a more appropriate institutionalized reaction to remove the danger posed by the problem.

Conversely, to alter social norms, it is mainly the government that attempts to construct distress and even risk in the media through PSAs. Most of the stories in PSAs ask people to take precautionary actions or react according to the suggested ways to tackle the problem. The government attempts to institutionalize society by asking people to take precautionary actions or act in designated ways. Specifically, a series of PSAs have been produced by the Social Welfare Department in 2007 to tackle the prevailing norm of family violence. Victims of family violence are mainly females, and their personal safety is at risk. The Social Welfare Department constructs scenarios of risk in the PSAs and presents institutionalized ways to audiences, such as reporting to the police and seeking help from social workers, so as to control the widespread of life threatening violence in society.

Overall, media victimization is a socially constructed process that demonstrates how individuals anticipate themselves as potential victims. This study further consolidates that the narration of risk and fear is indeed the construction of social reality (Elias, 1986; Fruedi, 2006). People who fear the problem more may risk victimization more (Elias, 1986), and eventually form their own victim identity (Fruedi, 2006). Media victimization not only can generate fear when people perceive that they are at risk of being attacked, but also can project the seriousness of problems with which people may feel threatened (Elias, 1986). Media



victimization, in which risk and fear can be constructed, is actually a way to seek for institutionalized rules and precautions to tackle problems. From the perspective of criminology, victimization is a kind of politics that the government uses to “portray its apparent concern and promote its legitimacy instead” [Elias, (1986), p.233]. This study further concludes that, to advocate public policy, media victimization may serve as a means to faithfully reinforce the government’s official definitions and measures (Elias, 1986). In addition to the government, the nongovernment units reveal problems and seek for better institutionalized governance by means of media channels. Critical studies on politics of media victimization should further investigate the significant effect from such bipolar forces on culture of risk and fear in the contemporary society.

## 7 THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The study contributes to the interpretive approach of risk society. The above analysis illustrates the principles of risk construction in public discourse. From the interpretive perspective, risk is constructed along the temporal dimension of the story and being shaped as what people would encounter in the future. Media victimization takes place under specific essential and intensifying conditions. Particularly, fear is a narrative component that intensifies media victimization in risk society. Such interpretive approach of risk society further enriches cultural theories of risk.

The findings of this study illustrate risk is a politicized element in risk society. Although past studies have argued that risk is an outcome of modernization and a tool of politics in risk society, limited effort has been made to deconstruct how risk is being manipulated in public discourse. This study found that, in risk society, media victimization serves as a way for both institutions and individuals to narrate and manipulate risk for institutionalized governance. It has long been argued that “institutions protect themselves by defining risk to individuals. Institutions bring out solutions to solve common problems, and introduce standard measures and get legislation to protect the measures” [Douglas and Wildavsky, (1983), p.96]. It means that, by defining risk and shifting blame to individuals, institutions force individuals to bear blames themselves. Yet, from another perspective, this study suggests that individuals in fact would like to seek institutional guidance and governance to reduce risk for a better life.

Similarly, it has been argued that individuals in risk society are required to “plan, understand, design themselves as individuals and, should they fail, to blame themselves” [Beck, (1999), p.9]. It means that institutions in risk society promote institutionalized individualism as a structural arrangement for better governance in risk society (Beck, 1999). But this study adds that, paradoxically, individuals in risk society resist against being individualized by institutions. Individuals even request institutions to bear the blame of risks and improve governance. Individuals project themselves as victims in public discourse and refuse to take the responsibility.

This research extends the discussion of victimization from criminology to media studies. Results of this grounded theory analysis further suggest that media victimization has occupied a significant role in risk society. Future research can validate the interpretive approach of media victimization in other sources of public discourse, and investigate the role of institutionalized governance in risk society.

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