

SCMP's Digital Transformation: How the legacy print publisher from Hong Kong established a world-class digital video team and built a global audience on YouTube

By Mat Booth, Director of Video, South China Morning Post

Video can support a news publisher's brand in so many ways—from revenue, to editorial, and exposure. Mat Booth, Director of Video at South China Morning Post (SCMP), shares how the Hong Kong news publisher integrated digital video into the heart of its newsroom and grew its global audience with YouTube.

With over a century of history in our newsroom, the *South China Morning Post* now has visibility around the world.

But, until recently, our audience had been relatively small. Like so many other legacy publishers, we were very traditional as Hong Kong's newspaper of record. The paper was circulated primarily in Hong Kong, and had not changed much in 50 years. If we wanted to thrive and grow in the digital age, we needed to modernize, revolutionize, and find global audiences.

Starting in 2016, SCMP embarked on a digital transformation journey. We focused on elevating our website and apps, grew our global audience, and established our brand as the premier English-language news authority on the rise of China and Asia, and its impact globally.

Early on in this digitization journey, we saw great potential in digital video. We believed **YouTube would help us connect to a global audience** and become a global brand.

With over **2B monthly users from over 100 countries**, YouTube is where the world goes to watch video—if we wanted to be big, we needed to be big on YouTube.



1.7M+
subscribers



50M
monthly views



1B
lifetime views

By following YouTube best practices, SCMP has significantly grown its YouTube audience.

I'm immensely proud of what we've achieved over the last few years. We've built up a stellar video team, and in March 2020 (about six months earlier than expected) our main channel hit **1M subscribers**—most of whom are outside Hong Kong. On top of that, our SCMP video team has **won several journalism awards**, including a Society of Publishers in Asia 2020 award for

[The Thin Yellow Line](#), a mini-documentary about the Hong Kong protests.



To get here, we integrated digital video into the heart of our newsroom, built up our resources, and developed a content and distribution strategy focused on audience growth.

To produce content that drives growth, invest in the right resources

Contrary to what you might think, **we didn't have a ton of money to splash around**—we just invested in the right resources: A world-class team and digital video-friendly equipment.

THE TEAM

I was brought in to be the senior leader responsible for video, to shape the vision and strategy for the video department, and to provide mentorship and support for our video journalists. Beyond my role as the video lead, we also got **buy-in from SCMP's executive leadership** that gave us the freedom to establish the video team's workflows and output.

Next, we needed the right people to tell the stories. You can't just thrust a camera in a text reporter's hands and say, "Go! Create video content!" Video is a fundamentally different medium, so you need trained visual storytellers. We opted for a video journalist model, where each reporter (often a recent J-school graduate) is a 'one-person band'—they research, write, shoot, edit, etc.

While this model helps keep costs down, it puts a lot of pressure on the individual journalists, so we **also brought in video production specialists to provide best-in-class talent to our team**. This support layer

includes a lead videographer who sets the visual tone for everything we do, an executive producer who is an expert on story building and structure, motion graphics experts who can design digital friendly animations, and a copy editor to make sure our words are as good as our pictures. With this supporting personnel, the video journalist model works really well. Journalists have the freedom and agility to move fast on stories, but they have the support when they need it.

In the early days, the video team was treated more as a service unit to the text journalists, rather than as original visual storytellers. **But we quickly demonstrated our value to the organization and are now fully integrated with the rest of the newsroom**. Most importantly, we now have the autonomy to decide where we dedicate our limited resources, so we can create videos with the biggest impact.

THE EQUIPMENT

For digital video, you **don't need expensive, broadcast-grade equipment**—on the contrary, you want gear that's portable and easy to use. We invested in things like best-in-class DSLRs with interchangeable lenses and a box of 'toys' including, drones, GoPros, sliders, and gimbals.

We also built a small, multipurpose studio for creating interviews, opinion monologues, and green screen segments. Believe it or not, it **doesn't have to cost a huge amount to get a good studio up and running**. You need a space that looks more expensive than it is, and you have to make it easy for a small number of people to operate and start creating content.



The multipurpose SCMP studio

To reach a broad audience, develop a robust content and distribution strategy

To create and deliver the best content, **hone in on your expertise and unique advantage**. For us, that meant leveraging the fact we're an English-language news publisher based in Hong Kong with extraordinary access to, and experience with, reporting on China—we're well-positioned to be the global authority on important stories playing out in Asia. With this in mind, I created a robust content and distribution strategy.

CONTENT

At SCMP, we aim to reach a broad, global audience with content that drives loyalty and growth. To do this, we publish videos that have a consistent SCMP look and feel across six key content areas:

News

We developed a strong editorial voice that's consistent with the SCMP brand. We also **extended our coverage to include breaking news**. This seemed daunting at first given we're a publisher, not a broadcaster. But during the Hong Kong protests we made it happen, and we've carried those learnings through to today. More on that later.

Life

Digital video gives us the time and space to meet interesting people, and this 'slice of life' content performs really well on YouTube. For instance, **our feature about a Sri Lankan addict who makes a living sweeping the floors of jewelry stores** did very well, rather unexpectedly. We make a lot of videos in this category for our **SCMP Films mini-documentary series**.

Fun

A lot of the SCMP news content was very serious, so we needed to make room for lighthearted content as well, such as this recent video about a **local bakery** making unusual cakes. This content performs well on social and helps drive people to our channel.

Studio

This includes interview and discussion/panel content, as well we direct-to-camera, vlogger-style monologues—all filmed in our office studio.



Hong Kong Film Awards: Anthony Wong wins over audiences with role as a paralyzed man in 'Still Human'.

Viral

We made a play to own Chinese viral videos in the English-language space, which we add our own editorial touches to. These now account for 40-50% of total video traffic, and some of our most-watched videos of all time are in this category, such as these videos about a **carpenter** creating toys and **goldfish playing football**.



Story of 'Folded Man': Li Hua stands up straight after 28 years following surgery that broke bones.

Explainers

These have a long shelf life and are **useful for embedding on our website** whenever we do a related story. For instance, our **explainer on Xinjiang** became an evergreen companion on developing stories about the region.



Producing Breaking News:

Learnings from the 2019 Hong Kong protests

In the first couple of days of the Hong Kong protests that started in June 2019, we tried to capture everything that happened. That soon proved unsustainable. We didn't have the resources for people on the ground 24/7, and we all started to experience burnout.

So we had to become flexible. Instead of trying to cover as much ground across the city as possible, we started to make strategic bets on where breaking news would happen, and deployed journalists to those locations. We decided not to even try and live stream everything—we'd leave that up to broadcasters with more resources. We took a focused approach to specific stories, and covered them in a cinematic, YouTube-friendly way, which was very different to traditional TV coverage. We played to our strengths.

We also pivoted our video journalist reporting model. Instead of one person doing everything and quickly burning out, we created a production line. Up to seven journalists would be out capturing footage, and other team members would be in the studio—writing, editing, and uploading.

Safety of our people was the number one priority. We had strict rules in place: Everyone in the field had to be equipped with the proper protective gear, have a buddy, and carry a medical kit—things like that. We also had no qualms pulling people out of dangerous situations, even if the story might have been phenomenal. We implemented feedback loops to frequently check in on everyone's mental and physical health.

As a result, our coverage of the Hong Kong protests was authentic, raw, and unique. YouTube helped connect us to a global audience to tell a powerful developing story, at a time when all eyes were on Hong Kong. We've since been approached by a number of acclaimed documentary filmmakers from abroad, who found us via YouTube, to license our footage.

DISTRIBUTION

In the past, SCMP didn't produce enough video content—only about two or three pieces every 10 days. And we were fussy about what and where we would publish. There was this belief that anything we put on YouTube needed to be material we shot ourselves, and that we shouldn't use other content even if it was material properly licensed from our news agency partners, or footage we had secured permission from other third parties to use. But frankly, audiences today aren't fussy about where the material you use comes from, they just want

regular and timely updates. Rather, they prefer authentic storytelling on a regular basis. The audience out there is big enough for you to find people who are interested in each story that you do.

So, we revamped our look and feel to be more in line with audience expectations, and increased the amount of content we published on YouTube to **7 to 10 videos per day**. This helped us reach and engage broad, global audiences, and we've definitely seen a halo effect on our brand because of it.

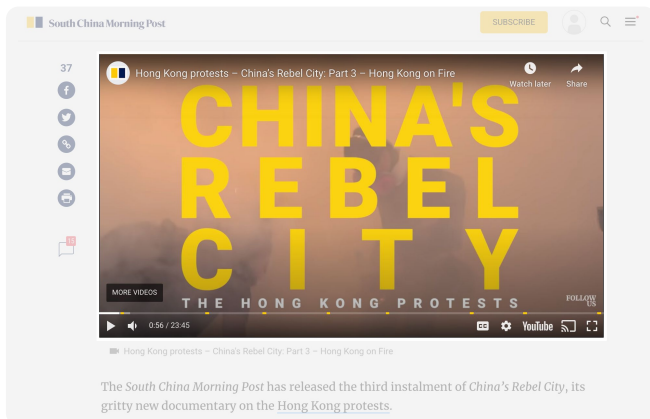
News content is our bread-and-butter, and performs really well because it gets people’s attention—often people are searching for that content themselves. All that helps drive our other content further. We always look at the top 10 stories on our website and make sure there is some video content associated with it (be it breaking news or a companion explainer) because these trending stories drive most of the traffic on any given day.



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Another **contributor to our rapid growth was the YouTube Player for Publishers (PfP) program**. In 2019 we started using YouTube as our primary video player across SCMP’s owned and operated sites and apps, which helped streamline our upload process (we only had to upload once). Now, our newsroom CMS is custom tailored to upload videos to YouTube and allow reporters to easily embed videos from our YouTube channels. PfP really helped us supercharge growth—the video views we got on our own sites helped drive views on our YouTube channel, and vice versa.



YouTube PfP on the SCMP website

To grow for the future, lean into YouTube

When we were first getting started on YouTube, it was a *lot* of work to drive growth. We upped our publication cadence significantly and learned all we could about engaging audiences via YouTube (e.g., using enticing thumbnails and titles, integrating Community features, writing good titles and descriptions that appeared in Search, etc.). Once we hit **50K subscriptions our channel gained momentum, which took off even more when we reached the 100K milestone**.

Now that we’re **nearly at 1.7M subscriptions, 50M monthly views, and over a billion lifetime views**, we’re seeing meaningful revenue come in from YouTube. And while I don’t believe there’s a single, silver bullet to video sustainability, I do think YouTube can play a critical role.

Looking forward, we’re excited about exploring the increased monetization options that we find through YouTube and programs such as PfP. **We’re optimistic that YouTube can continue to help us grow**. We’re keen to uncover more opportunities to create and distribute content that inspires and energizes a worldwide audience, and helps solidify SCMP’s role as a globally trusted news source.