

The Media in Democratic Taiwan

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Abstract:

Media reform has been an important indicator of democratization in Taiwan. It provides a benchmark that reveals an abundance of information about the levels of freedom, tolerance, social justice and pluralism within a political system. The purpose of this paper is to survey the current media landscape in Taiwan and to review the changes and the similarities of the media since the lifting of martial law in 1987, two terms of the DPP rule and the return of a KMT government in 2008. While the record reveals that Taiwan's media are still at an early stage of democratization we cannot deny the progress made, and that Taiwan's media look increasingly similar to those operating in systems at comparatively similar stages of democratic consolidation.

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Introduction

There is now broad agreement that mediated political communications play a significant and essential role in regime transition (Voltmer and Rawnsley 2009: 234–248; G.D. Rawnsley 2005; McCargo 2002; Skidmore 1993). Democratization, the process of transforming a political society from an authoritarian system to a democracy, both influences and is influenced by the media, which can play multiple roles: educator, socializer, mobilizer, agitator, stabilizer, and watchdog – often all at the same time. Media communications provide the transparency, accountability and checks and balances that are essential for political efficacy and governance in a democratic society, while providing the basis for political legitimacy and the acceptance of new political norms, routines and practices. In addition, new forms of non-mediated communications (blogs, twitter and citizen journalism) provide genuine public spaces to fulfil the democratic criterion of active popular participation.

However, despite the usual casual use of normative language, democratization is rarely a panacea that can solve all the problems of authoritarian politics. Rather, the transition to democracy imposes new and sometimes unexpected challenges for the media, and the reality of their relationship with the political system can often fall far short of expectations. This is not surprising given that the media are required to play very different roles within authoritarian and democratic frameworks, and they may have little time to prepare for the transition. After all, routines and norms of professional democratic journalism need to be learned in the same way that new democratic governments need to learn and adapt to democratic politics after a prolonged period of authoritarian rule. The media may have little time to negotiate new roles and responsibilities with the political system, their audience and each other. In the rush to reform, many important issues about the most appropriate system of media organization, structure and duties remain unresolved.

Moreover, the political economy of the media can play a part in impeding democratic consolidation because the tyranny of the state may easily be substituted by the tyranny of the market. New problems arise in democracies: pluralism encourages competition and can sacrifice quality of output. As competition intensifies, the media are less willing to invest in innovative programming and instead battle to capture the same middle-ground audiences with the same formats. This is particularly serious in television where national stations are forced

to compete with cable channels showing foreign and local programming that are gaining in popularity because of their ability to customize output for audiences. Furthermore, the idea that consumers are empowered by market competition is a little disingenuous. While reforming governments may try to end political influence in the media after democratization, this may give way to the concentration of power in the hands of commercially dominant individuals or consortia, and it is not unusual for bigger operators to squeeze out their smaller competitors from the market. Market forces may not serve the specific political and social needs of democratizing nations particularly well, as too often governments and media industries themselves consider media pluralism and privatization a priority with media institutionalization and the creation of new regulatory powers of secondary importance, which often turn out to be an affront to the very democratic principles that now permeate the political culture.

Taiwan is an example of a political system in which the media have experienced the variety of post-transitional problems outlined above. Despite all the remarkable progress made since the Kuomintang (KMT, i.e. Nationalist Party) government started to liberalize society in 1987, the media still struggled to define their role in a democratic Taiwan. For instance, persistent calls for the separation of politics and the media raise questions of ownership, influence and bias. Critics from across the political spectrum claim to observe an apparent absence of professionalism among journalists and editors, suggesting that rather than following the news agenda they create it, choosing what to report and how with the intention of presenting news from their own political perspective. This should not be particularly disturbing; studies of newspaper content and organization throughout the democratic world reveal unambiguous bias in favour of one political party or platform, especially during election campaigns. Besides, KMT-oriented newspapers, such as the *United Daily News* (*lianhe bao*) and *China Times* (*zhongguo shibao*) may be prominent, but alternative newspapers promoting competing platforms are readily available at newsstands and can be even more popular. For example, as a consequence of the growing Taiwanese consciousness (Corcuff 2002) the *Liberty Times* (*ziyou shibao*), famous for supporting former President Lee Teng-hui, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and their alliance, enjoyed the third highest circulation in 1997, and in 2005 surpassed *United Daily News* and *China*

Times in terms of market share and advertising revenue (Lin 2008: 198–200).¹ Moreover, the pro-independence Formosa Television (FTV, *min-shi*), established in 1997, makes a profit while the traditional three pro-KMT terrestrial commercial television stations, established prior to democratization, have been losing money year after year since 2002 (Feng 2009: 21–42). Among the top twenty television programs in 2003–2004, FTV dominated the terrestrial market (GIO 2005: 290–291).

Admittedly, other concerns are more serious: we can observe in Taiwan problems arising from fundamental changes in the practice of journalism (political and otherwise); a noticeable decline in deference to authority, prompted by claims of democratic rights to free speech, media pluralism, and the rising power of the market over state forces that have encouraged the growth of tabloid-style journalism in both print and broadcast media. For example, the media are intruding ever more enthusiastically into the private lives of politicians and other celebrities, while the victims (and even perpetrators) of crimes and their bereaved families are paraded nightly on television with little sensitivity. This has led to accusations of ‘trial by media’ before cases have even reached the courtroom. Where many democratic societies are trying to find new ways of regulating sensationalist and invasive reporting, Taiwan’s media seems to revel in the idea that free speech is a democratic licence to encroach on the lives of those in the public spotlight.

To understand the rapid progress in Taiwan’s media environment and to contextualize the challenges it faces as a consequence of democratization, it is first necessary to discuss the starting point: how did Taiwan’s media fare under the KMT’s system of authoritarian government prior to 1987?

The Media in Pre-Democratic Taiwan

The system of control operated by the KMT in Taiwan mirrored regulatory media architectures found in other non-democratic systems. We can identify the following characteristics:

¹ In 2005 *China Times* accounted for 10 percent of the market share, *United Daily News* 11.90 percent and *Liberty Times* 16.50 percent (Lin 2008: 200).

- Important appointments within the media, including ownership, are decided on political rather than professional grounds. In other words, the media industries in authoritarian systems exhibit clear signs of clientelism.
- The news agenda and news coverage are politically controlled, or at least influenced, in order to reflect the political agenda.
- Laws and legal systems are created to influence the media (targeting source, media actors and/or audiences). Together with a directed news agenda, this may lead to a realization among media employees that self-censorship is desirable and necessary for survival.
- Editors, journalists and other media workers are often subject to cycles of extra-legal abuse and intimidation.
- The media cannot operate within an autonomous public sphere.

The most visible method of control by authoritarian regimes is a system of media ownership that privileges the regime and embeds the media within the state structure under centralized management. This is a pattern of media ownership that does not conceal political influence and motives, and describes how Taiwan's media system was structured during the era of martial law. Until the beginning of liberalization and democratization in 1987, the KMT owned four national daily newspapers, the government owned two, and the military five; similar arrangements presided over the three oldest national television stations, Taiwan Television Company (TTV, *tai-shi*), China Television Company (CTV, *zhong-shi*) and Chinese Television System (CTS, *hua-shi*). However, the implied separation of ownership was misleading because of the overlapping character of party/state/military political authority that defined the martial law era. Below the level of ownership, the management of influence was defined by complexity. The KMT government of Taiwan, like their Communist counterparts in China (de Burgh 2003; Keane 2003: 169–187) created a labyrinthine patron-client network that granted the power and authority to manage media appointments to agencies representing the KMT, the provincial government and the state. Hence, newspaper editors were either members of the KMT or at least supportive of the party's political agenda,

an arrangement that meant that sympathetic journalists, media owners and political appointees were located in prominent and powerful editorial positions from where they could shore up the government's agenda (principally rapid economic modernization and the eventual recovery of China) and encourage their employees to exercise self-censorship. Thus the proprietors of the two privately owned newspapers with the highest circulation prior to 1987, the *China Times* and the *United Daily News*, were members of the KMT Central Standing Committee. In short, the KMT dominated the government, state and the military, and consequently controlled the entire legal media industry.²

The American human rights foundation, Freedom House, highlights in its annual reports the recurring intimidation of journalists throughout the non-democratic world by politicians, legal systems and even non-state actors engaging in illegal behaviour in clear violation of human rights regimes.³ These are cycles of repression and abuse that reinforce the institutional structures of control outlined above, often supported by legal authority, and which mirror the inclination to perceive and present the media either as instruments of state control or as adversaries – there is little room for the media to play a role between these poles: you are either with us or against us. If you decide you are against us, then you are by definition an enemy of the state and therefore the state is free to use any methods it may choose to control or destroy you.

However, it would be misleading to suggest that only authoritarian governments subject their media to such pressure; in fact, it is also common in political systems that tolerate a degree of media freedom (such as pre-democratic Taiwan) and those in the early

² For statistics indicating how well the KMT-controlled newspapers performed commercially prior to 1987, see Chen and Zhu (1987). It should be noted that, in addition to the legal media explored here, there was a vibrant underground media system that represented the opposition to the KMT. For details, see G.D. Rawnsley (2000: 565–580).

³ Freedom House's website (<http://freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=2>) declares its mission statement as follows: 'Freedom House, an independent nongovernmental organization, supports the expansion of freedom in the world. Freedom is possible only in democratic political systems in which the governments are accountable to their own people; the rule of law prevails; and freedoms of expression, association, and belief, as well as respect for the rights of minorities and women, are guaranteed. Freedom ultimately depends on the actions of committed and courageous men and women. We support nonviolent civic initiatives in societies where freedom is denied or under threat and we stand in opposition to ideas and forces that challenge the right of all people to be free. Freedom House functions as a catalyst for freedom, democracy and the rule of law through its analysis, advocacy and action.' Retrieved 15 February 2011.

stages of democratic transition because direct and total control is absent. In such societies, journalists are especially vulnerable targets because of their capacity to discover, investigate and expose information and issues certain members of the political world would prefer remain hidden. The fact that journalists are deemed such a threat to the status quo that they deserve state-sanctioned intimidation is perhaps indicative of their perceived influence on public opinion. After all, democracy is built on the principles of accountability and transparency, and journalists often see as their responsibility the adoption of these values.

Some authoritarian governments reinforce their physical intimidation of media with judicial processes. The problem for those on the receiving end is that most of these laws do not make their intentions explicit; the most common technique of exercising authority is to leave the laws as vague as possible to allow their expedient interpretation. This is particularly worrying in the context of the global war on terror; human rights advocates worry that the successful prosecution of this war depends on the suspension of fundamental liberties, and that the threat of terrorism ('national security') is once again a convenient excuse to exercise increasingly authoritarian practices against the media, even in otherwise democratic political systems. Taiwan's Law on Publications (passed in April 1952, amended in 1958 and 1973, finally repealed 25 January 1999. See Liu and Tsai 2009: 273) enacted under the conditions of martial law allowed the government to close a daily newspaper without recourse to judicial process or authority. Moreover, this law and other texts of the period imposed restrictions on: (i) the registration of new papers; (ii) the number of pages that newspapers could publish; and (iii) where the newspapers could be printed and distributed. These measures combined to form a comprehensive press ban policy in 1951 that prevented the further issue of licenses and thus froze until 1987 the number of titles in circulation to a mere thirty-one.

The restricted political environment of Taiwan under martial law, together with the clientelist structures of ownership and management, constrained the mainstream media from being little more than the mouthpiece of the government. The political and media relationship was characterized by the absence of a genuine public sphere for deliberation and dialogue. This meant that political communication was largely a one-way, vertical (top-down) process that transmitted government-approved news, information and propaganda. Attempts to break or evade the law were met with severe punishment: during the 'White Terror' (*baise kongbu*) of the 1950s, hundreds of reporters, writers and editors were harassed, interrogated and often

jailed, provoking a culture of self-censorship within media organizations (Rawnsley and Rawnsley 2004; Rawnsley and Rawnsley 2001; Chao and Myers 1998).⁴

Even democratic regimes are not immune from the possibility of political coercion; in Taiwan, complaints were registered in 2000 – the year of the historic presidential election when fifty years of government by the KMT gave way to Chen Shui-bian and the DPP – that government agencies were still closely monitoring the activities of journalists. This surveillance was invasive, and journalists working for *Next* magazine (*yi zhoukan*) were especially targeted.⁵ In March 2002 authorities raided *Next*'s offices to prevent distribution of an article that revealed details of a secret US\$100 million bank account (a 'slush fund' in *Next* language) allegedly used by former President Lee Teng-hui to buy influence abroad. The reporter was accused of having endangered national security and his home was searched (*Apple Daily* 24 April, 2010). Employees of the *China Times*, involved with investigating corruption in the National Security Bureau, were subjected to similar intimidation. The Taipei District Prosecutor's Office, responsible for the surveillance, explained that agents were concerned again with protecting 'national security,' a handy catch-all term that democratic and non-democratic governments regularly use to justify their suppression of basic civil liberties. In August, 2004, Taiwan's High Court upheld for reasons of national security the conviction of reporter Hong Zhe-zheng of *Power News* (*jin bao*, now defunct). The case revolved around an article that Hong had written in 2000 reporting Taiwan's regular military exercises (*hanguang yanxi*). Hong was sentenced to eighteen months in prison, suspended for three years (Liu and Tsai 2009: 274).⁶ For many journalists in Taiwan, this echoes the period of martial law between 1950 and 1987, and may explain why Taiwan's media oppose any regulatory frameworks in the democratic era.

⁴ In a narrow sense, White Terror refers to two specific periods: (i) from the February 28th Incident of 1947 to 1949 when the KMT government lost the civil war to the Communists and retreated to Taiwan; and (ii) from December 1949 to the end of the 1950s when the state used violence against dissidents. However some argue that Taiwan was under White Terror until 1987 when martial law was finally lifted. See Hou (2006: 139–203) for more detailed discussion.

⁵ The authors' interviews with Vincent Ming-huei Chiu, Executive Deputy Editor in Chief of *Next* Magazine, Taipei, May–September 2000.

⁶ In January 2003, Taiwan's Legislative Yuan ratified the National Secrets Protection Law to prevent the leaking of national secrets and restrict access to classified information. Violating the law is punishable by up to seven years in jail. The law has tried to be a considered response to critics questioning the arbitrary nature and vagueness of current legislation by reducing the number of classified national secrets. The law stipulates strict procedures detailing who can define secrets and how they are to be reviewed in a clear command of authority (CPJ 11 March, 2004).

Post–1987

When the KMT decided in 1987 to lift the laws that had restricted almost every aspect of life in Taiwan since 1949, the effect on the media was immediate and extensive. The expansion in the number of media was both rapid and substantial, allowing the creation of public spaces that could potentially help and hinder the more substantive political reforms the government promised would follow. By mid-2006, 2,037 newspapers were in circulation, compared to just 31 between 1951 and 1987. The number of radio stations likewise expanded from 33 in 1993 to 172 in 2009 (GIO 2010). The government endorsed the creation of a fourth national commercial television station in 1997 (FTV) that reflected the Taiwanese identity the government had previously tried to contain (M.Y.T. Rawnsley 2003: 147–166). A further national channel, working to the ethos of Public Service Broadcasting, the Public Television System (PTS, *gong-shi*), is available on cable and satellite, so technically Taiwan now has five national television stations (compared to three in 1987) offering 14 digital channels (Rawnsley and Rawnsley 2005: 15–30). Moreover, after the reception of cable programming was legalized in 1993, viewers now enjoy access to hundreds of channels providing local (i.e. community), national, regional and international programming. With a cable penetration rate of over 78 percent, Taiwan is one of the most heavily saturated pay-TV markets in the world, which by the end of the 1990s surpassed even the United States and Japan (Granitsas 2002: 46–48).

For the media, perhaps the most important aspect of the liberalization process was the KMT's explicit admission that media freedoms were not only required for the further development of Taiwan, but were a basic democratic right. As Director of the Government Information Office (GIO) between 1987 and 1991, Shaw Yu-ming was directly responsible for managing the media's liberalization. Most noteworthy was his declaration of the media's professional democratic duty to hold the government accountable for its actions and decisions: 'The government is ... under the surveillance of the media, and it is not suitable for the government to use administrative means or the law to punish them. That would raise criticisms about freedom of the press being hampered' (quoted in Batto, 2004: 65). Chu Ji-ying, Director of the KMT Cultural Affairs Department between 1989 and 1994 gave a party view. In its language and content, this is a remarkable speech for it overturns the legacy of KMT control over Taiwan's media. Chu declared that in a democracy,

the press is the spokesman of the public's interests. I believe that the role of the party's spokesman is to provide information, not to control the news. He must manage information, not control it. He must explain the party's policy to the media and relay public opinion to his superiors. *The rigid, domineering political style is out of date* [emphasis added] (ibid).

This admission that the KMT's style was obsolete was either the clearest sign yet of a liberalizing regime, or an expression of faith in the ability of pro-KMT media to survive increasing market competition.

The transition to democracy is often scarred by what we might term 'media wars' – a term sometimes reserved for explaining what happened in Hungary following the collapse of communism there – that rage over the control of access to newspapers and broadcasting systems. In other words, democratization, implying the demise of state repression and control, rarely solves the problems of ownership; if anything it can create further problems as an open playing field generates new public spaces exposed to both political and commercial competition. The concentration of ownership and control in a few hands (Berlusconi in Italy, Thaksin in Thailand, Putin in Russia, Murdoch just about everywhere else) is a problem facing transitional systems that may have sculpted other core institutions of democratic politics, and is particularly acute during early elections. Moreover, the comprehensive privatization of the press (isn't democracy about distancing such institutions as the press as far as possible from the state?) has resulted in fierce competition between newspapers for readers and therefore for survival.

One aspect of this competition is economic. As soon as the government lifted restrictions in 1988, both the *China Times* and *United Daily News* increased their number of pages but maintained their prices at the same level as other smaller newspapers. They also launched evening newspapers – *China Times Express* (*zhongshi wanbao*) and *United Evening News* (*lianhe wanbao*) – to compete with the *Independent Evening Post* (*zili wanbao*), Taiwan's most established and reputable evening newspaper at that time. However, the *Independent Evening Post* found the challenge from the aggressive marketing strategies adopted by the China Times Group and the United News Group difficult to deal with, and thus starting from 1994 lost influence, readers and its previous financial muscle (Lin 2008: 192–193). Moreover, both the China Times Group and United News Group enjoyed access to

far more extensive distribution networks than any other newspaper enterprises. In this way the free market structure created after 1988 allowed the *China Times* and *United Daily News* to enjoy even greater market dominance than in the pre-democratic era, while their smaller competitors found it increasingly difficult to face the challenges of market pressure. Hence, liberalization and democracy have not necessarily resulted in more voices and consumer choice, as market pressures and competition can inhibit growth. Moreover, newspapers' growing dependence on advertising revenue has encouraged a new form of censorship, whereby advertisers have increasingly required newspapers to 'omit news unfavourable to their business or run stories advantageous to them lest they withdraw their ads' (Freedom House 2010).

A second consequence of this competition impacts the quality of output. All too often, transitional systems sacrifice the democratic ideal for profit and commercial growth, as demonstrated in Taiwan where competition between media for ratings and advertising revenue has transformed the landscape of journalism. Where previously the media were expected to conform to a culture of deference to politicians (for instance, intrusion on the public and private lives of Chiang Kai-shek and his family was strictly prohibited), now many television programs and publications offer sensational exposés of public figures to entice audiences: tabloid journalism today thrives in Taiwan on a scale previously inconceivable. In its 2010 survey, Freedom House reports that the principal concerns in Taiwan are 'a rise in sensationalism and a potential loss of quality.'

Critics observed the entry into the market of the *Apple Daily* (*pingguo ribao*), run by Hong Kong entrepreneur Jimmy Lai as evidence of the dangers of creeping tabloid and even yellow journalism. *Apple Daily* is a tabloid newspaper that began life in Hong Kong, concentrating on celebrity gossip, scandal, naked women and lurid crime scene photographs. It has also published sexually explicit images and even reviews of recommended brothels.⁷ When it first appeared in Taiwan on 2 May 2003, it offered sensationalism at a low price and the impact on the media industry was immediate: with a launch circulation of 750,000, *Apple Daily* forced the *China Times*, the *United Daily News* and the *Liberty Times*, Taiwan's

⁷ Jimmy Lai is an entrepreneur refugee from Guangdong province. His publications, including *Apple Daily* and *Next* magazine, are banned in China but are published in Hong Kong. Hong Kong's *Apple Daily* has relentlessly attacked China for years, and included articles that described Jiang Zemin as 'one of the top enemies of the press' (Asia Times 11 November, 2004). *Next* magazine's motto is 'Don't put on airs: just seek the truth' (ibid.).

biggest existing broadsheets to size up the competition (Lin 2008: 199–200). To survive the challenge from their new competitor, they decided to add new sections to their newspapers, use colour print, and cut their newsstand prices by a third. Thanks to the *Apple Daily*, Taiwan's newspaper industry entered the twenty-first century.

But the impact of the *Apple Daily* and the competition for revenue by means of tabloid journalism raise important questions for the development of journalism as a profession: Where does freedom of speech end and moral responsibility begin? Taiwan's media are still discovering the need for professional self-discipline and self-regulation in their reporting of disasters, crime, celebrity and personal tragedies and this, we would argue, is just one sign that Taiwan is still in the early stages of democratic consolidation. This of course does raise an important question: as Taiwan's democracy matures, will the media become more professional, responsible and self-regulatory by natural means? Or does even a mature democracy require intervention in the media market to create the regulatory frameworks that can safeguard both quality and freedom? The GIO under Chen Shui-bian tried to design a regulatory framework that would allow journalists to carry out their work free from the threat of government interference, but at the same time legislating against the tendency to intrude on the private lives of individuals. In June 2002, the GIO reviewed a draft Mass Communications Law to 'better regulate the media ... ban invasions of privacy ... and prevent the media from violating an individual's autonomy' (*Taiwan Headlines* 6 June 2002).

In 2003, Huang Hui-chen, then Director of the GIO, admitted that 'Taiwan's freedom of speech is one of the most liberal in the world,' but warned that 'such freedom should not be abused. The media's responsibility should be to imbue audiences with positive social values,' which is attendant to their role in democratic consolidation (Yiu 2003). Most controversially, in 2003 a non-governmental organization, the Foundation for the Prevention of Public Damage by the Media, was created to evaluate six mainstream Chinese-language newspapers and measure 'justice, objectivity, appropriateness and accuracy,' with the results released to the public every two months.⁸ The Foundation received less than US\$30,000 from the GIO to conduct its research. Journalists from the *United Daily News* and the *China Times*

⁸ The six newspapers examined prior to 2004 were *Liberty Times*, *Apple Daily*, *China Times*, *China Times Express*, *United Daily News* and *United Evening News*. Since the closure of *China Times Express* in 2004, the analysis focused on the remaining five mainstream newspapers only. Further information about the Foundation for the Prevention of Public Damage by the Media can be found on the GIO Website. Retrieved 20 May 2010, <http://info.gio.gov.tw/ct.asp?xItem=19550&ctNode=4200>.

immediately responded with outrage and accused the government of interfering with the press. Within days, Premier Yu Shyi-kun announced that the GIO's plan to fund such research had been abandoned, but he did encourage the media to practice self-restraint to evade the need for future government regulation. The president of another NGO, Taiwan Media Watch, noted the dilemma between democratization and the need for regulation:

Any government intervention in the operations of the media is unacceptable because freedom of the press is pivotal in a civilized society. But as the tendency towards indecency looms large in our local TV programming, to expect self-discipline on the part of the media is a difficult option. So the only feasible solution is to allow the public to use its voice to tell the media what they consider to be quality TV programs (Chu 2000).

Too many in Taiwan – audiences, media and politicians (as demonstrated by their often vicious negative election campaigning. See G.D. Rawnsley 2004: 209–222) – are under the impression that free speech means having the liberty to say whatever one wishes without any consideration of the ethical implications or the consequences, another sign of Taiwan's democratic immaturity. The DPP administration (2000–2008) tried to design a regulatory framework that would allow journalists to carry out their work free from the threat of government interference, but at the same time legislating against the tendency to intrude on the private lives of individuals.

Consolidation

The DPP had long suffered from the KMT's monopoly over mass communication and the regulations imposed on the media that we noted above. As the opposition to KMT power, first the *tangwai* (a loose coalition of anti-KMT groups and individuals, *tangwai* literally means 'outside the party,' i.e. outside the KMT) and then the organized and legal DPP had been denied a voice in the mainstream media. When he was elected president in 2000, reforming the media featured prominently on Chen Shui-bian's agenda, with separating the media from political institutions and processes a priority. This required a bold vision, one that demanded serious political commitment because it entailed breaking traditional ownership patterns. First, the government would surrender its shares in media industries, thus undermining the entrenched liaison between economic interests and political power. The next

step was to restrain partisan and state influence in the media. Chung Chin, Director of the GIO (April–October 2000) described as her ‘basic aim’ filtering out ‘improper influences, both political and commercial, that may stand in the way of the neutrality of news gathering and presenting’ (Low 2000). These objectives proved difficult to accomplish for three reasons: First, the government created a workable blueprint for reform, but it was an aspiration without a practical solution. Second, the checks and balances within the political system prevented the realization of radical reform. Third, Taiwan’s parliament, the Legislative Yuan, remained dominated by a ‘blue’ (i.e. supportive of the KMT) alliance majority that was able to impose gridlock on the legislative process for political expediency.

We have already observed the complex patron-client networks involved in managing Taiwan’s media. Unpacking this knot of interdependent interests as called for in the revised Radio and Television Act, Satellite Broadcasting Act and Cable Radio and Television Act (additional articles promulgated 24 December 2003. See GIO 2007) would be far from straightforward. Privileged positions in the media were no longer reserved for the KMT; in fact, members of the DPP had themselves benefited from forming part of these networks since the onset of media liberalization and were thus reluctant to capitulate. As we all know, Turkeys do not vote for Christmas. The most significant test-case was ownership of FTV, a DPP-supporting television station that was established in 1997 to break the KMT’s monopoly on broadcasting. Persuading Cai Trong-rong, a DPP legislator and member of the party’s Standing Committee to resign from his position as chair of FTV was a milestone in demonstrating the government’s sincerity in ending political influence in the media (M.Y.T. Rawnsley 2003: 147–166).

The KMT were likewise persuaded, and in February 2003, the party announced that it would sell its stock holdings in the media. These were not inconsiderable: the KMT (then the world’s richest political party) was relinquishing 33.94 percent in CTV, 97 percent in the Broadcasting Corporation of China and 50 percent in the Central Motion Picture Corporation (Chuang 2005). This was a bold move and demonstrated the KMT’s commitment to a reformed political landscape; the party finally recognised that Taiwan had moved on, and that it too must progress to survive. However, following this apparent public commitment to reform, the China Times Group purchased the majority of the shares formally owned by the KMT. The China Times Group was subsequently purchased in 2008 by the Want Want

Company that has business interests in China (Liu and Tsai 2009: 274). This raises a set of new questions about media ownership in Taiwan and how the group's new owners, with close ties to the People's Republic of China (PRC), will affect media independence.

Political reform alone will not reverse the difficulties currently facing Taiwan's media. Newspaper readers are hemorrhaging; and circulation is falling because of increased competition from other media formats, especially cable television, digital media (experimental since 2000) and increasingly the internet. Total newspaper readership has fallen from 76.3 percent in 1992 to around 50 percent in 2004 (Lin 2008: 198–199). Furthermore, Taiwan's press media have suffered from the rising price of paper within the conditions of an economic downturn. Little wonder that the convergence of these conditions forced the closure of several newspapers between 2005 and 2008 including prominent papers such as the *China Times Express*, the *Central Daily News* (*zhongyang ribao*), the *Taiwan Daily News* (*taiwan ribao*) and the *Min Sheng News* (*minsheng bao*) of the United News Group (Liu and Tsai 2009: 274).

Criticisms of the trivialization of television news reporting opened debates about the value and use of audience ratings, especially when AGB Nielson's Peoplemeter, allowing minute-by-minute ratings, became available to Taiwan in 1995. C.C. Lin (2009: 79–117) noticed that the competition resulting from the mushrooming of available television channels provoked executives to consult minute-by-minute ratings not only for entertainment programs, but also for news output. For advertisers and the channels themselves, ratings equal cash (Ang 1991: 27), a development that is not unfamiliar in commercial media systems throughout the world. However, most worrying for Taiwan was that once ratings became the driving force behind news programming and scheduling, the professional integrity of journalists and editors was called into question.

Lin (2009: 96–97) observed how television news editors tracked the movements of ratings and cross-referenced them with the news items. The five news items with the highest and lowest ratings were published daily in the newsrooms, adding to the pressure on reporters. This has resulted in the homogenization of television news as ratings determined which type of story should feature in broadcasts (Lin 2009: 103), and the stations converged on the same news stories: news about the first family, crime, consumer and entertainment news always enjoy higher ratings, and the stations dropped news items which were not considered

‘popular’, regardless of significance. Hence a new phenomenon emerged: viewers may follow a news story from the beginning, but may never discover its outcome as the report may be abandoned because of low ratings. The effects on advertising also mean that journalists are often forced to place ratings before professional judgement (ibid.: 100–107). In 2007, the National Communications Commission (NCC), founded in 2005 and based on the American Federal Communications Commission (FCC) as a politically neutral regulatory body, requested that Neilson stop supplying minute-by-minute ratings to Taiwan’s news channels, and forged an agreement between the news stations to stop producing output according to these figures (*The Epoch Times* 11 April, 2007).

Conclusion

We might conclude from Taiwan’s experience that liberalization and democratization, allowing the media to escape from political interference, are phases of political change presenting the least problems, but this can only apply to transitions that are as atypical as Taiwan’s – smooth, non-violent, consensual, incremental and elite-driven. Democratic consolidation is significantly more demanding, principally because it requires that new values and political cultures be embedded. Problems will not be resolved overnight, despite Taiwan’s appetite for rapid change. The media are now in a strong position to contribute to the political dialogue, transparency and accountability that are essential architectures of democratic society. One strong example of the political influence of the media is demonstrated by critical coverage of President Ma Ying-jeou and his administration’s response to typhoon Morakot in 2009 which contributed to the change of prime minister.

Media ownership remains a concern as evidence seems to point to the KMT administration seeking ways of influencing editorial content, and many observers are still critical of political bias, but these are less worrying than a decline in the quality of content and especially the quality of journalism. Here we can attest to the influence of democratization: too many people in Taiwan, particularly journalists and politicians, suppose that freedom of speech absolves them of any responsibility for caution, sensitivity and sometimes accuracy. But rather than implement strict privacy laws, the government must try to encourage self-regulation within a framework that will account for standards of quality. This may be achieved by, for example, conceding more powers of regulation to media-interested activists and non-governmental organizations. Can a government really legislate

for quality? Perhaps a democratic government should aim to create by legislation a well-structured media market so that diverse media that offer what might be categorized as ‘quality’ content can find their corresponding spaces.

Liberal commentators routinely discuss the market as a panacea for problems within the media. Their logic is deceptively simple: by conceding greater powers to consumers and creating the conditions for greater competition within the industry, market mechanisms will compensate for and eventually subdue problems arising from ownership and bias. One member of the previous DPP cabinet offered a useful summary of this model: ‘The less government interference the better. If the public dislikes a certain TV channel or radio station which they think is manipulated by a certain party or individual they detest, they simply refuse to watch it or listen to it. It’s that darn simple.’⁹ Perhaps this is *too* simple. First, it assumes that audiences are able to detect manipulation and interference, can decode it, and have the necessary analytical tools to judge the program’s motivation. Second, leaving the power of regulation to the market does not guarantee quality. The existence of free media does not necessarily mean independent or responsible media that can fulfill the democratic expectations of citizens. Neither does competition necessarily stimulate producers’ appetites for innovative programming, but often instead drives them towards sharing formats that attract middle-ground audiences.

An unregulated market may create a media industry that places entertainment and commercial values as the guiding principles of production (Postman 1986), a development that democracies may wish to resist. Newton N. Minow, the former Chairman of the FCC, once said of commercial television in the United States:

When television is good ... nothing is better. But when television is bad, nothing is worse. I invite each of you to sit down in front of your own television set ... for a day ... I can assure you that what you will observe is a vast wasteland (Minow 1961).

It is possible to argue that, given the media’s relentless commercialism and convergence on the middle ground, Minow’s observations might equally apply to Taiwan.

⁹ Interviews conducted by the authors in Taipei, May–September 2000. The interviewee wishes to remain anonymous.

Moreover, we should not overlook how, far from promoting pluralism and diversity of ownership, the market is urging the media industry away from political interests and towards the concentration of ownership in the hands of a few powerful private individuals and consortia. This process has particularly serious consequences for Taiwan's newspapers and the prospering cable television industry where it is not unusual for bigger operators to squeeze out their smaller competitors from the market.

The creation of the NCC in 2005, the expansion of a public service-oriented network (Taiwan Broadcasting System) in 2006, and the NCC's decision in 2007 to intervene in television news practices that were more interested in ratings, all reinforce the suggestion that Taiwan finally recognizes that free media do not mean unregulated media, and that a regulatory system is not necessarily undemocratic. How much regulation and what kind are appropriate to sustain an independent, quality-driven and responsible media industry is another question and will require time, experience and measured reflection to answer. The perseverance of democratic consolidation in Taiwan and further media reform will continue to provide observers an opportunity to analyze the parallel development of communication and a democratic political culture in one of the most atypical Third Wave transitions.

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