

# Cartoon news is the future: Hong Kong media mogul

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Hong Kong media tycoon Jimmy Lai poses outside his company's headquarters in Hong Kong on February 7. Lai, 63, presides over an empire whose flagship Apple Daily is a must read in Hong Kong, a muck-racking tabloid with a peculiar mix of celebrity gossip, crime news and hard-driving political coverage punctuated by an anti-Beijing stance that has earned it a ban in mainland China.

Hong Kong media tycoon Jimmy Lai has never been a man to mince words, especially when it comes to what he insists is the future of journalism -- cartoon news.

Lai, 63, presides over an empire whose flagship Apple Daily is a must read in Hong Kong, a muck-racking tabloid with a peculiar mix of [celebrity gossip](#), crime news and hard-driving political coverage punctuated by an anti-Beijing stance that has earned it a ban in mainland [China](#).

But many loyal readers are particularly drawn to the graphic cartoons alongside the text stories, depicting a host of gruesome events such as triad hits, sexual assaults and horrific accidents.

Critics deride the pictorials as fanciful depictions of real-life news.

But the idea has sparked an Internet bonanza after Lai's Next Media produced a computer-generated animation in 2009 depicting Tiger Woods' enraged wife chasing after him with a golf club upon learning of his infidelities.

The segment, suggesting what might have happened before the golfing legend's infamous car crash, was an instant worldwide sensation and spawned a series of animated takes on high-profile news events.

Next Media now produces about 60 computer-animated dramatizations daily that draw about five million hits a day, all aimed at a generation under 40 hooked on video games and the Internet.

"They grew up watching TV and [playing video games](#)...so the future is obviously the visual world," Lai told AFP from his spartan office in an industrial park far from Hong Kong's glittering financial district.

"But the whole thing is a two-sided trial and error process -- we have to get used to the right way to present it and people have to get used to accepting it."

Key to jumping into animated news has been churning out a clip in hours rather than weeks.

"Before, it took two or three weeks to finish 60 seconds," Lai said.

"Now it takes two hours. That's the innovation we have."

The clips run from the bizarre -- a rap battle between US President [Barack Obama](#) and Chinese President Hu Jintao over a real-life currency spat -- to the questionable, including one that depicts former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown slugging his male aides and throwing a female secretary to the floor.

The spot followed reports about the politician's moody, bullying style, although he has denied physically abusing staff.

Lai is unapologetic about claims animated news takes serious liberties with the facts.

"The Gordon Brown (spot) was not very serious news," said Lai, dressed in jeans and sneakers with a picture of Jesus Christ on the wall behind him and a stuffed toy koala in another corner of his office.

"It's just for fun, but it may have some reality in it."

Added Lai: "I really don't care what people say to be honest... Just because nobody has ever tried something doesn't mean it's crazy."

Lai is famous for his unconventional style, rarely holding back on sensitive political matters, unlike some of his fellow Asian media moguls.

Despite making more than a few enemies through Apple's coverage and being an alleged target of a foiled assassination attempt in 2008, Lai has never had a bodyguard. And he continues to speak out.

In December, he wrote an op-ed piece in The Wall Street Journal that accused Taiwan of rolling over press freedoms after it turned down Next Media's application for a cable TV licence.

In 2009, Taiwan fined the company, which also publishes the Taiwan version of Apple Daily, for animations deemed obscene.

"But I don't worry about Taiwan's repressed freedom because it's a democracy," Lai said. "The people's voice is always heard loud and clear."

That is a message at the forefront of Apple's coverage, which pushes for political reform in Hong Kong, a semi-autonomous Chinese city that guarantees civil liberties not seen on the mainland, including freedom of speech.

Despite the buzz over animated news, Lai has no plan to desert newspapers, long the platform for his ardent political views. The printed word still has a future, he says, but not without big changes in the way it is presented.

"The future has to be in visual and we have to be in that business."

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