Apps at Risk

APPLE'S CENSORSHIP AND
COMPROMISES IN HONG KONG
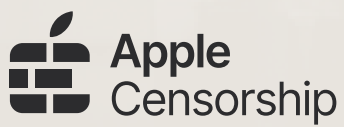
Apple
Censorship

GREATFIRE ORG

Apple Censorship

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INTRODUCTION

Helping a Democracy Die?

Two years after the adoption of the National Security Law (NSL), Beijing has effectively increased its control over Hong Kong's digital space. In addition to the loyalty of Hong Kong's Executive government and Judiciary, the central government now relies on local tech companies' (mainly telecom companies and internet service providers) swift reaction to censorship requests. The block of HKChronicles website in January 2021, which was later followed by others, shows that the authorities are now able to censor online content using the National Security Law as a justification. Using the NSL, Beijing has also taken control of the public media, and has dismantled most of the free press in the city.

But to tighten its political grip on Hong Kong's digital space, which largely consists of services operated by foreign tech companies, Beijing also needs to succeed in obtaining one of the two following outcomes: either these foreign tech companies offering services and platforms to Hong Kongers start toeing the line, or their services stop being offered in the special administrative region (because of the companies' withdrawal from the region, or because they're blocked by Beijing).

With an estimated market share of over 50%, Apple plays a central role in Beijing's strategy to control information and expression online. Apple has become a potential "kill switch" for the communist party, which could, using the NSL, purge any content deemed illegal from the mobile ecosystem used by half of Hong Kong's population. Recent history shows that Apple has been more than willing to cooperate with Chinese authorities and to export the censorship they exercise in mainland China to Hong Kong.

In this report, AppleCensorship looks into the compromises made by Apple in Hong Kong in the last few years, and examines the current level of app censorship in Hong Kong's App Store. The report also highlights the risks posed by Apple's dominating presence in Hong Kong and raises the following questions:

What will happen if Beijing starts using Apple to further limit information and speech online ? Will Apple resist requests for censorship or will it blindly "comply with law", albeit the National Security Law, thus contributing to the death of Hong Kong's democracy?

I. APPLE'S CENSORSHIP IN HONG KONG

Apple is China's Democracy "Kill Switch" in Hong Kong

AppleCensorship's Survey

In the spring of 2021, AppleCensorship conducted a survey of more than 2,500 Hong Kong residents in order to better understand their perception of digital censorship and surveillance since the passing of the national security law, as well as their use of mobile apps and how they communicate and access information.

• Hong Kongers rely on mobile apps that are banned in China to communicate and access information:

We found out that 27% of Hong Kong residents were using WhatsApp, while 24% rely on WeChat. Facebook's Messenger, Signal and Telegram are each used by less than 10% of the respondents (Messenger 0%, Signal 7%, Telegram 6%). 11% of the respondents are using different apps or communication tools to send their messages (e.g. Viber, Line, Threema, Skype, etc.).

Respondents also use social networks (apps and/or their web version) as their main source of general information and daily news. While Hong Kong based websites remain the most used source of information (13%), Facebook is the primary source of information for 10% of the population, while WhatsApp, Telegram and Twitter each constitute the main source of news for 5% of Hong Kongers. Although less used than WeChat (8%) Weibo (5%), Instagram is used by 4% of the population as its main source of news. Chinese language media, Foreign news (sites and/or apps) and online forums are also favored by 5% and 7% respectively. 28% of the population is using other unspecified sources.

Those figures make it clear that Hong Kong residents massively rely on online services and apps that are blocked in mainland China and could disappear from Hong Kong as pressure from the authorities arises.

• Hong Kongers are worried about the impact of the NSL on their digital freedoms.

More than 70% of the residents would feel concerned if mobile app stores started censoring apps at the behest of the authorities, and 25% believe that online censorship (the blocking of websites and social networks) will occur within the next five years. Although the level of restrictions is not yet comparable to that of mainland China, 28% of the population thinks that such online censorship is already present in Hong Kong. 43% believes that between one and one hundred websites have been blocked since the passing of the NSL. Hong Kongers are also worried about surveillance. 52% of the people have become more careful about what information they post online, and 44% believe that the authorities are tracking their online activity.

Yet, only 37% of the Hong Kongers have installed or subscribed to a VPN app or other similar service on their mobile device or personal computer.

Apple's Presence in Hong Kong: A Threat to Freedom of Information

The results of the survey confirm that Hong Kongers rely significantly on social media apps and services to communicate with each other and to seek news and information. They also highlight the growing concern that the national security law may impact their digital freedom and lead to an increase of online censorship and surveillance. A market research conducted by Digital Business Lab and Standard Insights at the beginning of the year confirms both Hong Kongers' reliance on social networks (such as WhatsApp and Instagram), and increased concern regarding the national security law. In their survey, "the majority of respondents (68% of a panel composed by individuals belonging to the "Gen Z" and "millennial" categories) expressed concern about possible limits on social media and communications in Hong Kong. Only 8% of the respondents said they were using a VPN, a result significantly lower than the 37% obtained by AppleCensorship's survey.

Other results reveal that respondents would be open to Chinese "replacement platforms" should their preferred one become unavailable: WeChat, Douyin and Xiaohongshu (RED) could become their app of choice as a replacement for Instagram, Youtube, Whatsapp, LinkedIn or Facebook. It is worth noting that for three out of these five apps, the first answer given by the respondents is "none of the above", meaning that they would not replace the app should it become unavailable.

As various market intelligence firms estimate Apple's market share in Hong Kong is between 45% and 53%, the picture that starts to appear when trying to anticipate further restrictions on freedom of information and expression in Hong Kong, is a very dark one.

Should Beijing decide to crackdown on social media and social networking apps in Hong Kong, all it would have to do is ask Apple to remove apps that it deems illegal or that it accuses of violating the NSL, and overnight, almost half of the population of Hong Kong would lose access to dozens of apps, if not more, to many independent sources of information and to platforms where they usually exchange information with their networks. Part of these users would not replace the apps that have become unavailable, while another significant part would simply switch to China's "replacement apps", exposing themselves further to censorship and surveillance. Only a fraction of the users would have the ability to use their already acquired VPNs, while the majority of iOS users would be left without any solution, as VPN apps would logically be included on the list of banned apps along with the social media and networking apps targeted by the authorities.

Apps at Risk : The National Security Law, Censorship & Hong Kong's Steep Road to Authoritarianism

On 30 June 2020, the national security law was passed by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, and came into force the same day. Despite authorities reassurance that the law would target "an extremely small minority of illegal and criminal acts" and that the "basic rights and freedoms of the overwhelming majority of citizens (would) be protected", the NSL severely impacted press freedom and free expression, offline and online.

Authorities have used the NSL to harass members of civil society organizations, human rights workers, activists and journalists. And to justify censorship of any content deemed to constitute one of the four types of activities criminalized by the NSL: secession or separatism, subversion, terrorism and collusion with a foreign country or with external elements to endanger national security.

Over the last two years, the space for media and internet freedom in Hong Kong has shrunk considerably, transforming Hong Kong into an authoritarian territory where censorship, and now self-censorship, are gradually becoming the rule rather than the exception. In July 2021, a story that portrayed the police as wolves preying on sheep (activists), led to the arrests of five people behind the book's publication.

Under the NSL, internet service providers, telecommunication operators, those who manage social networks and online platforms and those operating the numerous data centers in Hong Kong face greater liability for user content. In such a repressive environment, Apple's App Store may become one of the key targets for the authorities when they will be looking to restrict access to certain contents online.

Looking at the impact of the NSL on freedom of information and expression in Hong Kong over the last two years, AppleCensorship provides a non-exhaustive list of media and social media apps that have been directly or indirectly impacted by the NSL or that could be at risk of being targeted by the authorities in the future.

1 **Social Media**

Facebook
Status in Hong Kong's App Store: Available
Status in China's App Store: Available but blocked
Risk of removal: Medium

In May 2020, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg expressed concern about the situation in Hong Kong and Facebook's ability to operate on the territory and continue to offer its services such as WhatsApp, which allows users to communicate safely via end-to-end encrypted messages.

At the end of 2020, some pro-democracy groups on Facebook were suspended, such as the page called Tai Po, which had 120,000 members when it was suspended and frequently hosted messages supportive of the protests. Facebook has removed several popular pages run by pro-democracy and pro-police groups without explanation. While pressure on Facebook is expected to grow, the company has a better chance at resisting censorship than smaller social media platforms, and Apple knows that the removal of the platform from its APp Store would not go unnoticed.

MeWe Network
Status in Hong Kong's App Store: Available
Status in China's App Store: Unavailable
Risk of removal: High

After Facebook suspended pro-democracy groups and pages supporting the protests, fears that Facebook could be cracking down on anti-China messages led many of its users to switch to other platforms with fewer rules for content moderation. MeWe has been one of the main alternatives cited by Hong Kongers. Some independent media, such as Inmediahk.net, host some of their content on the platform.

LIHKG (討論區)
Status in Hong Kong's App Store: Available
Status in China's App Store: Unavailable
Risk of removal: High

Established in 2016, LIHKG is a forum which gained popularity and gradually replaced a formerly prominent Hong Kong forum called HKGolden as the go-to site for Hong Kongers to discuss political content. LIHKG is often compared to Reddit (available in Hong Kong but unavailable in China's App Store), where users create threads and submit a variety of content through relevant "subreddits" that categorize the posts into different sections.

Similar apps at risk:

HKGolden (高登討論區)   Reddit

Telegram Messenger
Status in Hong Kong's App Store: Available
Status in China's App Store: Available but blocked
Risk of removal: Medium

The number of arrests and prosecutions for content posted online has increased since the adoption of the NSL.

In June 2019, Ivan Ip, 22, who allegedly administered a group channel on Telegram called "Parade 69", named for a mass demonstration planned in central Hong Kong to protest the "extradition bill", was arrested on "suspicion of conspiracy to cause a public nuisance". In April 2021, a Hong Kong court sentenced 26-year-old Hui Pui-yee, who helped run a Telegram channel during the 2019 protests, to three years in jail, for "conspiracy to commit a seditious act and conspiracy to incite others to commit arson". In May 2022, 27-year-old Ng Man-ho, who had run a Telegram Channel with more than 109,000 subscribers during the 2019 and 2020 protests, was jailed for six and a half years after being convicted of "conspiring to incite others to commit arson", "rioting" and other crimes.

Some local media outlets reported that the Hong Kong government is considering restricting access to Telegram.

Rumble
Status in Hong Kong's App Store: Unavailable
Status in China's App Store: Unavailable
Risk of removal: Low to Medium

Presenting itself as a Youtube alternative, Rumble is trending online video platform and cloud services business, which, despite being its limited accessibility (the app is currently only available in 10 App Stores), has already convinced several major media companies like the Reuters and the NY Post, to run their own channel on the platform. In 2021, Stand News (see here) created its own channel, although it uploaded very videos (or they have since been removed). The fact that the apps is already unavailable makes it an improbable target for the authorities. But if the number of Hong Kongers equipped with VPNs using the platform continues to grow, the app could attract Beijing's attention.

2 Media

The NSL has taken a serious toll on press freedom and freedom of information. Journalists have been arrested for merely doing their job, criminal charges have been brought against critical journalists and media outlets, even retroactively.

When it comes to "traditional media", the authorities often favor strategies that instill self-censorship within the media personnel before resorting to outright censorship. This makes the probability of news and media app removal slightly lower than that of social networking and other apps used by the civil society.

In Hong Kong, authorities now regularly threaten media and media personnel with prosecution under the NSL and sedition law for their coverage of the government or for spreading "fake news". On 7th October 2022, a Hong Kong court sentenced radio host and political commentator Edmund Wan Yiu-sing to two years and eight months in prison under the rarely-used colonial-era sedition law.

D100 Radio HK
Status in Hong Kong's App Store: Available
Status in China's App Store: Unavailable (previously available)
Risk of removal: Medium

Hong Kong D100 internet radio channel host Edmund Wan Yiu-sing, better known as "Giggs", 54, was sentenced on 7th October 2022 to a total of two years and eight months in prison for "sedition" under a rarely-used colonial-era law, and for alleged "money laundering". He was also ordered to hand over HK$ 4.87 million (about € 633,000) of his assets.

Hong Kong internet radio host Edmund Wan Yiu-sing sentenced to 32 months in prison

Apple Daily (蘋果動新聞)
Status in Hong Kong's App Store: Available
Status in China's App Store: Unavailable
Risk of removal: Medium

The crackdown and closure of Apple Daily is emblematic of how the NSL is being used to stifle press freedom. It is reflective of the CCP's tactic to target key individuals in order to send a warning signal to others of the risks of speaking out and challenging the party's authoritarian rule. The crackdown on Apple Daily also reinforced the retroactive nature of the NSL.

Apple Daily released its final edition on June 24, 2021 and shut down its website, online television channels, and social media accounts following an unprecedented police raid and the arrests of its chief editor, other newsroom staff, and executives at the parent company Next Digital, all under the NSL.

However, until today, Apple Daily's app is still available in the App Store, and is only blocked in China's App Store. Some users have even requested Apple to keep the app in the App Store until the media is reformed, while several initiatives to archive the journal's content (and other media at risk) have emerged.

The website collection.news, which archives content from both Apple Daily and Stand News, has saved more than 400,000 articles from Apple Daily.

★★★★★

Ms Kwong・03/06/2022

This is the best newspaper app in Hong Kong
Dear Apple,
Please don't remove this app from App Store! It's didn't update because its shutdown by HKG. Please let it stay in App Store, maybe it can renew on one day in the future, this is most HongKonger's wishes.
We're appreciates for your help!
By HongKonger

Comment on Apple Daily's App in the App Store

Similar apps at risk:

Hong Kong Free Press   **Apple Daily Taiwan**   **Next Magazine (壹週刊)**

Next Apple News

Apple Daily's sister publication, Next Magazine, was also shutdown in 2021, with the app still available in the App Store.

Apple Daily Taiwan, Taiwan's version of the Hong Kong pro-democracy tabloid, quickly became one of the major media outlets in Taiwan after having entered the market in the 2000s. As the crackdown on Apple Daily in Hong Kong started, the fate of Apple Daily Taiwan was uncertain until it eventually discontinued its print edition in May 2021, to focus on its online version. The media eventually shut down and was rebranded as "Next Apple News" in August 2022, under the ownership of Singaporean entrepreneur Joseph Phua. In a statement published on the 30th Apple Daily Taiwan staff, which almost entirely moved to Next Apple News, said it was "sorry that it had to bid farewell to its readers due to a lack of working capital, but added that Next Apple News would continue to shoulder the same responsibility to expose societal injustices.

[RTHK](#)

Status in Hong Kong's App Store: Available
Status in China's App Store: Available
Risk of removal: Low to Medium

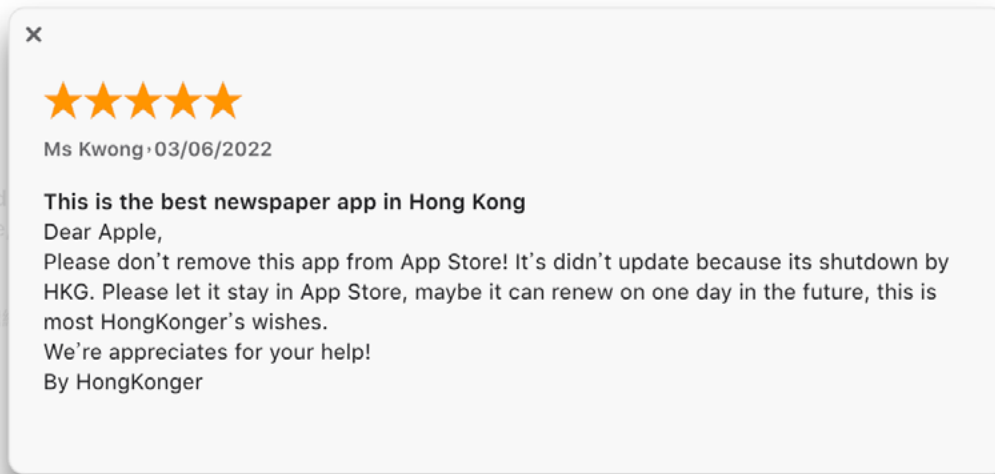The overhaul of public broadcaster RTHK by the government has been one of the most severe blow to press freedom in Hong Kong since the adoption of the NSL. Once a respected source of information, RTHK started to lose its editorial independence in February 2021 after a government review found "[deficiencies in the editorial management mechanism and a lack of transparency in handling complaints](#)". RTHK also suspended its relay of the BBC radio news after China's ban of the BBC World News broadcasts. From March until August 2021, RTHK [cancelled a current affairs](#) program, removed content from [its online archives](#) and [its Twitter account](#), [launched a chat show hosted](#) Hong Kong Chief Executive, [issued directives to its journalists to use Beijing-approved wording](#) in their reporting activities, and started a partnership. RTHK has also seen an [exodus of senior editorial staffers](#). Employees were also warned that they would be held financially liable for airing forbidden content.
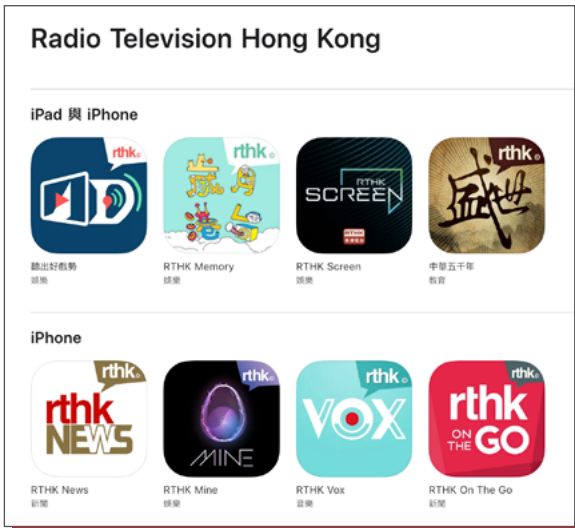
In May, RTHK confirmed that it had begun removing shows older than 12 months from its YouTube channel and Facebook page. A couple of months later, RTHK's English-language Twitter account was also purged from its earlier posts. Considering the extent of the media's overhaul, the probability of the Beijing requesting that the app be taken down is low.

[Apps published by RTHK group in the App Store](#)

[Stand News](#) (立場新聞)

Status in Hong Kong's App Store: Disappeared (app removed globally)
Status in China's App Store: Disappeared (app removed globally)
Risk of removal: N/A

After the shut-down of Apple Daily, Stand News was one of the few remaining pro-democracy media outlets in Hong Kong. But on 29 December 2021 at 6.20 am, over 200 police officers raided Stand News' office, seizing boxes of evidence and arresting several current and former senior staff. They also searched the residence of Ronson Chan, who was at the time Stand News' deputy assignment editor and chair of the Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA). Stand News' assets (HK$61 million) were frozen and, on the same day, the company announced that it was ceasing its operations.

立場新聞 [12+]
立場新聞 Stand News
專為 iPhone 設計
#12 (新聞)
★★★★★ 4.8 • 1.1万 個評分
免費

iPhone 螢幕截圖

Stand News' iOS app remained available for download in the App Store until at least December 2021, but was eventually taken down globally around the same time the news outlet's UK office chief, Yeung Tin-shui announced the decision to cease operations of Stand News' UK office. All reporting on the Stand News website provided by the UK office and its social media accounts were also removed. It is unclear if the removal was initiated by Stand News staff or ordered by the authorities.
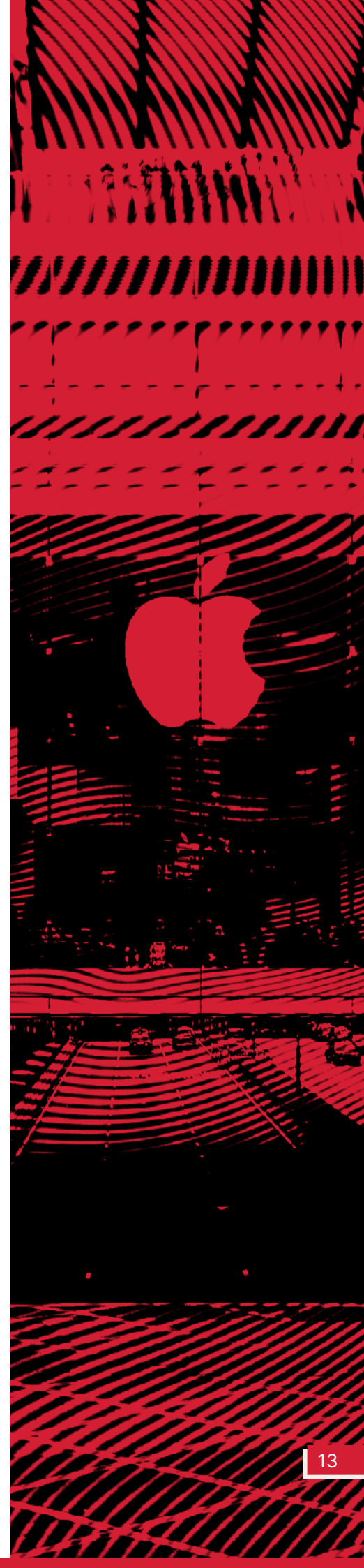
App Store 預覽

立場新聞
評分與評論

4.8 滿分 5 粒星   1.1万 個評分

★★★★★
TooLazyToNameMyself · 03/12/2019

The voice we need in a critical moment of …
The Stand News offers the much needed "other side" of the story for anyone who cares about truth and justice to form his or her own opinion. I thank the Stand News ! 更多

★★★★★
Xxxica · 03/06/2020

Reliable Media 👍
One of the few local media who are willing to report the truth of the ongoing situation, without kneeling down in front of Gov or other parties. 更多

★★★★★
Terrence0531 · 28/05/2020

The Stand News
A press that brings you to the dark side of Hong Kong's politics and local's life. It tells you stories that you won't hear from other major medias. If you want to have a look ! 更多

★★★★★
hkehung · 17/08/2015

Wait for this for a while already
Wait for their app for a few months already and finally we got it. Good to read on app when I am out of town and/or on the road, much easier.

★★★★★
KienLYL · 24/11/2019

True HK news platform
Stand News had been very professional and reporting the truth which every media should be doing. In this critical period in Hong Kong, the Stand News reported with justice and 更多

★★★★★
man_mom · 02/04/2020

Fantastic experience!
The Stand News offers a neutral platform for users with providing "accurate" and updated news about Hong Kong present.

★★★★★
nowgimmemycoins · 19/07/2019

Awesome
An impartial and uncensored news source that offers a variety of subjects with high quality content.
One of the very few media in Hong Kong ! 更多

★★★★★
Lost Atlantis · 25/02/2020

Professional
The Stand News is your best source of information for news related to Hong Kong, their reporters are professional, and their opinion editorials are well informed.

★★★★★
Liukakaka · 03/08/2020

Good app
User-friendly with good interface. This is the best platform app to read articles n latest news!

★★★★★
Revolution Hong Kong · 24/02/2020

Minimalistic design
The UI design is simple and user friendly, I can read the latest news easily.

Comments posted during the time of the protests praising Stand News can be seen on the app's page in the App Store (archive)

Initium (端傳媒：華語深度新聞)
Status in Hong Kong's App Store: Available
Status in China's App Store: Unavailable
Risk of removal: Medium to High

A digital news outlet launched in 2015 in Hong Kong, and specializing in in-depth feature reporting on issues in Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China, Initium announced in August 2022 that it was relocating its headquarters to Singapore, to "produce content through online and decentralized medium, and continue to present the pulse of the times in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan in our in-depth content", said Initium's executive editor. This move made Initium the first Hong Kong-registered media to relocate abroad as a result of the national security law. Although the media relocated abroad, its local reporters remain a target of choice for the authorities, should they attempt to silence the media or force it into self-censorship, making an app takedown request less likely.

South China Morning Post (SCMP)
Status in Hong Kong's App Store: Available
Status in China's App Store: Available
Risk of removal: Low

In March 2022, Gary Liu, Alibaba-owned *South China Morning Post's CEO*, quit his role after six years at the helm of Hong Kong's oldest English-language newspaper, bringing more uncertainty on the future ownership of the media. Speaking about editorial line of the SCMP company, journalist and former SCMP contributor Stephen Vines wrote in 2018:

"Most of the critical voices have been purged from its comment pages leaving a stodgy residue of required reading for insomniacs. Sprinkled on top are some "brave" critics whose licence to criticise is conditional on their readiness to disparage Hong Kong's home-grown democratic forces.

There are a couple of significant exceptions, but they would understandably not wish to be named as it would jeopardise their positions."

i-CABLE (流動版)
Status in Hong Kong's App Store: Available
Status in China's App Store: Available
Risk of removal: Low

Hong Kong television station i-Cable TV network was founded in 1993 and is now owned by David Chiu, chairman and CEO of Far East Consortium. In December 2020, Executives at Hong Kong television station i-Cable TV network announced they would be firing at least 40 journalists, editors, and production crew, including the team of the award-winning investigative journalism show News Lancet. *"The Group needed to conduct a comprehensive review and adjustment of personnel and leadership structure across all departments."*, an official statement said.

Epoch Times (大纪元)
Status in Hong Kong's App Store: Available
Status in China's App Store: Unavailable
Risk of removal: Medium

While physical attacks on individual journalists remain rare, their number has increased over the years. The attack on the printing press of the *Epoch Times* newspaper is one of the most recent examples of the growing threat on news providers. The newspaper, which was founded by practitioners of the Falun Gong spiritual movement, often covers human rights abuses in mainland China and is fiercely critical of the CCP. Between April and May 2021, unidentified attackers assaulted an *Epoch Times* journalist with a baseball bat and broke into the journal's printing facility and damaged the office's computers and printing machines.

Related apps:

MINGHUI (news of the Falun Gong community)

The Witness (法庭線)
Status in Hong Kong's App Store: no iOS app
Status in China's App Store: no iOS app
Risk of removal: Medium to High

While prominent independent outlets, such as Apple Daily and Stand News, have shut down one after another, a number of independent media outlets are still trying to report on Hong Kong current affairs independently. The Witness, which started publishing in May 2022 was launched by a "group of former court reporters" aiming at restoring a proper coverage of legal affairs (i.e. including cases related to the national security law).

Although the media does not have any mobile app, it is widely present on social media platforms. The Witness has a Facebook page, an Instagram and a twitter account, a Telegram Channel, and a Youtube video channel with already more than 5,000 subscribers.

It is yet to be seen if such model of online presence, chosen by several independent media which have recently formed in Hong Kong, constitutes a strength and higher capacity of resilience to censorship or, in the contrary, if it makes the media vulnerable to the authorities' control of the internet. As The Witness also relies on membership platform Patreon, to finance its operations, the removal of the platform from Hong Kong's App Store (coupled with the blocking of the website) could cut the media from its main source of income.

Apps at risk:

Facebook　　**Instagram**　　**Telegram Messenger**

Twitter　　**Youtube**　　**Patreon**

Human Rights Academy (Amnesty International)
Status in Hong Kong's App Store: Available
Status in China's App Store: Available
Risk of removal: Low to Medium

In August 2019, human rights organization Amnesty International revealed it had "been the target of a sophisticated state-sponsored cyber-attack, consistent with those carried out by hostile groups linked to the Chinese government. The attack had first been detected on 15 March 2019, when "state-of-the-art security monitoring tools detected suspicious activity on Amnesty International Hong Kong's local IT systems". Two years later, in October 2021, the organization announced that it had no other choice but to close its offices in Hong Kong "by the end of the year".

"This decision, made with a heavy heart, has been driven by Hong Kong's national security law, which has made it effectively impossible for human rights organizations in Hong Kong to work freely and without fear of serious reprisals from the government," Anjhula Mya Singh Bais, chair of Amnesty's International Board was quoted as saying in the statement.

In 2020, the organization launched its Human Rights Academy app, which offers a wide variety of human rights courses in more than 20 languages, including Chinese. As Beijing's goal was to see the group depart from Hong Kong, it is unlikely it will seek to take down the app.

Similar apps:

Human Rights Watch News

Yellow Umbrella (黃雨傘)
Status in Hong Kong's App Store: Available
Status in China's App Store: Unavailable
Risk of removal: Low to Medium

The app Yellow Umbrella was created in 2014 to gather the RSS feed of all Twitter news related to the Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong, including the Occupy Central with Love and Peace civil disobedience campaign, students' engagement and demonstrations. The app could fall into Beijing's plans to purge Hong Kong's App Store of all seditious content.

iCensorship

Apple has bet big on China, a strategy shaped by Tim Cook soon after he joined the company two decades ago and took charge of its operations. The bulk of its factories are there, and as of last year, almost half of its key suppliers for core inputs like chips and glass are based in China. Most of Apple's supply chain is now in China as well as 1/5 of Apple's annual revenue ($17.7 billion net sales in Q1 2021). Apple's suppliers became more concentrated in China. Among all supplier locations, 44.9% were in China in 2015, a proportion that rose to 47.6% by 2019, the data showed.

Apple faces hurdles in diversifying beyond China, where the clustering of multiple suppliers allows it to make hundreds of millions of devices per year while holding only a few days' worth of inventory, which is critical to the free cash flow Apple investors prize. Other phone makers ship far fewer units and have more flexibility. Even if Apple can make devices in India or Vietnam, the volumes would be small compared with Apple's overall needs. Outside of China, there are few places in the world that have the infrastructure to produce 600,000 phones a day.

In 2019, Cook took on the role as board chairman of the business school at China's prestigious Tsinghua University. The university, known as "China's Harvard," has a storied history as a cradle of Chinese political and economic thought. Cook accepted the promotion to board chair in 2019 in the midst of Hong Kong protests and Apple's take-down of HKMaps. In 2019, Cook also met with China's top market regulator to talk about Apple's investment and business development in China and Cook told attendees at a conference in Beijing that his company was "grateful" that China had opened its doors to Apple.

"We encourage China to continue to open up," Cook said at the China Development Forum. *"We see that as essential, not only for China to reach its full potential, but for the global economy to thrive. ... Our future, therefore, depends on collaboration."*

During the 2019 protests, Apple removed apps that protesters used to organize themselves during the uprising, and Apple did not join the coalition of tech platforms that announced they would not disclose data to the Hong Kong authorities.

In 2020, a Hong Kong resident reported that he requested to have the phrase "liberate HKERS" [Hong Kongers] engraved on an Apple product. He said an Apple employee contacted him over the phone, refusing to communicate in writing, and refused to provide the engraving as requested because the Apple "higher-ups did not approve" of the message.

While Apple promotes itself as a company advocating for human rights and opposing North American law enforcement requests when they are unjust, The Citizen Lab researchers have discovered instances of Apple's censorship in Hong Kong through "broad, keyword-based political censorship" and displayed through App Store app take-downs, removed media content, and even the product engraving process (see here). Apple has even forbidden their own employees in Hong Kong from wearing any attire that would imply support for Hong Kong independence from China.

The New York Times found that Apple proactively censors its Chinese App Store, relying on software and employees to flag and block apps that Apple managers worry could run afoul of Chinese officials.

The New York Times found that Apple built a system that is designed to proactively take down apps — without direct orders from the Chinese government — that Apple has deemed off limits in China, or that Apple believes will upset Chinese officials. The system includes training app reviewers on a long list of topics that it believes are not permitted in China and creating software that searches for those topics.

In Hong Kong, Apple is known to broadly censor references to collective action including 雨伞革命 (Umbrella Revolution), 香港民运 (Hong Kong Democratic Movement), 雙普選 (double universal suffrage), and 新聞自由 (freedom of the press). Apple also censors references to political dissidents such as 余杰 (Yu Jie), 刘霞 (Liu Xia), 封从德 (Feng Congde), and 艾未未 (Ai Weiwei).

Much of Apple's censorship in Hong Kong is not required by local Hong Kong laws and regulations. Researchers say Apple may apply its mainland China censorship in Hong Kong intentionally, which "speaks to how much Apple wants to appease the Chinese government."

"Apple has become a cog in the censorship machine that presents a government-controlled version of the internet. If you look at the behavior of the Chinese government, you don't see any resistance from Apple — no history of standing up for the principles that Apple claims to be so attached to," said Nicholas Bequelin, Asia director for the Human RIghts NGO Amnesty International.

Apple Movies & Books

In 2016, Beijing blocked Apple's iTunes Movies and iBooks Stores in China, only six months after they had launched. The shutdown occurred shortly before the Hong Kong film "Ten Years" (十年), already censored in China, was released in Apple's Hong Kong iTunes service. The 2015 film imagined Hong Kong overtaken by Beijing in 2025: with paramilitary, protests & "language police."

The Chinese Communist Party called the film a "thought virus." Subsequently, the Chinese content regulator, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT, abolished in 2018), ordered the Apple services shut down. Today, the film's page on itunes seems to be unavailable globally.

In April 2017, satirical news show China Uncensored, which is affiliated with the religious group Falung Gong, claimed that the Apple TV service blocked users from accessing it from Hong Kong and Taiwan in addition to mainland China. The show which was launched on YouTube in 2012 and aired by New York-based New Tang Dynasty Television (NTD.TV), had been approved by Apple in March 2017 before being removed from Apple TV App Stores in mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Apple's legal team justified its decision, saying the company had to comply with local laws.

In a message sent to China Uncensored, Apple said:

"Apps must comply with all legal requirements in any location where you make them available (if you're not sure, check with a lawyer). We know this stuff is complicated, but it is your responsibility to understand and make sure your app conforms with all local laws [...]. And of course, apps that solicit, promote, or encourage criminal or clearly reckless behavior will be rejected. While your app has been removed from the China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan App Stores, it is still available in the App Stores for the other territories you selected in iTunes Connect."
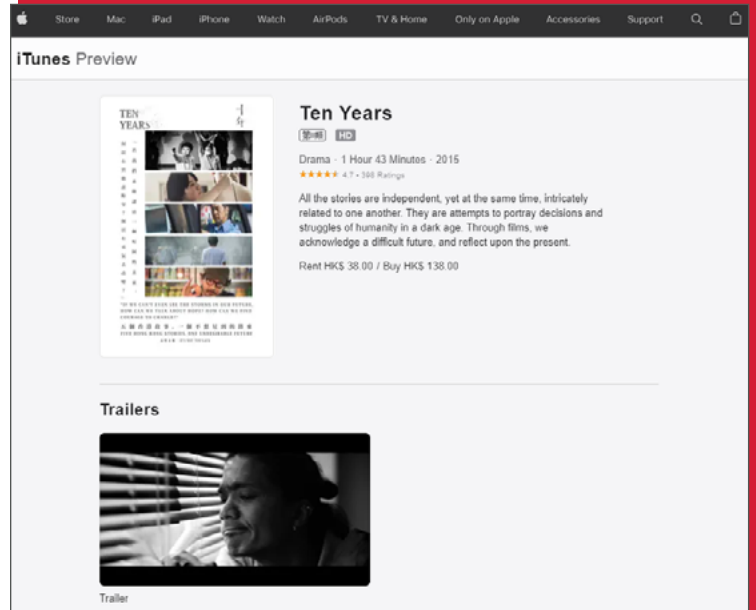
iTunes Preview of 10 years: Source (cached version)

Apple also censors Apple TV projects that "may offend China" and told Apple TV partners to "avoid portraying China in a poor light." Apple's current censorship of Apple TV, banning content that may offend Beijing, is thought to be directly linked to the 2016 iTunes ban.

Apple Music & iTunes Songs

Read more on Twitter

In 2019, Apple Music removed a song by Hong Kong singer Jacky Cheung from its streaming service in China because of the politically sensitive lyrics it contained. The song, entitled "The Path of Man" (人間道), which was the theme music of the 1990 film A Chinese Ghost Story II, is directly referring to the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests and massacre.

Apple Music's users also discovered that the songs of Hong Kong singer Anthony Wong and pro-democracy singer Denise Ho were taken down from Apple Music's China service. Denise Ho, who supported the 2014 Umbrella Movement, could not be searched on the platform.

Sophie Richardson, China Director at Human Rights Watch, posted commentary on the takedown to Twitter, calling the decision to remove Cheung's song ***"spectacularly craven, even by [Apple and Tim Cook's] standards."***

Emojis

In September 2019, Apple censored the Taiwan flag emoji for users that have their iOS region set to Hong Kong or Macau. However, the flag emoji did not completely disappear and was still shown in apps and on websites, or could be typed in English by users. Apple had only previously applied such censorship to users who had set their iOS region to mainland China. Since 2017, Chinese iOS users have been unable to see or type the emoji on their devices at all.
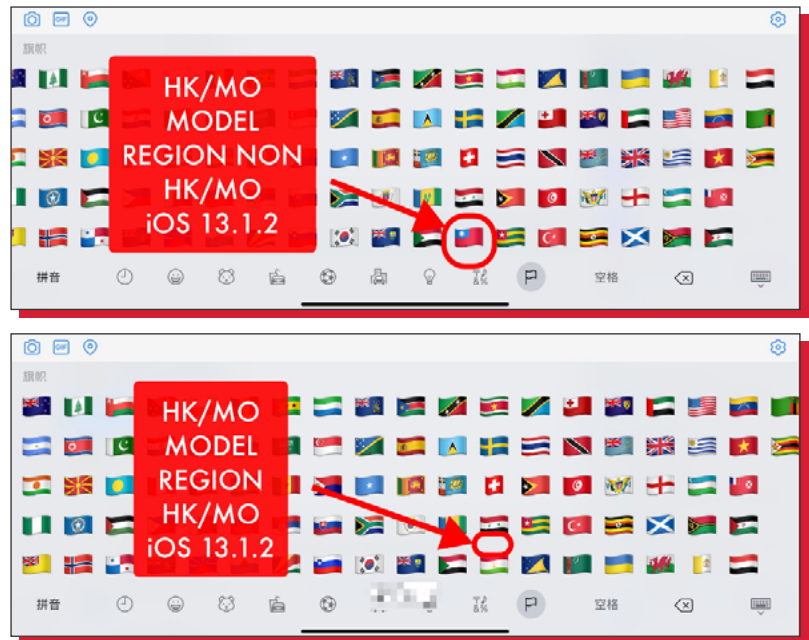
Read more on Twitter

Retail Employee Attire

In August 2020, managers at Apple stores in Hong Kong banned employees from expressing their support for the city's pro-democracy movement. Prior, staff at Apple stores globally have been wearing lanyards with Memojis—or customizable emoji characters—as part of a way to "help store employees express themselves in a world wearing masks."

Use Memoji on your iPhone or iPad Pro

You can create a Memoji to match your personality and mood, then send it in Messages and FaceTime. And with a compatible iPhone or iPad Pro, you can create an animated Memoji that uses your voice and mirrors your facial expressions.

Apple encourages its customers to personalize their Memoji "to match (their) personality and mood", but prevented its employees in Hong Kong to do the same. Source: https://support.apple.com/en-us/HT208986

According to activist Joshua Wong, Apple managers in Hong Kong have ordered staff not to decorate their Memojis with yellow or black accessories after some staff members personalized theirs in a way that was interpreted as pro-protest support.

In a forwarded WhatsApp message shared by Wong, one Apple employee said a manager questioned a worker's choice of Memoji colors, asking "Do you really like black/yellow? Why wear a yellow shirt/ yellow hat?" "After that, [the manager] forced [my] co-workers to immediately change their Memoji colors. Otherwise, they could not leave," the message continued. It added that managers have even threatened not to renew the contracts of staff as a way to pressure them to change their Memojis. The employee also said that staff have instructed them not to wear face masks that are yellow or have the word "Hong Kong."

Wong published an open letter that he had emailed to Apple CEO Tim Cook, asking him to protect free speech in the company and create a welcoming work environment.

"I hope Apple can affirm its commitment to the principle of freedom of expression and introduce concrete measures to protect employees from future workplace censorship," Wong wrote in the letter, which remained unanswered.

Engraving

The engraving "8964", a reference to the 1989 June 4th protests, is politically censored on an AirTag in mainland China.

Apple's restrictions on what can be engraved on its devices as a way to personalize them have been known for some time now. In 2014 the Los Angeles Times was already publishing an article on the politically charged words that would be rejected by Apple's online store engraving service in China. Words like "Dalai Lama's name in Chinese characters, Tibet independence" or "Liu Xiaobo" would trigger a pop-up box saying: *"The engraved text is not suitable".*

In 2018, Hong Kong Free Press reported that the names of some Chinese state leaders and activists had been deemed "not suitable" from the latest versions of the iPad, iPod Touch and Apple Pencil's engraving service.

After the news of sensitive words being censored by Apple's online store engraving service in China came out for the third time, in April 2021, The Citizen Lab decided to look further into this specific type of censorship across six regions, including mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.

"Among the keyword filtering rules we discovered in the six regions we tested, the largest number applied to mainland China, where we found 1,045 keywords filtering product engravings, followed by Hong Kong, and then Taiwan." the Citizen Lab's report said.

Interestingly enough, Citizen Lab suggested that Apple's staff in charge of blocking specific words) might not fully understand what content they filter in Chinese language regions:

"By comparing Apple's Chinese language lists to those we have previously found used to censor other Chinese products, we found that Apple's list has similarity to many that is unexplainable by coincidence. Rather than each censored keyword being born of careful consideration, many of Apple's censored Chinese keywords seem to have been thoughtlessly reappropriated from other sources."

If that was the case, it would be a contrary example of how Apple seems to curate its App Store, with high-ranking executives directly involved in the decision process leading to the removal of apps for political motivations.

Government Surveillance & Data Requests

After the Hong Kong government granted the police vastly expanded powers under the national security law, including ordering platforms and internet service providers to remove content and hand over user information, major tech companies like Google, Twitter, and Facebook announced that they would halt the processing of data requests from Hong Kong authorities. Notably absent was Apple, which only said that it was "assessing" the impact of the new legislation.

Apple claimed it does not get data requests directly from the Hong Kong government. *"Apple has always required that all content requests from local law enforcement authorities be submitted through the Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty in place between the United States and Hong Kong,"* the company said. Under that process, *"the U.S. Department of Justice reviews Hong Kong authorities' requests for legal conformance."*

On its website, Apple gives a fragmented view of the data requests received from governments. Charts and data are organized per half-year and year-on-year trends are absent.

When looking at the evolution of the figures, the main observations that can be made, are:

■ From 2013 to 2016, the number of "Device requests", "information regarding customers associated with devices and device connections to Apple services" sent by the authorities of Hong Kong and to which Apple complied has more than tripled.

■ From 2016 to 2020, the number of Device requests has significantly dropped, with only 5% of the number of requests in 2016 (1333), observed in 2020 (62). Those numbers continue to drop in the first half of 2021.

■ Apple's compliance with government's requests has significantly dropped in 2020, although the data makes it clear that Apple did not pause Hong Kong Customer Data Requests in the region.
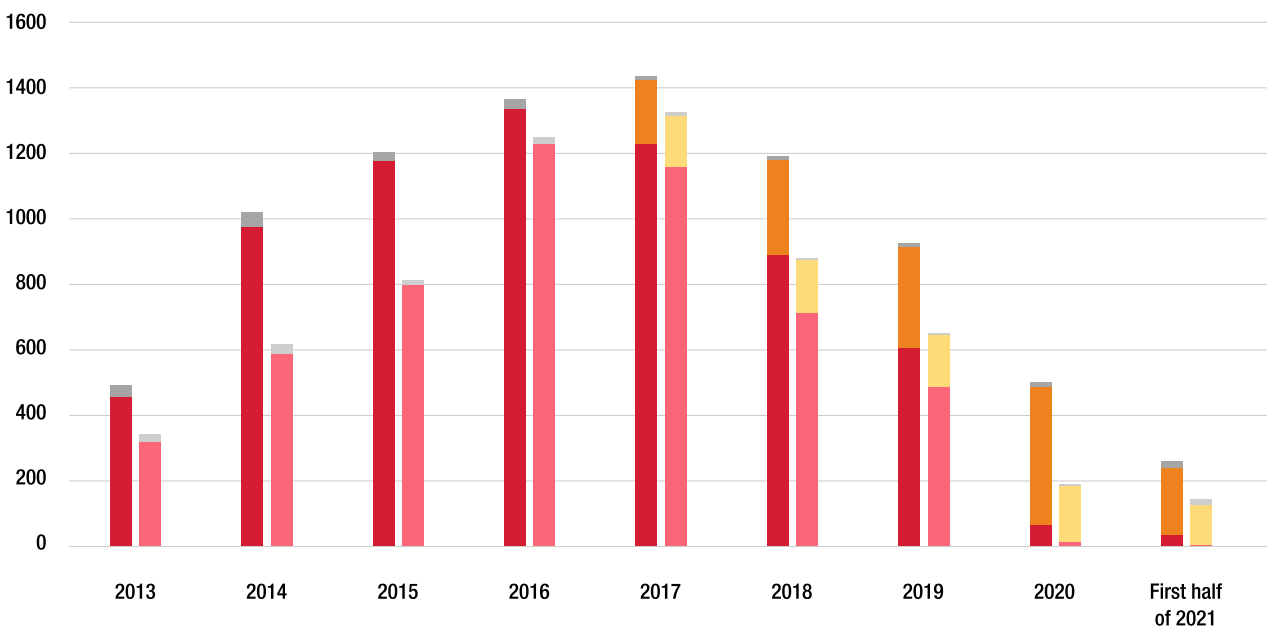
Left column: Received Requests

■ Device   ■ Financial Identifier   ■ Account   ■ Emergency

Right column: Compiled Requests

■ Device   ■ Financial Identifier   ■ Account   ■ Emergency

Requests for Customer Data in Hong Kong from 2013 to 2020
Source: https://www.apple.com/legal/transparency/hk.html

The very low number of Device requests sent by the authorities in 2020, when the NSL was adopted, shows no correlation between the crackdown on the civil society and requests for iOS users' data sent to Apple. However, without the details of those requests, it is impossible to rule out the possibility that the authorities may have relied on evidence obtained via Apple's device related data requests, to target those exercising their free speech online, including owners of Facebook groups, Telegram channels and web forums administrators.

Apple did reject a majority of Customer Data requests in 2020, potentially indicating a rise of unsubstantiated or illicit demands from the authorities.

However, since 2017, when Apple started reporting it, the number of "Financial Identifiers requests" (such as credit/debit card or iTunes Gift Card) has more than doubled. Although Apple vaguely defines the information that is transmitted to the government agencies requesting them, such identifiers could allow the police to know which apps have been purchased by a given user, even if the app was deleted by that user. Apple gives no explanation to this rise of "Financial Identifiers requests".

Apple's Compliance Rate

Year	Rate
2013	69.45%
2014	60.23%
2015	67.60%
2016	92.12%
2017	94.14%
2018	80.05%
2019	80.30%
2020	17.74%
First half of 2021	3.03%
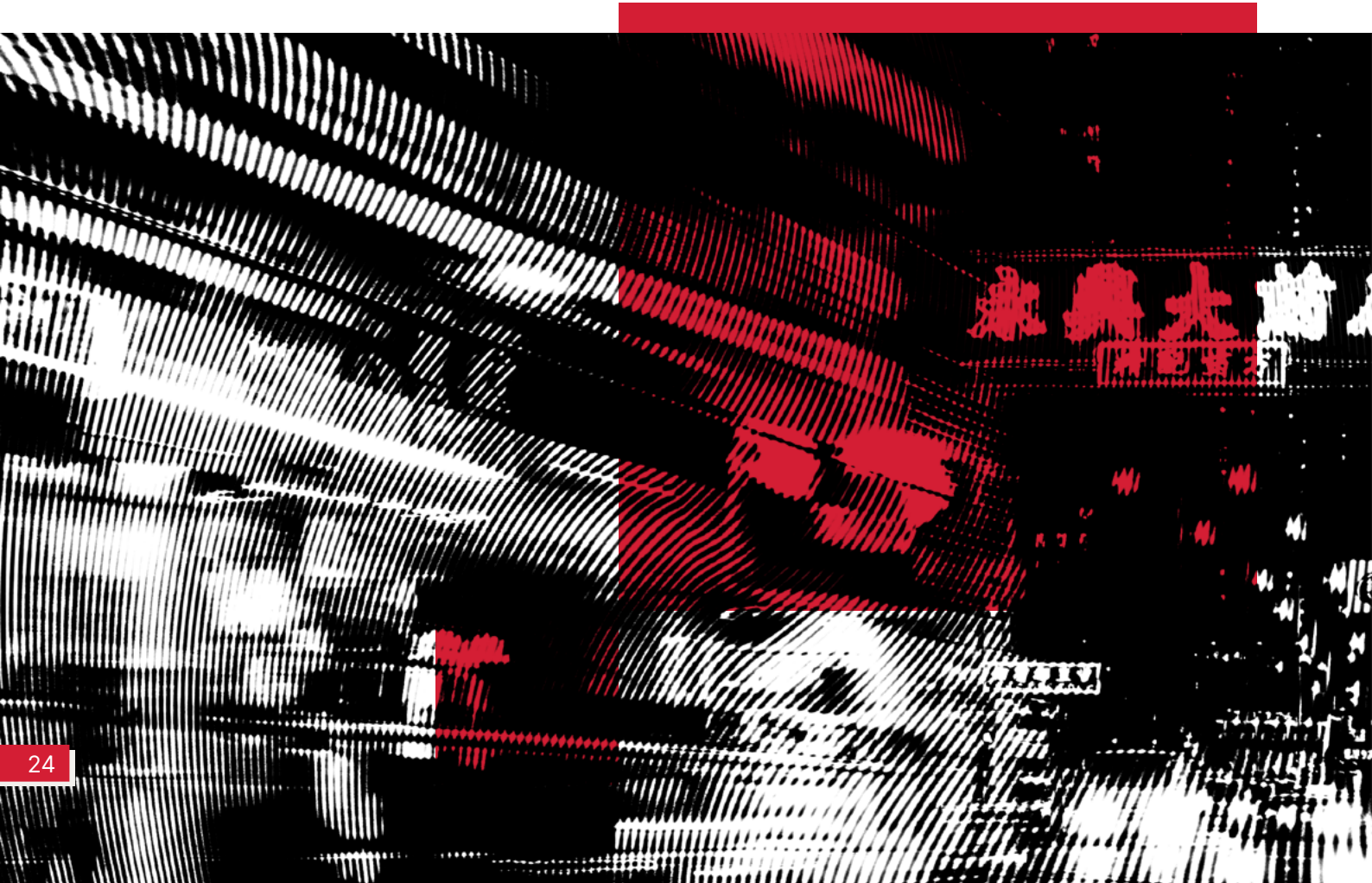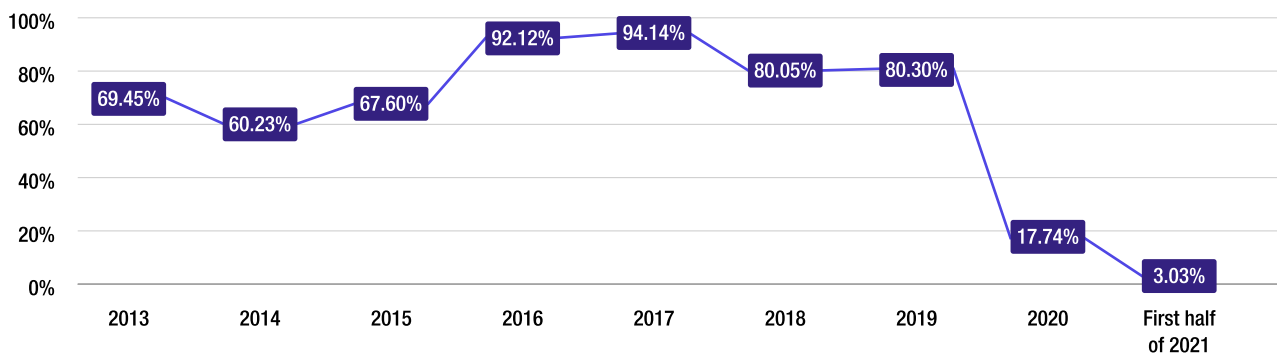
II. HONG KONG'S APP STORE

Overview

App Store Monitor (ASM), July 2021 Measurements

On November 1, 2021, AppleCensorship published its first overview report on the App Store. Studying the unavailability of apps in the 155 App Stores operated by Apple and based on the data collected by the App Store Monitor (ASM), we estimated no less than 29 million cases of app unavailability in Apple's App Stores.

Although there are discrepancies in availability of apps between App Stores - a fact which quashes the very idea of a unique App Store - we found that the average percentage of app unavailability (the ratio between the number of apps tested in a given App Store to the proportion of apps which were found to be unavailable in that App Store) among all 155 App Stores, was around 10% (10.46%).

App Store Monitor (ASM)
Apps Unavailability Per Category - Hong Kong's App Store - July 2021

Number of apps tested	Book	Business	Developer Tools	Education	Entertainment	Finance	Food & Drink	Games	Graphics & Design	Health & Fitness	Lifestyle	Magazines and Newspapers	Medical
	9	9	0	11	63	21	21	134	0	8	32	1	5
6,374	Music	Navigation	News	Photo and Video	Productivity	Reference	Shopping	Social Networking	Sports	Stickers	Travel	Utilities	Weather
	21	8	30	15	16	2	30	31	17	0	8	52	6

Total Number of Unavailable Apps: **550**   Ratio of Unavailability: **8.63%**

Unavailable apps in Hong Kong's App Store (July 2021).
Source: *"Censored on the App Store" Report* (pages 12 – 13) / Nov 1, 2022 Press release
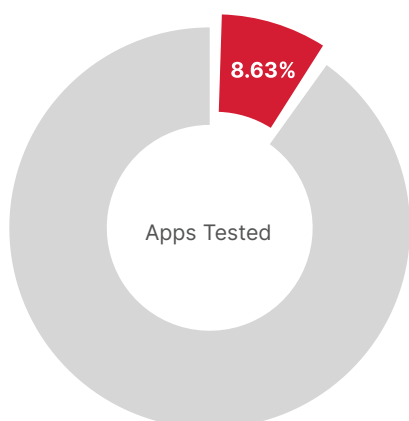
From **6,374 tested Apps,**
550 Apps were detected as unavailable.

- 6 App Stores out of 155 had between 4000 and 7000 apps tested. Only Hong Kong's App Store had more than 500 unavailable apps.

- Hong Kong's App Store showed the 10th best unavailability percentage out of 155 App Stores.

- Only 10 App Stores were found to have from 400 to over 500 unavailable apps (405 to 550).

Despite a high number of unavailable apps, Hong Kong's App Store remained among the App Stores with the smallest ratio of unavailable apps. As expected in this first overview, it was determined that, for the vast majority of App Stores, the more apps were tested, the smaller their unavailability percentage was getting. In July 2021, few App Stores had more than 4000 apps tested for availability.

All July 2021 results are available here

List of unavailable apps in Hong Kong's App Store detected by the ASM (August 2021)

Hong Kong's App Store VS. China's App Store

On December 31, 2021, AppleCensorship conducted a series of tests in Hong Kong's App Store in order to compare it with mainland China's App Store. For that purpose, all apps unavailable in China on December 31, 2021 were tested in Hong Kong's App Store. Although this approach has some limitations (e.g. after the tests, the total number of apps tested in Hong Kong and China, as well as the IDs of the apps tested, would still be significantly different), the purpose was to eliminate the possibility that China's App Store's high number and high unavailability rate was only explained by the fact that China had (with the U.S. App Store) the most amount of apps tested overall. The hypothesis that testing all the apps unavailable in China would make any App Store resemble China's App Store, was to be eliminated.

On December 31, 2021, slightly more than 32,000 apps had been tested in China's App Store out of which, 8526 (almost 27%) were unavailable at the time. In Hong Kong's App Store, more than 7,000 apps had been tested and 854 apps were unavailable at the time.

TESTING ALL CHINA'S APP STORE'S UNAVAILABLE APPS IN HONG KONG'S APP STORE - 12/31/2021								
App Store (before/after the battery of tests)	Number of unique, existing apps tested	Number of currently unavailable apps	Unavailability percentage	Apps available in 1 or 2 App Stores ("local apps")	Apps available in 3 or more App Stores	% of "Local apps"	% of other apps	Link to raw data (.CSV)
CHINA (before)	32,041	8,526	26.61%	2,567	5,959	30.11%	69.89%	CN App Store 12/31/2021
CHINA (after)	31,8	8,325	26.18%	2,241	6,084	26.92%	73.08%	CN App Store 01/03/2022
HONG KONG (before)	7,31	854	11.68%	629	225	73.65%	26.35%	HK App Store 12/31/2021
HONG KONG (after)	13,035	2,266	17.38%	1,674	592	73.87%	26.13%	HK App Store 01/03/2022
Evolution	5725	1412	(+5.70%)	1045	367	(+0.22%)	(-0,22%)	

After testing all 8,526 apps from China's list of unavailable apps, in Hong Kong's App Store, Hong Kong's App Store percentage of unavailability increased significantly: from 11.68% to 17.38% (+5.70%). The main observations and interpretations that can be drawn from the results (cf. Table above) are as follows:

- Although it was not the target of the experiment, but was only used as a source for the apps to be tested, China's App Store was impacted by this series of tests, as the ASM updated the status of many apps that had not been tested for weeks or months in the App Store. As some were found to no longer exist (approximately 200 "disappeared apps"), the figures for China's App Store have decreased after the test session.

- China's App Store's specific level of restrictions is marked by the relatively low percentage of "local apps" (about 30%) among unavailable apps. Hong Kong's App Store remains relatively free compared to China's App Store, with a majority of apps possibly being "local apps" (around 73%).

- After testing 8,526 apps in Hong Kong's App Store, the number of total apps tested apps increased by 5,725, indicating that approximately 2,800 apps from the test list were already tested in Hong Kong's App Store and were therefore not added to the number "unique existing apps" tested in that Store.

- The assumption that Hong Kong's list of unavailable apps increased because it integrated a significant number of "local apps", (apps only available in one or two App Stores) proved to be partly false. In fact, the proportion of unavailable 'local apps' in Hong Kong's App Store (73.65% before the tests) remained constant after all the 8,526 apps were tested (73.87%). This indicates that the increased percentage of unavailability is also due to apps that are available in 3 or more App Stores.

- Moreover, if the 2,241 apps labeled as "local apps" in China's App Store's list of unavailable apps, were indeed local apps, they should all have been added to Hong Kong's list of unavailable apps (as they would be equally unavailable there). The fact that Hong Kong's App Store's number of "local apps" increased by less than half of that number, shows many apps were not in fact local apps. Although this is merely a correction of a methodological flaw (apps can only be definitely labeled as "local apps" once they have been tested in all existing App Stores), this confirms China's App Store's specificity.

- This series of tests indicates that, despite still being far from reaching the level of restrictions observed in China's App Store, Hong Kong's App Store is more restrictive than we initially thought. Additional testing focusing on relevant apps categories could further raise Hong Kong's App Store's percentage of unavailability.

App Takedown Requests
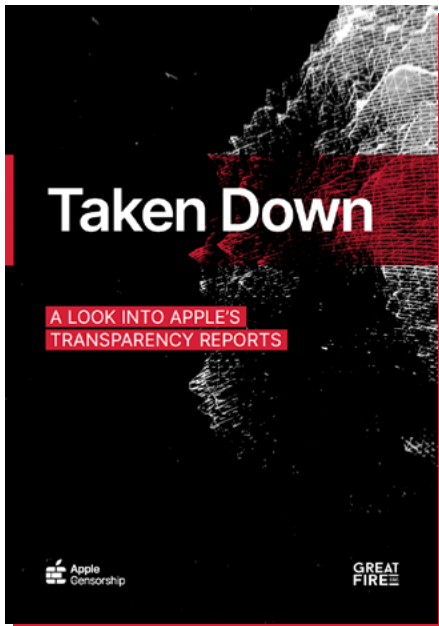
On April 21, 2022, AppleCensorship published a report, "*Taken Down: A Look into Apple's Transparency Reports*", exposing how Apple carefully engineered its Transparency Reports to conceal as much information as possible on app removals from the 175 App Stores it operates worldwide.

Dissecting the four Transparency Reports covering "Worldwide Government App Store Takedown Requests" from January 2019 until December 2020, AppleCensorship uncovered scores of missing data, incoherence and contradictory information presented in the most deceptive way, making it impossible for the public to have a clear understanding of Apple's government-led and proactive removals of apps from its App Stores. In presenting such reports as its effort to be transparent to the public, Apple is deceiving its users and the public on the reality of its takedown policy, both in terms of its nature and true scale.

Hong Kong did not appear in the list of countries' governments which requested apps to be taken down from their App Store or globally. However, one particular case comes as a contradiction to Apple's data showing no requests from Hong Kong authorities.

In October 2019, one app in particular made the news after being removed by Apple at the request of the Hong Kong police: HKmap.live. The navigation app constitutes a particularly salient example of Apple's misleading self-reporting and willingness to enable repressive governance. (read more on this case)

HKmap.live allowed users to report and view the locations and crowd control measures of police across Hong Kong. Although the app does not appear in the transparency report relevant to the period - indeed Hong Kong appears in no transparency report since their first publication - Apple did acknowledge its removal of the app from Hong Kong's App Store after the police confirmed it enabled the committing of crimes.

In a statement sent to the press, Apple wrote:

"We have verified with the Hong Kong Cybersecurity and Technology Crime Bureau (CSTCB) that the app has been used to target and ambush police, threaten public safety, and criminals have used it to victimize residents in areas where they know there is no law enforcement, (...) This app violates our guidelines and local laws, and we have removed it from the App Store."

Despite Apple removing the app at the behest of the authorities, Hong Kong did not appear in Apple's Transparency Reports. As the firm states in its reports, it only counts requests that follow the "official" procedure of the "Government App Store Takedown Requests" mechanism, procedures which have never been made public.

This case opens the possibility that other apps may have been (or may be) removed from Hong Kong's App Store following "unofficial" requests from Hong Kong government agencies, or following requests that are later attributed to mainland China's government in Apple's Transparency Reports. Doing so would allow Apple to conceal specific cases of political censorship in the high number of app takedown requests emanating from China, as such a tactic has been documented in "*Taken Down: A Look into Apple's Transparency Reports*".

App Store Monitor (ASM), November 2022 Measurements

App Store Monitor (ASM)

Apps Unavailability Per Category - Hong Kong's App Store - November 2022

Number of apps tested	Book	Business	Developer Tools	Education	Entertainment	Finance	Food & Drink	Games	Graphics & Design	Health & Fitness	Lifestyle	Magazines and Newspapers	Medical
14,782	36	68	0	47	213	166	103	544	2	55	146	4	79
	Music	**Navigation**	**News**	**Photo and Video**	**Productivity**	**Reference**	**Shopping**	**Social Networking**	**Sports**	**Stickers**	**Travel**	**Utilities**	**Weather**
	72	32	66	41	67	19	163	121	85	3	62	160	26

Total Number of Unavailable Apps: **2,370**   Ratio of Unavailability: **16.03%**

16,03%
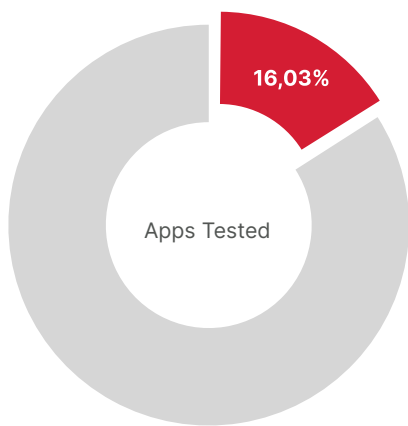
Apps Tested

From **14,782 tested Apps,**
2,370 Apps were detected as unavailable.

- 5 App Stores out of 155 have more than 14,000 apps tested for availability.

- Hong Kong's App Store ranks 158th out of 173 App Stores in terms of apps' unavailability.

- Only Russia's and China's App Stores have more unavailable apps than Hong Kong's App Store. (Russia: 2,754 ; China: 10,837)
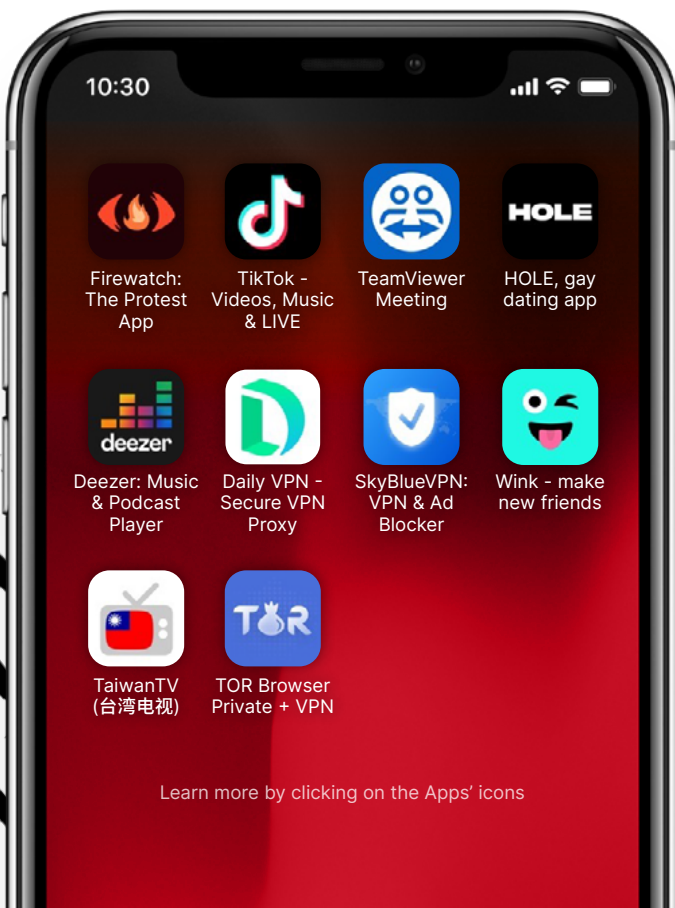
Noticeable iOS apps unavailable in Hong Kong's App Store
(November 2022)

All November 2022 results are avaialble here

10:30

Firewatch: The Protest App

TikTok - Videos, Music & LIVE

TeamViewer Meeting

HOLE, gay dating app

Deezer: Music & Podcast Player

Daily VPN - Secure VPN Proxy

SkyBlueVPN: VPN & Ad Blocker

Wink - make new friends

TaiwanTV (台湾电视)

TOR Browser Private + VPN

Learn more by clicking on the Apps' icons

Targeted Censorship: Categorical Bans

One of the main obstacles to producing a complete picture of Apple's policing of the App Store is the absence of information and figures for apps removed regionally due to governments targeting of certain categories of apps or blanket restrictions requested by said governments.

While Apple communicates (poorly) on government requests relating to one or more specific apps, they do not disclose the number of apps removed due to governments requesting that Apple reject or take down all apps of a particular kind or category. In fact, this type of removal is barely acknowledged by Apple.

Blanket restrictions allow governments to ensure the removal or rejection of apps by Apple without having to issue a request for every app it wants to ban. Those restrictions lead to "proactive removals": app removals or rejections initiated by Apple itself, in accordance to concealed blanket restrictions or for other politically motivated reason, such as Apple trying to avoid the ire of a government. As it has been confirmed by the New York Times in the case of China, Apple does elaborate blacklists of content that should not be uploaded in specific App Stores.

Indeed, documents from a lawsuit by a former Apple's employee working as an App Store app reviewer has revealed that Apple keeps a "Chinese App Store Removal wiki page" that tracks an "Apple China blacklist" and that Apple has a software program that tags any apps mentioning keywords from the blacklist.

Like in China's App Store, patterns of app removals from Hong Kong's App Store detected by the ASM could suggest that specific groups of apps are targeted by the Chinese authorities (in Hong Kong or in Beijing) and/or that such system of Apple-enforced bans and proactive removals are in place in Hong Kong's App Store. At present time, although some patterns could indicate a worrying trend towards more restrictions, no systematic ban of a specific category of apps has been detected in Hong Kong's App Store.

Sensitive Categories of Apps in Hong Kong

AppleCensorship monitors specific ad hoc "categories" of sensitive apps. The following categorical lists of apps currently unavailable in Hong Kong's App Store are composed of apps which have a higher probability of having been censored by Apple.

A selection of unavailable apps in Hong Kong's App Store was made and the selected apps were regrouped in four categories of potentially "sensitive" apps : "Dating, Relationship and LGBTQ+ Related", "Information, Media, News, TV & Radio", "VPNs & Private Browsers, Digital Security & Privacy", and "Social Media & Communication Tools". A fifth category, "Miscellaneous", has been created to regroup other types of apps in small numbers and apps which are not by nature sensitive, but for which information on availability worldwide seems to indicate geo-blocking in Hong Kong's App Store.

Dating, Relationship and LGBTQ+ Related Apps

In the summer of 2022, Hong Kong's crackdown on social activism is threatening to undo progress for gay rights, once considered validation of the city's reputation as Asia's liberal, financial haven. Well-known LGBTQ figures, including former lawmakers and singers, have been arrested or jailed for their political activism. The national security law imposed following the violent protests of 2019 has also exacerbated the pandemic's restrictive impact, forcing the suspension of the annual Pride marches and prompting human rights lawyers to leave the city.

#	App's ID	App's Name	Developer / Owner	Genre	App Tested in (# territories)	Available in (# territories)
1	1212184377	"Gender Fair"	"The Buy Up Index Inc"	Reference	69	14
2	1546521292	"Meet Erinna: Lesbian Dating"	"CONSOLIDATED MOTION LIMITED"	Lifestyle	8	3
3	1493599874	believr	"believr	Lifestyle	158	7
4	1154947579	"HOLE	"Soul Technologies Limited"	"Social Networking"	155	154
5	1507544819	"Threesome:3some Hookup Dating"	"OMEGA Co. Ltd	"Social Networking"	35	31
6	1344508411	"#open Polyamory & ENM"	"Open App	Lifestyle	161	30
7	1470220391	"weBelong: Call with fav ppl"	"HoloAsh	"Social Networking"	164	46
8	1551266616	"Gay Date & Hookup App: Gaylaxy"	"瀚阳 杜"	"Social Networking"	17	11
9	1350464887	"MURJ - LGBTQ+ Social Space"	"QuailTek LLC"	"Social Networking"	16	1
10	1454591093	"ゲイ AMBIRD マッチング ゲイ専用コミュニティ"	"TIEWA INC.	"Social Networking"	8	1
11	445338486	"LOVOO - Dating App & Live Chat"	"LOVOO GmbH apps"	Lifestyle	74	69
12	1051200532	"#1 Positive Singles Dating App"	"GoMatch Limited"	"Social Networking"	103	52
13	1482681335	"Wink - make new friends"	"9 Count	"Social Networking"	29	27
14	595287172	"Hinge: Dating & Relationships"	"Hinge	Lifestyle	159	24
15	1057001329	"Bisexual Dating App - Purpled!"	"GoMatch Limited"	"Social Networking"	157	78

Information, Media, News, TV & Radio Apps

The crackdown on independent media in Hong Kong, which has accelerated after the adoption of the NSL in 2020, is perhaps the most serious signal of deterioration of the political situation and human rights in Hong Kong. Hong Kong's App Store does not reflect the seismic shift in Hong Kong's media landscape, as the crackdown on the press was not decided in the App Store and several media were shut down entirely (including their app, as collateral damage). Future app removals targeting press freedom and freedom of information may occur but will likely affect apps belonging to "social networking" categories.

#	App's ID	App's Name	Developer / Owner	Genre	App Tested in (# territories)	Available in (# territories)
1	654946831	早报	"SPH Media Limited"	News	158	155
2	1373643039	大千視界HK	"Multi Vision Media (Hong Kong) Co.	News	162	58
3	1462759162	"TV Martí +"	"United States Agency for Global Media"	News	155	50
4	1498583637	"Trovo - Live Stream & Games"	"TLive LLC"	Entertainment	16	13
5	977901175	TechNews	"YEH PU JUNG"	News	63	60
6	1132762804	"NewsBreak: Local News"	"Particle Media Inc."	News	86	6
7	774869819	"Radio FM !"	"Tasmanic Editions"	Music	32	13
8	894930703	"Peel TV Guide"	"Peel Technologies	Entertainment	140	40
9	751712884	"Pluto TV - Películas y Series"	"Pluto	Entertainment	84	27

VPNs & Private Browsers, Digital Security & Privacy Apps

Proton VPN @ProtonVPN

China's Great Firewall is now in Hong Kong. Internet providers in HK have started censorship under Beijing's National Security Law. On this sad day, ProtonVPN supports online freedom in HK, and will continue to provide uncensored internet around the world:

apnews.com
Hong Kong internet firm blocked website over security law
HONG KONG (AP) — A Hong Kong internet service provider on Thursday said it had blocked access to a pro-democracy website to comply with the city's national securi...

10:00 AM · Jan 15, 2021

Read more on Twitter

In 2017, Apple admitted removing more than six hundreds VPN apps from China's App Store. Apple's opaque policies were later exposed. It was revealed that the firm was In fact removing all foreign VPN apps which did not give the Chinese authorities access to their users' data. Only a few VPN apps remain in mainland China's App Store, and all operate under the surveillance of the police and the Cyberspace Administration of China.

While many VPN apps remain in the App Store, including the most popular ones, a considerable number of VPN apps seem to have been removed from Hong Kong's App Store, following the adoption of the NSL.

The ASM data could indicate that some VPN companies have already begun self-censoring with the passing of the National Security Law, or that Apple may have been requested to remove specific VPNs from its App Store.

As Beijing continues to crack down on Hong Kongers' right to access information freely, VPNs ensure that they will always have a looking glass into the content that may get removed. If more VPN apps are removed from Hong Kong, or if Beijing requests that Apple enforce a systematic categorical ban on VPNs, as it currently does in China, that looking glass could disappear quickly.

#	App's ID	App's Name	Developer / Owner	Genre	App Tested in (# territories)	Available in (# territories)
1	1436251125	"UFO VPN - Super VPN Proxy"	"Dreamfii HK Limited"	Productivity	172	169
2	1439297761	"Signal Secure VPN-Solo VPN"	"INNOVATIVE CONNECTING PTE. LIMITED"	Productivity	156	153
3	555717978	"Smart Search & Web Browser"	"Reactive Phone Ltd."	Productivity	155	152
4	1421658630	"Daily VPN - Secure VPN Proxy"	"UPUP TECHNOLOGY LIMITED"	Productivity	155	151
5	1529085421	"Fastway VPN - Stable VPN Proxy"	"juan shen"	Productivity	155	151
6	633495655	"SurfEasy VPN - WiFi Proxy"	"SurfEasy Inc"	Productivity	156	148
7	1450492940	"SkyBlueVPN: VPN & Ad Blocker"	"Circo	Productivity	155	148
8	1543595410	"Armor VPN -Ultra Fast & Secure"	"SpellMe Ltd"	Productivity	156	137
9	1249219174	"Yoga VPN - Protect Security"	"WILDLOOK TECH PTE. LTD."	Productivity	172	116
10	1298872326	"VPN-stable vpn	"Talha Javed"	Productivity	88	83
11	1576672465	"Gamma VPN-Fast&Safe VPN Proxy"	"Chengdu birds of a feather Technology Co.	Productivity	85	83
12	1263033737	"Lemon VPN - Speed Network VPN Accelerator"	"Talha Javed"	Productivity	79	74
13	1591542521	"Secure VPN Proxy - Fast Server"	"Qingdao Qichenda Network Technology Co.	Productivity	34	32
14	1494996252	"VPN - Secure VPN Proxy App"	"INNOART ECOMMERCE LIMITED"	Productivity	26	23
15	1613509199	"Private VPN - Fast & Secure"	"Shanghai Zhixuan Electronic Technology Co.	Productivity	18	17
16	1574277154	"TOR Browser - Onion VPN"	"Arin Ventures Private Limited"	Productivity	19	16
17	1089969624	"Kaspersky Security & VPN"	"Kaspersky Lab Switzerland GmbH"	Productivity	26	14
18	1311355327	"Trend Micro WiFi Protection"	"Trend Micro	Productivity	20	13

#	App's ID	App's Name	Developer / Owner	Genre	App Tested in (# territories)	Available in (# territories)
19	1623308614	"Live VPN - VPN Proxy Unlimited"	"Datong Yinhuang Network Technology Co.	Productivity	10	8
20	1450136113	"Power VPN - VPN Proxy"	"Quick Atom Ltd."	Productivity	11	7
21	1521289264	"Neon VPN - Unlimited VPN Proxy"	"VS SOFTWARELINE LTD"	Productivity	155	6
22	1117424189	"VPN Tracker World Connect"	"equinux AG"	Productivity	7	5
23	1589382919	"Monster VPN Safe Private Proxy"	"Chengdu Chunxiaoweibo Tech Co.	Productivity	5	3
24	1579992117	"VPN Booster - Super VPN Master"	"Chengdu Chunxiaoweibo Tech Co.	Productivity	5	3
25	1330354828	"Password Manager - Easy Pass2"	"KAIHATSUISHIN CO.	Productivity	6	2
26	1250365718	"VPN-Security Proxy VPN"	"Talha Javed"	Reference	81	70
27	1504179394	"VPN ▸▸"	"IT4GO Company Limited"	Utilities	155	152
28	1544644696	"VPN AHA - Best VPN Easy VPN"	"NEWCNEWL PTE. LTD."	Utilities	155	151
29	1458080487	"Melon VPN - Easy Fast VPN"	"WILDLOOK TECH PTE. LTD."	Utilities	155	150
30	1273734740	"VPN for iPhone - Secure Proxy"	"Brain Craft Ltd"	Utilities	155	148
31	1504101226	"Malwarebytes Privacy VPN"	"Malwarebytes Corporation"	Utilities	155	147
32	1466763029	"Shadow Speed - Speed Master"	"Xiamen Renrenzhu Business Information Consulting Co.	Utilities	141	120
33	1099085132	"WiFi Master - by WiFi.com"	"LinkSure Network Holding Pte. Limited"	Utilities	123	108
34	630442428	"Trend Micro Mobile Security"	"Trend Micro	Utilities	95	86
35	1454747687	"SS+VPN - Secure Web Surfing"	"Yiwu Madan Network Technology Co.	Utilities	82	78
36	1089804570	奇舞周刊	"shi weifu"	Utilities	143	67
37	556621431	"DD-WRT Legacy"	"Dappological Ltd."	Utilities	106	59
38	1386689359	"CallHelp: Fake Call & Blocker"	"Digital Solutions LLC"	Utilities	69	56
39	1116014161	"AdClear Plus -adblock&security"	"SEVEN Networks	Utilities	36	34
40	396848281	"Virus Scan of Suspicious Website"	"Zhenyu Lu"	Utilities	49	26
41	1454171374	"TOR Browser Private + VPN"	"ASIAN TURBO LIMITED"	Utilities	27	25
42	1438836314	"Marmot VPN - Fast&Secure Proxy"	"SKY DRIVING COMPANY LIMITED"	Utilities	28	23

#	App's ID	App's Name	Developer / Owner	Genre	App Tested in (# territories)	Available in (# territories)
43	1525213647	"MyToken News-比特币区块链行情分析app"	"Beijing Yunhui Zhongtian Consulting Co.	Utilities	23	22
44	1454250152	"MGOSU VPN & Secure Hotspot"	"MGOSU VIET NAM JOINT STOCK COMPANY"	Utilities	20	17
45	1518426541	"#1 VPN TOR proxy master tunnel"	"VPN CONNECT SRL"	Utilities	19	17
46	1433820185	"Secure Anonymous Browser"	"ICRYPT TECHNOLOGIES (PRIVATE) LIMITED"	Utilities	17	8
47	1370324645	"Jet VPN"	"WEBTECH INTERNATIONAL L.P."	Utilities	10	8
48	1581047581	"SuperMaster - Fast & Safe"	"Xianyang Xingrun Network Technology Co.	Utilities	8	6
49	1569524276	"Unlimited VPN - Proxy Master"	"LITTLE TOMATO PTE. LTD"	Utilities	7	5
50	1491889901	"AdBlock One: Browser AdBlocker"	"Trend Micro	Utilities	6	5
51	1583512420	"VPN Rapid - Fast Proxy Master"	"Chengdu Feixiao Tech Co.	Utilities	6	4
52	1522454877	"VPN - Secure Hotspot Shield"	"Maxima Apps"	Utilities	6	4
53	1642634986	夏时VPN-国际加速器	"Sombra Ltd."	Utilities	5	4

THIS ONE IS CURIOUS!

Social Media & Communication Tools

Hong Kong's access to the main social media platforms remains intact. But recent events ; In August 2022, The Hong Kong Police Force has rebranded its public relations branch and introduced a 24-hour mechanism to monitor online "smearing" of police work.

#	App's ID	App's Name	Developer / Owner	Genre	App Tested in (# territories)	Available in (# territories)
1	1246204575	"Rainbow Mail – Email App"	"Craigpark Limited"	Productivity	160	21
2	1544506558	vicos²	"app squared GmbH"	Productivity	10	8
3	1144872364	"TeamViewer Meeting"	"TeamViewer Germany GmbH"	Productivity	7	5
4	1155058086	"Email Client for Hotmail"	"Craigpark Limited"	Productivity	30	3
5	1400040339	"Phone Call & Voice Recorder"	"ROCKETAPPS LLC"	Utilities	12	10

Miscellaneous

The following includes apps which did not fit in other categories or apps which are not particularly sensitive apps, but of which the large availability worldwide could indicate a deliberate removal from Hong Kong's App Store (or an intended unavailability from the day the app was released in the App Store).

#	App's ID	App's Name	Developer / Owner	Genre	App Tested in (# territories)	Available in (# territories)
1	1025053072	"Jesus Loves You - A Gallery"	"Suneet Amrute"	Lifestyle	171	164
2	602322397	"Echo Church"	"Subsplash Inc"	Lifestyle	150	115
3	1491101673	"WPS Office: PDF	"KINGSOFT OFFICE SOFTWARE CORPORATION LIMITED"	Productivity	156	151
4	1154297408	WOTFC	"Word of Truth Family Church"	Lifestyle	173	65
5	991823442	"Sticky Notes - MemoCool Notepad"	"NALADEX STUDIOS SL"	Productivity	16	14
6	1446621967	"Shadow App"	BLADE	Productivity	24	3
7	1047649534	"iScanner - Escáner PDF"	"BP Mobile LLC"	Productivity	10	3

Disappeared Hong Kong Apps

The ASM also records, in a table called "Disappeared Apps", apps that are removed from all App Stores operated by Apple. Such global removals can only be interpreted as follows:

- **Either the app's owner / developer decided to pull the app from all App Stores,**

 or

- **Apple decided to remove the app from all its App Stores because of a Platform Policy violation (i.e. violation of the App Store Guidelines). The determination of such violation can be the result from a request from a third party entity, such as a government agency or private company.**

As it emphasizes in its Transparency Reports, Apple can receive "Platform Policy Violation Takedown Requests" (PPVTR) from governments and their agencies. What Apple does not explain, however, is that such Platform Policy violations requests can also come from private actors and, more importantly, that the vast majority of removals following alleged breaches of Platform Policy is instigated by Apple itself. However, Apple's Transparency Reports do not report worldwide removals when the takedown requests originate from private entities or when these removals are made autonomously by Apple. (see "Taken Down: A Look into Apple's Transparency Reports" for more information on Platform Policy Violation Takedown Requests)

Between January 2019 and December 2020, the ASM recorded no fewer than 6458 apps that were removed from all 155 regional App Stores (175 in H2 2020, although the ASM was only monitoring the 155 App Stores at the time). That's the equivalent of 1 million removals if we assume that all apps were originally available in all App Stores.

Below are some of the apps disappeared during that two years period and which are related to Hong Kong in various ways (e.g. a Hong Kong TV app, map of Hong Kong, etc.) Contrary to apps that are removed from a specific App Store, "Disappeared Apps" do not in themselves suggest targeted censorship. Only by gathering information on the apps and their publishers can it be determined conclusively whether a specific app's disappearance results from censorship or whether it follows reasons unrelated to censorship.

Hong Kong Maps Apps

| App	Last Available	
BackupHK: HKmap.live 即時地圖	10/9/19	20:04
HK DingDing Hong Kong Tramways	4/7/20	4:24
HK-SZ metro: Hongkong Shenzhen Metro	11/24/20	7:24
HKmap 即時地圖	10/9/19	20:04
Hong Kong City Travel Guide - GuidePal	9/28/20	1:08
Hong Kong Tramways	3/11/20	20:04
HongKong Land Boundary Control Points Waiting Time Enquiry	6/20/20	22:57
My Hong Kong Guide	11/30/19	21:59
Whale's Hong Kong Metro MTR Subway Map 鲸香港地铁地图	8/31/20	16:04
世界机场航班资讯 - 香港机场 台湾桃园机场 新加坡机场	1/22/21	6:47
香港交通經典 HK Traffic Classic	12/5/19	12:11
香港旅行离线地图	12/21/19	10:58
香港自由行地图 香港离线地图 香港地铁轻铁 香港地图 香港旅游指南 Hong Kong Metro Map offline 香港通 香港旅游攻略	8/8/19	13:38
香港離線地圖	8/4/20	2:45

Hong Kong News Apps

App	Last Available	
HK Top News	9/18/20	5:00
秒頭條HK – 藍黃中立香港新聞	2/26/22	8:45

Hong Kong Radio Apps

App	Last Available	
Hong Kong Radio Pro	7/5/20	6:06
Hong Kong Radios - Top Stations Music Player FM	3/25/20	8:57
HongKong Radios HKG- 收音機香港 : The Best Stations Music, News And Sports	6/28/21	9:38
Radio HK Pro - Hong Kong #1 FM	7/5/20	4:05

Hong Kong TV Apps

App	Last Available	
Hong Kong TV Channels Sat Info	9/28/20	2:03
Hong Kong TV Schedules Lite	4/14/20	5:26
香港開電視 Hong Kong Open TV	9/20/21	22:32
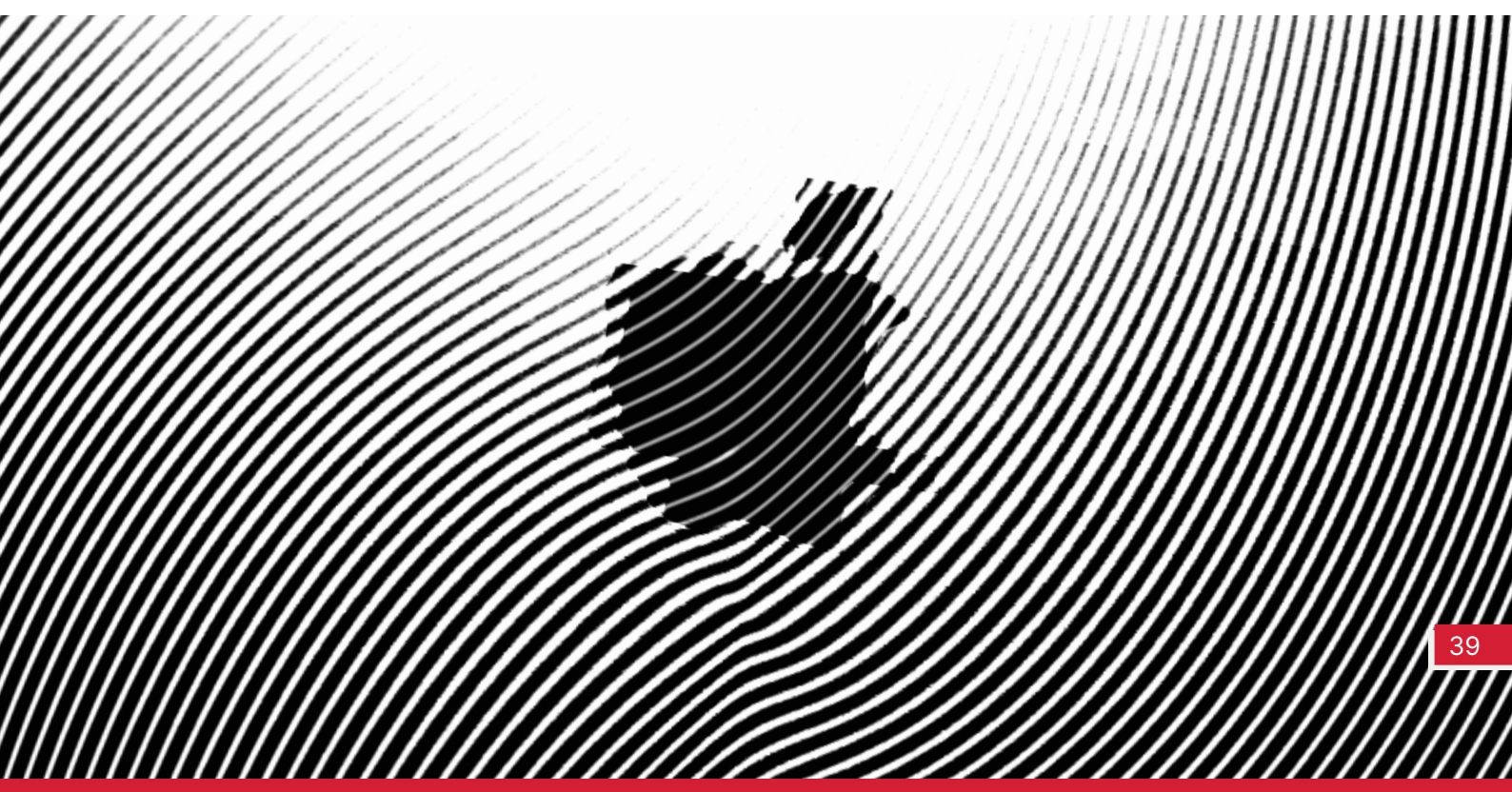
App Store Case Studies

In October 2019, Apple made a flurry of changes to its software in Hong Kong that brought the company in line with the Chinese government, which was cracking down on pro-democracy protesters. It removed the HKmap.live app, used Hong Kong protesters to evade police officers. Apple spokesman Fred Sainz defended the move at the time, saying that the company had been contacted by "many concerned customers in Hong Kong" about the app. Apple had heard from the Hong Kong police that the app had been used to "target and ambush police," Sainz said then.

Using the App Store Monitor at the end of 2020, the Tech Transparency Project identified 35 applications relating to Hong Kong that were unavailable on China's App Store. Of the 35 apps, 16 were news publications, four were specific to the Hong Kong independence efforts, six were Hong Kong-specific communication platforms, and the remaining nine were miscellaneous Hong Kong-specific apps for entertainment applications, shopping, etc.

HKmap.live (2019): Undefendable Removal

HKmap.live 全港抗爭即時地圖 HK Protest Live Map
@hkmaplive

"Your app contains content - or facilitates, enables, and encourages an activity - that is not legal ... Specifically, the app allowed users to evade law enforcement." @Apple assume our user are lawbreakers and therefore evading law enforcement, which is clearly not the case.

8:58 PM · Oct 1, 2019

[Read more on Twitter](#)

HKmap.live 全港抗爭即時地圖 HK Protest Live Map
@hkmaplive

1. We disagree @Apple and @hkpoliceforce 's claim that HKmap App endanger law enforcement and residents in Hong Kong.

#HKmap #HKmaplive #HK #Censorship

6:42 AM · Oct 10, 2019

[Read more on Twitter](#)

Charles Mok 莫乃光 is @charlesmok@mastodon.online
@charlesmok

Today I wrote to Tim Cook, CEO of Apple, to tell him his company's decision to remove HKmap live app from Appstore will cause problems for normal Hong Kong's citizens trying to avoid police presence while they are under constant fear ofpolice brutality. Values over profits, pls!

6:44 PM · Oct 10, 2019 from Wan Chai District, Hong Kong

[Read more on Twitter](#)

https://t.me/hkmaplive/485
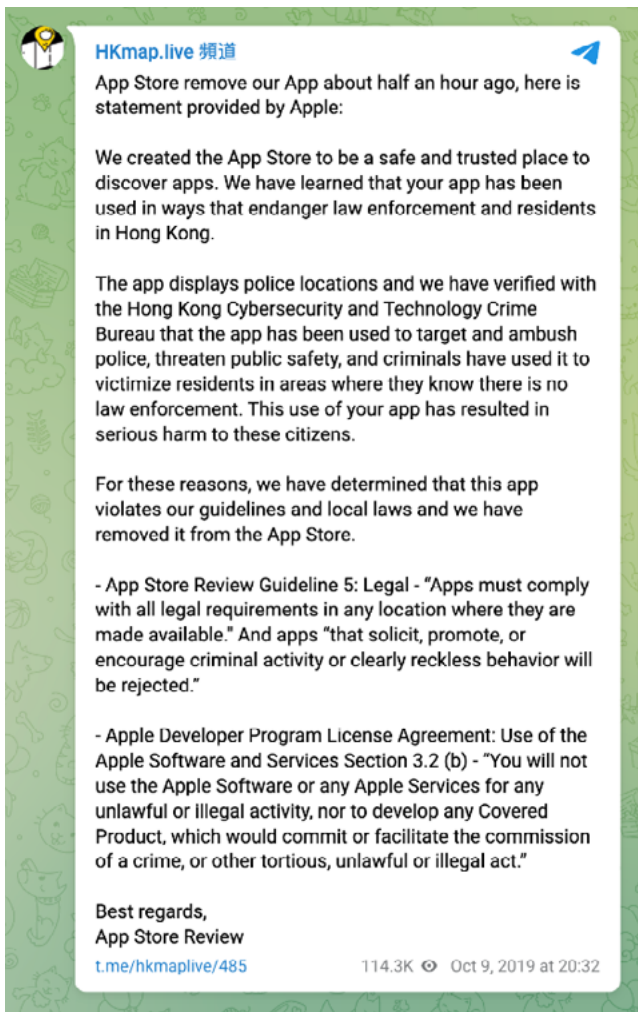
Apple has taken down or blocked several apps relating to Hong Kong protests from its App Store. One prominent instance is the case of HKmap.live.

Launched in fall 2019, the HKmap.live app crowdsources the location of protesters and police. In a statement, Apple said it took the app down because it "has been used in ways that endanger law enforcement and residents in Hong Kong." HKmap released a backup version of the app called BackupHK: HKmap.live 即時地圖 after the original was taken down, which has since disappeared from the App Store.

Apple said it was withdrawing HKmap.live from its App Store just days after approving it because the authorities in Hong Kong said protesters were using it to attack the police in the semiautonomous city. Cook said in an email to employees that the company had removed the app after receiving "credible information" from the authorities and people in Hong Kong "that the app was being used maliciously to target individual officers for violence and to victimize individuals and property where no police are present."

As a result, he said, the app violated Apple rules and local laws. *"National and international debates will outlive us all, and, while important, they do not govern the facts,"* he wrote in a memo sent to employees. *"In this case, we thoroughly reviewed them, and we believe this decision best protects our users."*

According to a statement published by the makers of HKmap.live, Apple said *"your app has been used in ways that endanger law enforcement and residents in Hong Kong"*. Apple's withdrawal of the application from its App Store follows an accusation from China's state media that the app *"obviously helps rioters"*.

Reacting to the removal, U.S. lawmakers wrote a letter to Tim Cook :

"Apple's decisions (...) to accommodate the Chinese government by taking down HKMaps is deeply concerning," the lawmakers wrote. *"We urge you in the strongest terms to reverse course, to demonstrate that Apple puts values above market access, and to stand with the brave men and women fighting for basic rights and dignity in Hong Kong."*

HKmap.live's developers have pushed back against Apple's claims and reiterated that the app was aggregating and consolidating information from users, news sources, and social networks like Facebook and Telegram. HKmap.live never displayed a lack of police on its map, only areas where they were congregating.

Programmer and technology blogger John Gruber pushed back on Apple in his Daring Fireball blog:

"I can't recall an Apple memo or statement that crumbles so quickly under scrutiny. For a company that usually measures umpteen times before cutting anything, it's both sad and startling."

Maya Wang, a senior China researcher at Human Rights Watch in Hong Kong, said Apple's decision to remove the Hong Kong app had emboldened the Chinese Communist Party.

"I think the party concludes from this that intimidation, harassment and pressure work for most people, in most places," she said.

PopVote.app (2020)

In the summer of 2020, Apple rejected a pro-democracy app in Hong Kong after Chinese officials warned that it might contravene the national security law. Pro-democracy campaigners had created PopVote, an unofficial election platform effectively acting as a popularity poll for candidates opposed to the Chinese crackdown in the region. Both iOS and Android apps were created for it. But while the app was quickly accepted in Google's Play Store, Apple rejected the iOS version citing "issues with the code", PopVote told Quartz in July 2020.

The developers fixed the code within hours, Edwin Chu, an IT advisor for the app, told Quartz, but Apple then repeatedly ignored multiple requests for an update and the app never made it onto the App Store.

"We think it is being censored by Apple," Chu said.

Apple is coming under criticism for remaining largely silent on the issue, though the piece does note the difficult position faced by tech companies.

A prior version of PopVote app had been issued in 2014 by the University of Hong Kong to survey Hong Kong residents about the 2017 Chief Executive elections.

Mary Hui @maryhui

And the app, called PopVote, on which that public opinion poll was run for the opposition primaries was never approved by the Apple app store: qz.com/1879754/hong-k...

> **Maya Wang 王松蓮** @wang_maya · Jan 6, 2021
> Apple Daily is reporting that Prof Robert Chung, former Director of the HKU Public Opinion Programme, is also arrested for, essentially, "doing a public opinion poll" hk.appledaily.com/breaking/20210...

2:16 AM · Jan 6, 2021

Mary Hui @maryhui

PopVote, the electronic voting platform for last wkend's democratic primaries in HK, now open-sourced: github.com/hkpori/popvote...

After publication of my story re: Apple's non-approval of the app, Apple asked the developers if the election was 'authorized by govt'

h/t @wongmjane

> **Mary Hui** @maryhui · Jul 14, 2020
> Apple banned protest map @hkmaplive from its app store last year. In what activists say is another case of censorship, an iOS voting app for last wkend's opposition primaries was never approved. Apple's approach hints at what HK's internet future could be:
> qz.com/1879754/hong-k...
> Show this thread

1:16 PM · Jul 15, 2020

Read more on Twitter

LennonWallHK.app (2021)
[Disappeared in September 2021]

Ryan Ho Kilpatrick 何松濤 @rhokilpatrick

How Double Tenth was marked by HK:

Dozens of police and private security sealed off the historic Red House used as Sun Yat-sen's secret base (thestandnews.com/politics/%E5%B...) while at HKU—Sun's alma mater—the Lennon Wall was destroyed in an unprecedented move (hkcnews.com/article/34647/...).

11:19 AM · Oct 10, 2020

[Read more on Twitter]

Antony Dapiran @antd

A blank Lennon Wall: speaks volumes on the state of HK today.
(& see further down the thread: someone called the police on a different venue for having a blank Lennon Wall...smh)

Mary Hui @maryhui · Jul 2, 2020
Per @appledaily_hk, a pro-democracy shop put up a Lennon Wall of blank Post-Its after police warned said notes w protest slogans could breach the nat sec law. If cops ban even blank stickies, they'd have to take down this installation @ HK art museum too (right; IG: wkyemily)
Show this thread
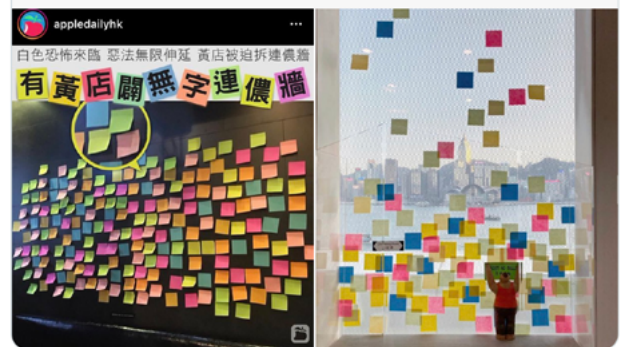
2:27 AM · Jul 3, 2020

[Read more on Twitter]

Developed by Free Hong Kong, and released on August 26, 2019, LennonWallHK was a crowdsourcing app to build "Lennon Walls" throughout the city.

"During the series of protests against the China-Extradition bill beginning on 9 June, the original Lennon Wall has been once again set up in front of the Hong Kong Central Government Offices staircase. During the months of June and July, Lennon Walls with similar encouraging messages written on post-it notes and regular paper have been put up throughout the entire Hong Kong. This is referred to as "blossoming everywhere" (遍地開花)." said the description of the app on Apple's App Store page.

"This is an open source project dedicated to Hong Kong citizens against the tyranny of hk government during the anti-extradition bill protest. You are welcome the download the source code and create your own Lennon Wall app at https://github.com/goatman/LennonWallHK"

The political art pieces were inspired by the original John Lennon Wall in Prague and became popularized during the 2014 Hong Kong democracy protests. Protestors posted thousands of sticky notes in public places spreading pro-democracy messages. Lennon Walls in Hong Kong were generally censored starting in the fall of 2020, including at universities.

LennonWallHK disappeared from all iOS app stores, including Hong Kong, in September 2021.

The developer did not respond to AppleCensorship's inquiries about the removal. Looking at LennonWallHK's social media, the developer was once very active on social media, but their posts became infrequent in the fall of 2021, around the time the app was removed.

The two posts before LennonWallHK was removed from the iOS App Store included a post on June 4, 2021, about the Tiananmen Square massacre. It showed a photo of a woman in black clothing holding a sign that says "8964." The caption said *"Hong Kong does not forget."*

[Read more on Instagram](#)

[Read more on Instagram](#)

LIHKG (2022)
[Temporarily taken down on 22 March 2022](#)

[Read more on Twitter](#)

Hong Kong's Reddit-like app, LIHKG, was [removed](#) from the iOS App Store in March of 2022 and reactivated one day later. LIHKG is often referred to as "Hong Kong Reddit" and is a local popular online discussion forum.

According to a report from [HK01](#), the management of LIHKG believed that some comments left by its users had violated the policies of App Store, leading to the removal of the app on the platform.

Anticipating Beijing's tightening grip on online speech and information in Hong Kong

It becomes increasingly difficult for tech companies to maintain their presence in Hong Kong while limiting their collaboration with the increasingly authoritarian government agencies and judiciary. Far from trying to stay away from the political crisis, let alone resist the abusive demands regarding individual's data and moderation of online speech and information, Apple has taken proactive measures to curtail the fundamental freedoms of its employees and its users in order to avoid being perceived by Beijing as supportive of the pro-democracy movement. Apple did not wait the enactment of the NSL in 2020 to censor independent news and dissent voices on its devices and services.

However, the end of free speech in Hong Kong has not come yet. Hong Kongers still enjoy access to the vast majority of mobile apps on all platforms and can continue to exchange information privately and securely. Although surveillance has increased, so has fear (or suspicion) of surveillance. A significant portion of Hong Kongers are using VPNs and still enjoy access to most of them on their mobile.

Apple's known about Beijing's authoritarian preferences for decades. Apple's response to the events in Hong Kong the last few years are not knee-jerk reactions. Apple's response is aligned to its global business strategies, with a top priority of appeasing the Chinese government to protect Apple's supply chain, distribution channels, and revenue stream.

A counter-example is ProtonMail which already posted in 2020 that it planned to keep its presence in Hong Kong as long as possible. CEO Andy Yen wrote, *"We have always had concerns about such an outcome and have long designated Hong Kong as a high-risk country when it comes to VPN security. As a result, our policies for high-risk countries have long been in effect in Hong Kong, allowing us to mitigate certain risks."*

Yen elaborated, *"In light of the significant challenges facing freedom of speech in Hong Kong today, the easiest (and by far cheapest) thing to do would be to shut down our server network there. However, at Proton, we have never focused on doing what is easy, but on doing what is right. Our longstanding policy is to leave countries rather than compromise our values. However, it is not our policy to leave without putting up a fight."* Yen also notes, *"We have zero staff or physical presence in Hong Kong or China, which makes us less susceptible to pressure from Chinese authorities."*

Instead of limiting their presence in China, Apple has only increased it. Instead of designing products and business to avoid intervention by Beijing, Apple welcomes it. Instead of making contingency plans and implementing mitigations to avoid compromising user privacy and security, Apple shrugs off the populations of countries led by authoritarian governments as long as Apple makes a profit at the end.

Worse, is that Apple seems to be exploiting this dynamic with Hong Kong. The company appears to have done nothing to prepare for China overtaking Hong Kong, something most knew was imminent. Instead, it positioned as a middleman between Beijing and Hong Kongers' access to information & digital expression.

It sat in wait for Beijing to ask to pull the kill-switch on Hong Kong's democracy, knowing that compliance would improve its relations with Beijing.

But it is not too late for Apple to clearly state how it will react if freedom of expression and information online are further suppressed. Hong Kongers deserve to know how Apple will react if and when Beijing starts issuing the same kind of app takedown requests it is routinely sending to Apple regarding mainland China's App Store. Hong Kong residents' fundamental rights and freedoms depend on that answer.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1

Apple should declare publicly what measures it will take if Beijing increases its crackdown on digital freedoms and access to information. Apple should make it very clear what actions, if any, the company would take to resist app takedown requests from Beijing's or Hong Kong's government agencies.

2

Apple should provide full transparency regarding its app distribution platform in Hong Kong:

Apple should allow the public to understand how the Hong Kong government and mainland China's authorities have been attempting to remove (or censor) content, by providing information on:

- the reasons it provided for each of its requests, including the specific laws and/or guidelines the apps allegedly broke;

- the rules and procedures that Apple follows when dealing with these requests and if specific rules are enforced in its Hong Kong's App Store;

- a copy of Apple's internal procedures;

- a timeline of the requests being filed, the length of time it took to consider each request, and the point at which the apps specified were removed from Hong Kong's App Store.

3

Apple should also provide:

- Data on app rejections or removals it made according to any categorical requests from the Hong Kong government, which do not specify apps but do function as blanket legal violation requests;

- Data on the rejection and removal decisions it made after requests from Hong Kong private entities (i.e. other than government agencies or official bodies with legal powers).

- Details of the apps it rejected or removed of its own accord from Hong Kong's App Store, whether these removals are due to guideline violations, proactive takedowns of apps which break local laws, or government-requested category bans.

- A list of all apps owned by Hong Kong developers / publishers which are blocked in mainland China's App Store.

- A list of all apps which remain on Hong Kong's App Store but are blocked by the government. Apple should further inform users of such blocks directly on the app description page within the App Store.

4

Regarding transparency and accountability:

- Apple should adopt all recommendations previously made by AppleCensorship and included in its report "Taken Down" A Look into Apple's Transparency Reports, *published on April 21, 2022*;

- Apple should model its Transparency Reports on the efforts of other companies, such as Twitter and Google, to provide as much - rather than as little - useful information as possible. This would include the addition of many of the details listed above, as well as a broader effort to use the Transparency Reports to resist - rather than enable and conceal - censorship and repressive governance.

5

Apple's should adopt new corporate policies:

Apple should take measures to make itself less vulnerable to the Chinese government's pressure and censorship demands, and in particular:

- Allow "sideloading" of apps on iOS devices in order to make censorship requests a less efficient tool for the authorities;

- Take measures to ensure safety for its staff to limit Chinese government's intimidation and censorship pressure, including relocation of staff abroad;

- Work with other tech companies targeted by censorship demands in order to better resist abusive requests;

- Engage with Hong Kong civil society organizations to understand the impact of its decisions regarding Hong Kong's App Store, to learn how to become more resilient to censorship and to discuss ways to protect members of civil society organizations using iOS devices;

6

Apple should adhere to the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights in order to address adverse human rights impacts with which it is involved, and in particular:

- To avoid causing or contributing to adverse human rights impacts in Hong Kong through its App Store's Platform Policy;

- To seek to prevent or mitigate adverse human rights impacts that are directly linked to its App Store, iOS devices or other services by its business relationships with Hong Kong authorities, China's government and relevant bodies and agencies.

APPENDIX

Abbreviations

ASM	AppleCensorship's App Store Monitor
LVTR	Legal Violation Takedown Request
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NSL	National Security Law
PPVTR	Platform Policy Violation Takedown Request
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US/USA	United States of America

References

Report: *"Taken Down" A Look into Apple's Transparency Reports : Key Highlights*

- Highlights:https://applecensorship.com/taken-down-a-look-into-apples-transparency-reports-key-highlights/

- Summary: https://applecensorship.com/taken-down-a-look-into-apples-transparency-reports/

- Full Report: https://applecensorship.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/AppleCensorships-Taken-Down-Report-Print.pdf

Report: *"Censored on the App Store": new report shows the staggering scale of app censorship by Apple*

- Press Release: https://applecensorship.com/censored-on-the-app-store-new-report-shows-the-staggering-scale-of-app-censorship-by-apple/

- Full Report: https://applecensorship.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/AppleCensorships-Censored-on-the-App-Store-Digital-Spreads.pdf

Tool: *AppleCensorship's App Store Monitor*

- Overview: https://applecensorship.com/rightscon-2022-what-apps-have-disappeared-from-apples-app-store/

- Tool: https://applecensorship.com/app-store-monitor/

Human Rights Data Sheet

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The National Security Law (NSL) introduced in 2020 enabled human rights violations that were unprecedented since the establishment of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region in 1997. There was a rapid deterioration of freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association, and other human rights in Hong Kong after the enactment of the law.
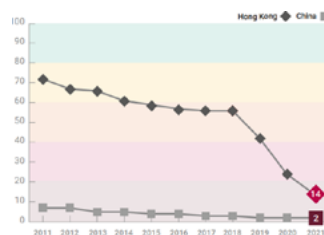
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Article 19 - Hong Kong

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Learn more: https://www.article19.org/gxr-22/
& https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/A19-GxR-Report-22.pdf

December 2022

Apple Censorship

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