

**THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION**  
**CENTER FOR NORTHEAST ASIAN POLICY STUDIES**

**THE CHANGING ROLES OF THE MEDIA IN TAIWAN'S  
DEMOCRATIZATION PROCESS**

Huang Ching-Lung  
CNAPS Taiwan Fellow, 2007-2008  
President, Want Daily  
The Want-Want Chinatimes Media Group

July 2009

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION  
1775 Massachusetts Avenue, NW  
Washington D.C. 20036-2188  
Tel: (202)797-6000 Fax: (202)797-2485  
<http://www.brookings.edu>

The purpose of this paper is to shed light on the role of the media in Taiwan's democratization process and to provide a proposal for the media to play a more positive role in improving the consolidation of Taiwan's democratization.

On July 15, 1987, then-President Chiang Ching-kuo lifted martial law and new political parties were allowed to form. In January of the following year, the ban on new newspapers was also lifted. Since then, Taiwan and its media have entered a whole new era. Now, two decades after the end of martial law, the people of Taiwan enjoy many fundamental rights: freedom of speech, freedom of the press and freedom of assembly, among others. Taiwan is widely considered a free and democratic country, with the same political rights and civil liberties as those in the United States and many European nations. In fact, in its global Freedom of the Press Survey released on April 28, 2008, Freedom House ranked Taiwan as having the 32<sup>nd</sup> freest media, among 195 countries—and it was ranked higher than any other Asian nation in both 2007 and 2008.<sup>1</sup> However, in 2009 when Taiwan experienced its second change in ruling party, its ranking in the Freedom House survey fell from the first place in Asia to second, and its global ranking fell to 43<sup>rd</sup>. Freedom House reported “Media in Taiwan faced assault and growing government pressure.”<sup>2</sup> This shows that in Taiwan political factors are difficult to avoid in the development of the media and freedom of the press, especially at sensitive times of political transition.

Over the past 20 years, Taiwan has been undergoing enormous political change, transforming from authoritarianism to democracy. During this period, however, Taiwan's image abroad has been that of an extremely contentious society, uneasy with itself and beset with endless (and, to some, mindless) conflicts between different factions. The Taiwanese media have reinforced this perception. Despite progress in securing freedom of the press in Taiwan, the media have come to play a controversial and often negative role in Taiwan's democratization process.

Mark Magnier wrote in the *Los Angeles Times* in 2005 that the Taiwanese media have gone “from lapdog to mad dog” in recent decades. He lamented the “sensationalism, partisanship and corruption that characterize the business.”<sup>3</sup> The article, titled “They Can't Handle the Truth,” goes on to say that “Taiwan's no-holds-barred journalism is alternately seen as a gutsy check on authority and the embodiment of chaos.” There is evidence that the Taiwanese people are growing tired of the endless conflict between political parties. There is also evidence, however, that they detest the recklessness and

---

<sup>1</sup> “Freedom of the Press 2008 Survey Release,” Freedom House, April 29, 2008; <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=362> (accessed July 17, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> “Freedom of the Press 2009 Survey Release,” Freedom House, May 1, 2009; <http://freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=70&release=811> (accessed July 17, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Mark Magnier, “They Can't Handle the Truth,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 28, 2005; <http://articles.latimes.com/2005/feb/28/world/fg-hounds28> (accessed July 7, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> See “The media has lost the public's trust,” Editorial, *Taipei Times*, October 26, 2006, Page 8; <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/archives/2006/10/26/2003333468> (accessed July 14, 2009).

ruthlessness of the media. A study presented in 2006 by Edelman, an international public relations firm, shows that only 1 percent of Taiwanese view the media as a trusted information source—the lowest rate in the Asia-Pacific area. (The highest figure for the region was in India, where the media trust rating was 50 percent.)<sup>4</sup>

These contradictory images reflect the complexity of the role of the media in Taiwan's democratization. Taiwan's democracy is vigorous, and so is its media, despite a poor image. This paper will examine the media's roles during the period of martial law as well as its impact on current democratization efforts, on provincial ethnic problems, and on political divisions (such as the pan-Blue coalition that opposes Taiwan independence, and the pan-Green bloc which favors Taiwan independence). The analysis will distinguish between big media (which can be characterized as "mainstream" and "establishment") and small media (which may be called "marginal" or "alternative"). It will also discuss the deterioration of quality that has accompanied the media's adaptation to the process of commercialization. This paper should provide a better understanding of the relationship between the media and Taiwan's democratization, and may ultimately become part of the discussion on creating a healthier relationship.

### **Big Media and Small Media**

Within the media world, the size of a media company can be well defined. However in the context of the development of Taiwan's democracy, the distinction of large and small media has complex significance. "Large" refers not only to size and scale, but also refers to the fact that such outlets have legal status, operate in the public openly, are friendly with the ruling authorities, or that they basically are part of the ruling party. This includes television, newspapers, broadcasting, and news agencies. A small media company not only is smaller in size and scale, but also is often unlicensed or illegal, opposed to the ruling authority, and competes with the mainstream media in the realm of public opinion.

Big and small media have had deep but different impacts on Taiwan's political change. During the long period of martial law (1949-1987), Taiwan's big media served almost only to supplement to the established political system and social values. Media leaders accepted this situation, and their main priority was to make a profit. They did occasionally use some ideological ambiguity to deviate from the establishment in order to enhance their credibility and create an image of professionalism. Some also strived for true journalistic independence, but it was not easy for them to overcome the constraints of ideological and political pressures. In the end, they were not able to empower the oppressed. Since the voices of the marginalized simply could not be heard through big media, the political opposition turned to smaller, underground media (alternative magazines, cable television, and radio) to push for change. Once small media began to gain traction with the wider public, the world that big media had constructed began to crumble. Big media's self-imposed limits were gradually torn down.

## *The roles of big media*

During the martial-law era, the autocratic regime maintained a patron-client” relationship with the big media. Under these circumstances, the government restricted the total number of newspapers that could be published. To publish newspapers was a privilege which was only given to certain people, and in return these people were loyal to the regime. The so-called “two big newspapers” (the *United Daily* and the *China Times*) and three television stations (TTV, CTV, and CTS) together held more than a 90 percent share of the media market. Their relationship with the government was very close; both of the big newspaper bosses were members of the KMT’s Central Standing Committee, and the three TV stations belonged to the government, the KMT, and the military respectively. The roles of the two newspapers are particularly worthy of mention. In early years, the *United Daily* was considered to have a certain degree of independence: in 1958, it published an editorial criticizing a new publishing law for being more rigid than the old one. But after the Lei Chen / *Free China* event in 1960, the *United Daily* adopted a more conservative stance, often represented the KMT’s right-wing forces, and tended to be close to the military and the security system. The *China Times*, on the other hand, adopted a more liberal stance, especially when dealing with issues of domestic politics and cross-strait relations. It represented the left-wing reforming forces in the KMT.

Under the authoritarian party-state system, Taiwan’s media were politically restrained; subjects like the lifting of martial law and the formation of new parties were taboo and could not be openly discussed. But in non-political areas, the newspapers had sufficient rights to act on their own. Thus the two newspapers frequently invited scholars and intellectuals residing in the U.S. to write articles and commentary, providing foreign experiences and promoting progressive thought while avoiding sensitive topics. Despite their close relations with the KMT, both newspapers competed fiercely with each other for market share, so they occasionally pushed political boundaries to gain popularity. However, establishing a foundation for political reform was far from a primary goal for the two publications. Taiwanese scholar Tien Hung-mao wrote in 1989 that “while under martial law, Taiwan’s newspapers had independent characters which were not seen in other totalitarian systems. That was because they were competing for market share. Sometimes commercial objectives would go against political interests.”<sup>5</sup>

But Taiwan’s mainstream media seldom spoke out for the anti-KMT political opposition before the lifting of martial law. The Chungli Incident in 1977 and the Kaohsiung Incident in 1979, demonstrations for democratic development which turned violent and were dealt with violently by the government, were critical moments for Taiwan’s democratization, yet during these and other periods of upheaval in the 1970s the big media either kept silent or showed no sympathy to the opposition. The media effectively became accomplices of the persecuting party. The opposition group –

---

<sup>5</sup> Tien Hung-mao, *The Great Transition: Political and Social Change in Republic of China*, Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1989, Pages 206 and 212.

collectively called the Dangwai, which literally means political forces “outside the party” (that is, outside the KMT) – could only voice their discontent and challenge the authority through alternative and marginal media. These media included the Dangwai magazines in the 1970s and the 1980s, cable television (known as the “the fourth channel” in a reference to the big three broadcasters mentioned above) in the 1990s, and underground radio stations thereafter.

*Small media: Dangwai magazines*

Lee Chin-chuan, a leading scholar on mass media, used the proverb “A single spark can start a prairie fire” to describe small media in the story of Taiwan’s democratization. The same story could be seen in other parts of the world during the 1980s, such as in the Philippine People Power Revolution led by Corazon Aquino, the Iranian Revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini, and the uprisings of intellectuals in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. These examples proved that small and alternative media could in some cases effectively confront autocracies.

Taiwan’s influential small media can be traced back to the 1950s. *Free China*, a biweekly journal initially sponsored by the KMT government, became a political forum that actively criticized Chiang Kai-shek’s authoritarian rule. It promoted ideas like democratization, civil rights, freedom of the press, reform of government organization, release of political prisoners and legalization of opposition parties. *Free China* incurred the wrath of the authority and was forced to close in 1960. But the journal had a great influence on subsequent small media outlets.

In 1971, the Republic of China lost its United Nations seat to mainland China, and the legitimacy of the KMT’s rule in Taiwan became increasingly questionable. The KMT government used the carrot and stick approach to meet this domestic challenge. On the one hand, it introduced the “Ten Major Construction Projects” and other programs that actively improved people’s lives. As the purchasing power of the people expanded, so did their demands on the media. The *United Daily* and the *China Times* replaced older KMT- and government-run newspapers, such as the *Central Daily News*, the *Chinese Daily News*, and the *Taiwan Shin Sheng Daily News*, as the main forces of public opinion. On the other hand, the KMT’s heavy-handed authoritarian rule did not soften at all; the people of Taiwan still kept quiet out of fear and did not dare to speak publicly about change. Toward the end of the 1970s, however, the opposition increased in force and the authority’s oppression became less and less effective. In August of 1979, almost 20 years after the closing of *Free China*, *Formosa Magazine* was established by opposition leaders, and the decade-long golden age of Dangwai magazines began.

Taiwan’s experience is an example of print magazines acting as the mechanism for political organization in lieu of a formal party. In its heyday, *Formosa Magazine* had 11 branches throughout the island. It organized 13 mass assemblies and demonstrations in the 1970s before the eruption of the Kaohsiung Incident in December 1979.

After that incident, *Formosa's* publisher, Huang Hsin-chieh, was sentenced to jail by a court martial. During the trial, Huang said the aim of establishing the magazine was not merely to publish news from the Dangwai movement, but to develop an organization to actively attract supporters for the opposition. Another famous opposition leader and political prisoner, Shih Ming-teh, said during the trial that the goal of *Formosa Magazine* was to form "a party without a name." In addition to this organizing function, *Formosa Magazine* was also an effective Dangwai propaganda tool which broke down the KMT's political mythology and publicly challenged the restrictions established by the state. There was a common saying at the time that the KMT had the organization but not the masses, while the Dangwai had the masses but not the organization. Before *Formosa Magazine*, that was true—but after the magazine's emergence, that was no longer the case.

However, the Kaohsiung Incident resulted in expanded authority for the Taiwan Garrison Command, a military body with the mission of domestic state security (and the government's main tool against the political opposition), which began to make increasingly arbitrary arrests and judgments against individuals and publications. It clamped down on Dangwai magazines more frequently. Antonio Chiang, editor in chief of a Dangwai magazine called *The Eighties*, recalled that every time the members of the Garrison Command came, they had blank documents already signed with the authorizing seal. The reason for closing down a publication could be filled in on the spot, with general terms like "undermining public morality" listed as reasons for banning the publication.

At that time, the authorities offered rewards for confiscating Dangwai magazines and informing against them. Thus the publishers would deliberately print a certain number of early copies of the magazine intended for seizure, and would tell the printing house to inform the authorities. After the Garrison Command took away these copies, the printing house would continue to print the rest. Because of the curiosity of the public, any banned issue of a magazine would sell well. In a 1985 article titled "Taiwan Magazines Play Mice to the Censor's Cat," the New York Times reported on the Dangwai publications and their special ways of surviving during the period of martial law.

As more and more Dangwai magazines began to appear in a limited market, intense competition for circulation and market share naturally began. In order to attract readers, some magazines deliberately defied taboos, and many the writing in many were ethically questionable and represented substandard journalism. Later, when newspapers were finally deregulated (January 1, 1988) and restrictions on speech were gradually removed, Dangwai magazines lost their importance and thus disappeared.

The Dangwai magazines had at least two major influences on the development of Taiwan politics and the media. First, different Dangwai magazines gave their names and followers to political factions in the new Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which was

founded in 1986 and legalized in 1991. The DPP's New Tide faction (新潮流系), Formosa faction (美麗島系), Justice Alliance faction (正義連線), and Welfare State Alliance faction (福利國連線) are all named after Dangwai magazines.<sup>6</sup>

Second, Dangwai magazines influenced the journalistic style and attitude of Taiwan's mainstream media. They set the pattern for cutthroat competition and extreme partisanship. This trend has only increased since the Dangwai era; after the KMT lost the presidency for the first time in 2000, Taiwan's media fully embraced commercialism and plunged into aggressive political commentary. In many cases, the media have degenerated into mouthpieces of political parties and are more interested in advertising than in journalism.

#### *Small media: cable television*

"The fourth television channels" were the predecessors of today's thriving cable television systems in Taiwan. In the mid-1980s, Taiwan was still under authoritarian rule. While the ban on independent newspapers was lifted in 1987, the only three large television stations – TTV, CTV, and CTS – remained under the control of the authorities (the state, the KMT, and the military). Television news reports and commentary therefore tended to advocate the conservative ideology of the ruling party and provided few programs in local dialects. The opposition and various business representatives repeatedly requested that the government open additional television channels, but their efforts were futile. So they created underground "fourth television channels."

In the early 1980s, these stations were made possible through a new microwave technique and mushroomed all over the island. The authorities initially turned a blind eye to these emerging stations—until the opposition began to use them as a political platform to challenge the official stations (beginning especially in 1986 following a demonstration at Chiang Kai-shek International Airport).

1990 was a watershed year. The DPP, which still did not exist legally, decided it would not conform to the unfair rules of the KMT any longer; using the underground microwave technique, it established the first "democratic television" network. This process began to accelerate, and in September 1991, 21 individual stations throughout the island organized "democratic TV networks" and proclaimed that they wanted to terminate the KMT government's monopoly on television broadcasting.

At the same time, the U.S. government demanded that Taiwan halt its alternative cable systems, which were broadcasting programs in violation of intellectual property laws. The U.S. threatened to impose retaliatory tariffs against Taiwan's goods if it refused to comply. The KMT was therefore forced to quickly legalize the 250 illegal,

---

<sup>6</sup> On July 23, 2006, the DPP general assembly passed a resolution requiring the disbanding of all factions. The factions have since publicly stated that they will comply with the resolution. But in reality the original factions of the DPP still exist under the surface.

mixed-quality cable systems on the island in order to better monitor their content and enforce intellectual property laws. The “Cable Radio and Television Act” of 1993 recognized many of Taiwan’s cable television systems – some of which had existed for more than 10 years as “guerrilla media” – as normal and legal. However, Taiwan’s economy is of limited size; the island did not have sufficient capacity for so many cable systems. While this new move by the KMT government represented a turn toward economic liberalism, planners did not consider the market size requirements of the media business. Ultimately, as with the Dangwai magazines, market forces dominated: in the fight for greater market share the “fourth channels” lost their function of pioneering democratic ideas. Media run by the party establishment even imitated the “guerrilla media” by adopting their inflammatory style to compete for viewers. (To this day, there are 10 to 12 talk shows and call-in programs every night, running one after another. They initiate senseless arguments and stir political scandals and gossip. They have become a source of social turmoil.)

### *Small media: underground radio stations*

As with television, the KMT's monopoly on radio broadcasting continued after the lifting of martial law in 1987. The DPP applied for a radio license several times, but was denied repeatedly. So in 1992, the DPP set up the first underground radio station in Taiwan to publicly challenge the monopoly. In the following year, a more radical pirate radio station called “The Voice of Taiwan” hit the airwaves, triggering a copy-cat effect that led to many new stations. Bowing to intense pressure at the end of 1993, the government began to grant licenses to new radio stations, but this action had only a limited impact in controlling the rampant underground stations. In 1994, during the Taipei mayoral election campaign, pirate radios aired call-in shows and talk shows 24 hours a day, calling for supporters to call in and vent their anger over the radio. These programs catered to listeners with strong prejudices, stirring up inflammatory emotions among rival camps and inciting ethnic tensions.

After the election, the KMT government issued even more radio licenses. Since a new telecommunications act went into effect in 1997, more than 100 licensed radio stations have sprung up, but many pirate stations still exist. On a small island of 36,000 square kilometers with a population of 23 million, there are up to 171 legal and illegal radio stations on the air. The density is probably one of the highest in the world, especially for the news and talk format.

Nan Fang-shuo, a renowned political commentator in Taiwan, once described the underground radio stations as a new type of “radio-wave terrorism”; they spread “political ravings” and viciously incite hatred. The legitimate radio and television stations have followed this style as well. As the saying goes, “Bad money drives out good money.” Some famous talk show hosts have programs on both legal and illegal radio stations, further blurring the lines between the two media sectors and lowering standards across the board.



Commentary on Taiwan's radio stations can have a direct impact on politics. In 2007, for example, 11 candidates in the DPP primaries for legislative seats were targeted by underground radio hosts and labeled as "the eleven bandits." Most of them were outstanding young public servants with progressive ideas. Many of them belonged to the DPP's New Tide faction. But they were criticized for not actively supporting President Chen during large sustained street protests in 2006 (the "Red Shirt Army Incident"). Many members and supporters of the DPP were gravely influenced by these apparently biased accusations, and as a result, most of "the eleven bandits" failed in the primaries.

DPP leaders did sense the power of the underground radio stations, but chose not to resist their unhealthy tendencies and even made use of them not only to shape perceptions of party members and supporters, but also to influence government policy.

For example, during Frank Hsieh's and Su Tseng-chang's tenures as premier, when the DPP was in power during 2000-2008, the issue of loosening restrictions on investment in mainland China had been discussed many times, but resulted in no action due to resistance among party members. Some underground radio stations broadcast baseless anti-China propaganda which helped radicalize the DPP's grass-roots public opinions. DPP legislators felt the pressure and in turn did not support the government's plans to liberalize investment rules.

## **The Media and Ethnic Problems in Taiwan**

Ethnic tensions and the antagonism, between anti-independence "mainlanders" or *waishengren* (broadly speaking) and pro-independence "native Taiwanese" or *benshengren* (again, in general) and also including Hakka and aboriginal populations, constitute the most basic and intractable political problem in Taiwan today. The causes behind these issues are very complicated. Before the KMT was driven out of mainland China by communist forces in 1949, local Taiwanese experienced several clashes with the post-Japanese KMT leadership from the mainland that produced lasting resentment. For example, in 1947 the KMT violently suppressed anti-government protests in the "228 Incident." Since that time, hatred against the "mainlanders" has become deeply rooted in the minds of many Taiwan locals.

Then, in 1949, the KMT moved the ROC government to Taiwan after its defeat by the communists on the mainland. KMT leader Chiang Kai-shek established an autocracy in Taiwan, with himself as the supreme ruler. He and the rest of the ruling elite were almost all mainlanders, and they controlled every political and economic resource, such as government administration, lawmaking, the judicial system, the army, and state enterprises. The KMT monopolized the media and the educational and cultural systems, spreading a special pan-Chinese ideological mythology and suppressing the locals' ethnic identification. This was the background behind the rise of the Dangwai movement and

the alternative media. As a result, these media sources often expressed deep anger toward the government and mainlanders and reinforced tensions across Taiwan.

Why are provincial ethnic problems still so pervasive even after Taiwan's democratization? Political commentator Nan Fang-shuo has pointed out that these problems reflect historical political issues and are tied closely to social class perceptions that emerged decades ago but still persist today. With educational systems and the media under its control, the KMT indoctrinated Taiwan with a "Greater China" national consciousness, but Taiwan had been part of the Japanese Empire for the last 50 years and for the most part had been outside the Chinese polity. After taking over Taiwan, the KMT enforced Mandarin as the only national language, at the expense of Minnan/Hoklo/Taiwanese, Hakka, aboriginal languages, and the Japanese to which many had become accustomed. Mainlanders, who generally had a greater level of education, spoke Mandarin fluently and controlled the voice of media. The locals, meanwhile, had gone through a period of limited access to higher education under Japanese rule. Few Taiwanese could attend college during that time, with medical and agricultural schools as the exception, and many of those who did attend college did so in a Japanese environment. Therefore they were at a disadvantage in this new mainlander-ruled society. This led to a feeling of cultural superiority among those coming from the mainland, and caused the locals to feel deeply frustrated and upset.

Chi Chi, a famous local writer in Taiwan, recalled that she was the only "local" contributor when the best-selling literary magazine *The Crown* published its first list of writers in July, 1964. She subsequently met several senior writers who were mainlanders but who were not chosen by the magazine. She remembers that they would each give her a disdainful look and ask, "Where do you live in Taiwan?" They seemed to imply that a local should not be granted such an honor as to be published in the magazine. Chi Chi wrote that the experiences were so unpleasant that she would never forget them.

While Taiwanese culture has changed in many ways since then, history still plays an important role; many of the same cultural tensions of an earlier era persist today and are now driven by contemporary politics (put simply, the debate over independence vs. unification) as much as by history.

#### *From Free China to Formosa Magazine: demographic shifts and ethnic tensions*

The print media have played an important and evolving role in deepening the pro-independence vs. anti-independence divide in Taiwan. The goals of these publications have shifted markedly over time; a comparison of the early *Free China* publication and the later Dangwai magazines reveals this trend.

*Free China*, mentioned above, was a KMT-sponsored publication in the 1950s written by liberal intellectuals originally from the mainland. They supported Chiang Kai-shek in the early days after 1949, hoping that he would learn a lesson from his failure in mainland

China. When they realized that Chiang was practicing authoritarianism in the name of anti-communism, they began to turn against him, criticizing him and the KMT for human rights abuses and violations of the constitution. They also propagated the ideas of freedom and democracy. In 1960, *Free China* editor in chief Lei Chen formed a movement for a new “China Democratic Party.” He brought together a group of non-KMT mainland intellectual elites as well as local politicians like Lee Wan-chu, Kuo Yu-hsin, Kao Yu-shu, Yang Chi-hu, and Hsu Shih-hsien to champion the cause. But two days later, the Taiwan Garrison Command arrested Lei Chen and charged him with treason. His attempt to promote democracy through cooperation between mainlanders and locals ended in failure, and the hope of ethnic reconciliation was shattered. The provincial ethnic split continued to deepen.

*Free China* served as a spiritual guide to later Dangwai magazines such as *Taiwan Political Review*, *The Eighties*, and *Formosa Magazine*. But the methods, readership demographics, and opposition strategies changed dramatically with the newer magazines. The very names of the two magazines – *Free China* in the 1950s and *Formosa Magazine* in the late 1970s – revealed that the concerns of Taiwan’s intellectual elite had changed profoundly, turning away from the abstract perception of a greater China to the concrete perception of Taiwan as a unique entity. *Free China* was an intellectuals’ political beacon focused on criticizing the authorities; *Formosa Magazine* was aimed at winning over mass support for a rejection of mainlander authority. The readership of *Free China* comprised urban intellectuals, teachers, and civil servants, while *Formosa Magazine* was sold to the local middle class and grass roots leaders. The overwhelming majority of supporters of the DPP and pan-Green have always been locals or *benshengren*, giving an ethnic component to the contemporary political divide and mirroring the ethnic divisions created in the 1940s and 1950s. Elimination of these divisions within Taiwan’s society is urgently needed.

#### *The “China complex” and “Taiwan complex” in Taiwan’s television culture*

The contradictions between different cultural identities in Taiwan are deeply rooted in the long-standing unbalanced distribution of political and economic power, and have been symbolically described as a conflict between the “China complex” and the “Taiwan complex.” The most obvious embodiment of this conflict was Taiwan’s television industry and its culture.

For many years, the television industry was a combination of party, government, and military bureaucracy and private commercial interest groups. It had great power and financial resources, and even influenced the moral norms in Taiwanese society. According to media expert Lee Chin-chuan’s analysis, since Taiwan’s society and economy are capitalist, its television industry should tend to be profit-seeking and consumer-oriented. From a marketing point of view, programs in the local language and cultural context should be favored by local broadcasters (as is the case in Hong Kong, for example). But since the KMT government held to the ideology of a “Greater China,” it

would not tolerate localism. Older generations of locals would remember the hand puppet shows and Taiwanese operas they watched on television in their childhood; and when they saw these traditional Taiwanese puppet programs being performed on television in Mandarin, they hardly knew whether to laugh or cry.

Chinese cultural hegemony was seen frequently – and promoted – on television. For example, maids in television dramas always spoke Mandarin with a local accent, while the master or mistress would speak flawless Mandarin. Anchormen and women on news programs were mostly mainlanders whose mother tongue was Mandarin, and locals had few chances to work on television. Mainstream media did not pay much attention to local politicians if they couldn't express themselves fluently in Mandarin.

The tide turned during the presidencies of Lee Teng-hui and Chen Shui-bian (1988-2008). These two native Taiwanese heads of state actively promoted Taiwanese culture and identity, a natural step after the process of democratization. The Chinese ideological hegemony, which had ruled for 40 years, had become a symbol of exploitation and domination. So although authoritarian rule has disappeared, Chinese ideology is still seen as opposite to Taiwanese identity and has been constantly under attack by pro-Taiwanese forces. Thus, a contradiction has manifested itself in modern Taiwan where multiple cultures and advocates of open-mindedness coexist with exclusiveness and blatant closed-mindedness.

On the one hand, local dialects, history and culture are finally valued and respected; programs in the Minnan dialect have become staples on television, and Hakkas and aboriginal people have their own television stations as well. This can be seen as significant progress. On the other hand, however, the DPP government (2000-2008) made every effort to disparage and minimize Chinese consciousness and eliminate symbols and monuments representing Chinese culture. These actions have been described as “desinification,” and have led to a fierce confrontation between the pan-Blue and pan-Green blocs. Today, Taiwan's television news and political programs must take a clear stance – they are either pro-KMT or pro-DPP. Superficially, political standing on this issue is of utmost concern. Because of Taiwan's polarized polity, different stations appeal to separate segments of society—they are profit-seeking and consumer-oriented as Lee Chin-chuan predicted. This, however, serves also to reinforce the polarization in society.

Though Taiwan's political system has been democratized and power has been redistributed, we can see that powerful divisions are exploited and therefore reinforced through the media. Chinese traditions and the Mandarin language have become one of Taiwan's multiple cultures, but are widely discriminated against by “local” media outlets. If the media continue to emphasize historical scars and promote ethnic stereotypes, they will not help to integrate and unify the country.

## Relations between Media and Political Parties

### *The KMT as a media conglomerate*

During the period of martial law, the KMT held the power of life and death over public and private media. It controlled a media empire which owned *The Central Daily News*, *The China Daily News*, the Central News Agency, the Broadcasting Corporation of China, China Television, and the Central Motion Picture Corporation; these groups, in turn, were major shareholders of Taiwan Television (TTV) and Chinese Television System (CTS). In addition, publishers of the two major private newspapers, the *United Daily* and the *China Times*, were members of the KMT's Central Standing Committee. The KMT, we may say, was the only media conglomerate in Taiwan up to the early 1990s; it dominated voices all across the media.

But after the death of President Chiang Ching-kuo in 1988, factional power struggles erupted within the KMT, and its control of the media began to deteriorate. There was turbulence in the party from 1988 through 1993 and it split into a "mainstream" faction that stood behind Chiang's successor Lee Teng-hui, and the "non-mainstream" faction, which represented the conservative old-guard. The *United Daily* was a flag-waver for the non-mainstream faction, and was deeply involved in the struggle. Annoyed by its hostile comments, Lee's supporters initiated a "Say No to United Daily" movement, and severely reduced the newspaper's circulation. The newly created *Liberty Times* rose as a competitor by adopting successful marketing strategies, such as providing subscribers chances to draw lots for lavish prizes. It soon became a major newspaper. Lin Rong-san, the newspaper's owner and a senior KMT member, gave strong support to Lee Teng-hui. The *China Times* remained neutral. The market originally dominated by the two big newspapers now was divided among three, with the *Liberty Times* taking up the pro-local/pan-green end of the political spectrum, the *China Times* in the middle and the *United Daily* representing the pro-unification/dark-blue. This situation lasted until 2003, when the Hong Kong-based *Apple Daily*, a sensational but non-political newspaper, came to Taiwan and opened up a new era of competition.

### *The DPP and the media: from love to hate*

Members of the DPP briefly dabbled in media ownership before the major DPP victory in 2000. In 1989, when the newspaper ban was lifted, a senior member of the DPP named Kang Ning-hsiang founded *The Capital Morning Daily*, but the newspaper was closed a year later. In 1995, Trong Chai, another senior DPP member, gained the right to operate an independent over-the-air television station with secret support from Lee Teng-hui. After DPP candidate Chen Shui-bian won the presidency in 2000, however, DPP leaders decided the party would not run any media outlets. They promised to implement a policy of "party, state, and military withdrawal from the media." The public praised the DPP for this decision.

The Chen administration claimed that it would respect press freedom and it did—to an extent. But when the *China Times* and *Next Magazine* shocked the public by disclosing secret projects and funds of the National Security Bureau (NSB) in March 2001, the Bureau immediately took actions to confiscate copies of the publications and filed lawsuits against the paper and the magazine. The author of the news piece was then editor in chief of the *China Times*, and was a defendant in the legal case. President Chen ultimately supported the media, paraphrasing former U.S. president Thomas Jefferson and saying that he would choose media over government. The NSB later dropped its case, and President Chen decided to legalize the projects of the NSB and put its funds under proper supervision.

In spite of its support for media freedom in this instance, the DPP clashed with the media repeatedly. It also had clashes with the KMT on issues related to the media. The following is a list of some of the incidents:

- Early in the Chen administration in 2000, the authorities searched the *China Times Express* newsroom and arrested a Power News reporter. Vice President Annette Lu also filed an unprecedented lawsuit against weekly newspaper *The Journalist*.
- A direct clash with the KMT occurred in 2002 due to the allocation of government advertising budgets to media outlets. The DPP was criticized for using public funds to control the media.
- In 2004, the DPP confronted its leading antagonist in the media, the cable television network TVBS, over its ownership and the Chen administration threatened to cancel its license. This intimidation led to attacks on the DPP by a broad array of media outlets.
- Another clash erupted between the DPP and the KMT over the KMT's sale of its media outlets to private parties. The government took a series of administrative and judicial actions attempting to stop the transactions.

In short, after the lifting of martial law, political forces and parties in theory should have lost direct control of the media. But from the cases just mentioned, it is clear that all parties, and especially the ruling party at any given time (i.e., either the KMT or DPP) continued to seek to control the media. The KMT, which had dominated the media for decades, did not relinquish its hold on the media even after being voted out of power in 2000. The DPP pretended to support the separation of political parties and media, but actually used governmental resources to manipulate the media, or threatened them with judicial power.

### **The Effects of Market Competition**

After the transfer of political power in 2000, Taiwan's media enjoyed more freedom and openness, and became determined to resist what it saw as the interference of political forces; sometimes they have succeeded and sometimes not. But the professionalism and

credibility of the media have also been damaged by the fierce competition in the market and excessive commercialism. In Taiwan, the media have long been labeled as the “rumor, gossip, abuse and slaughter industry.” They are labeled as “mad dogs” in a democratic society. How did this happen? As described above, the seeds of today’s crisis were planted in the opening up of newspapers in the late 1980s and the advent of cable television in the mid-1990s, which proved to be a chaotic process.

In the case of print media, the two big newspapers persuaded the government to lift all restrictions without setting up effective rules to promote a healthy market. While mainstream newspapers engaged in marketing warfare, they also used news reports and commentaries as weapons in political struggles in order to attract readers. They ignored the public interest and eventually lost their image of professionalism and independence. A similar situation occurred in cable television: the government was forced to open up the market without consideration of market scale. Therefore, while Taiwan only has a population of 23 million, it has more than 100 over-the-air and cable television channels, including about ten 24-hour news channels. This is a market completely open to competition, with few restrictions and guidelines. As a result, with more than 100 networks desperate to improve their ratings, quality is very uneven and competition is fierce. This equation is a loss to society as a whole, and is a detriment to the quality of democracy in Taiwan.

An example of this was the television reporting during the 2004 presidential election, in which various stations reported inflated vote counts. The polls were closed at 4:00 pm on March 20, and the results slowly began to be released. At about 4:20 pm, the figures from the poll results of the Central Election Committee (CEC) were still just in the hundreds of votes, yet tallies shown on television news channels competing to catch the eyes of the audiences had passed the 1 million mark. By 4:50, some of them even passed 5 million. Due to the news channels’ manipulations, many citizens did not trust the results presented by the CEC later that night and thus they were open to suggestions by KMT candidate Lien Chan to his supporters to protest the exceedingly close election result and encircle the Presidential Office; the resulting mass rallies lasted for several weeks and the cost to society was enormous. The media acted irresponsibly at first by sowing seeds of discontent—through their manipulation of poll results—and then exacerbated the situation with continuous live reporting of the demonstrations. They were unwilling to play the role of an honest broker as election results were sorted out.

### **The Role of the Media in the 2008 Election**

Since the lifting of martial law in 1986, Taiwan’s media community has gone through three general stages: freedom, commercialization, and overly zealous competition. Adapting to freedom of the press began in the early 1990s. By the end of the decade, the media had reached the stage of commercialization. Following the election in the year 2000, the period of overly zealous competition began. The uncontrolled growth of the media industry is a result of the early stages of development, and a cause of the later

stage. In 1995, Taiwan only had several tens of television stations and newspapers; in 2008, there were hundreds. Given that Taiwan's total advertising market is only of the scale of several tens of billions of Taiwan dollars (US\$1=NT\$33), the ensuing super competition resulted in the media moving toward extremes, satisfying popular whims, and getting deeply involved in the political battles between the two sides. Thus the media in general became an accomplice in the polarization of society. This was already beginning to surface in the 2004 election. By the time of 2008 election, the media had split into two distinct opposing camps.

The political biases of television stations were very obvious in the 2008 election. Formosa Television (FTV or Min Shih) supported the DPP and CTV (Chung Shih) supported the KMT, as they had done before. Taiwan Television (TTV or Tai Shih) and CTS (Hwa Shih), which were originally government owned, had turned their support from the KMT to the DPP in the 2004 election, and in 2008 switched to a neutral stance following the former converting to private hands and the latter becoming publicly owned. Amongst the cable and satellite television stations, SET (Sanlih) continued to support the DPP. TVBS, CtiTV (Chung Tien), ERA (Nian Dai) continued to support the KMT. However, the originally neutral ETTV (Tung Sun) turned to support the KMT. The two sides concentrated on intense ratings and advertising battles with each other, disregarding the public interest.

In the newsprint arena, there was also some change. Amongst the big four newspapers the *Liberty Times* supported the DDP and the *United Daily*, supported the KMT as before. The *China Times* evolved from mild KMT support to strong KMT support, and the *Apple Daily* also shifted from neutral to supporting Ma. Amongst the periodicals, aside from Business Week, Commonwealth (Tien Hsin), and Global Views (Yuan Jian) which continued to support the KMT, Tsai Hsin and Today weekly also joined in supporting the KMT. From the shift of support of television, newspapers, and periodicals, one can see that in the 2008 election, the mainstream media gave increased support to the KMT candidate Ma compared to four years ago. This was on the one hand due to Ma's better image and attractiveness, but on the other hand it was due also to the poor eight-year record of the DPP's Chen Shui-bian. However, one could also see that in Taiwan party lines were very clear; very few media organizations remained neutral.

In the internet world, with its unlimited boundaries, combat between KMT and DDP forces was equally intense. In the 2004 election, the internet was not yet an important medium in Taiwan. Even though the DDP invested heavily in internet groups, internet users were more interested in discussing the true facts of the March 19, 2004 assassination attempt on President Chen and Vice President Annette Lu rather than the campaign itself. In 2008, the internet had evolved from an insignificant medium to a major information highway that was open to the general public. As there was enlarged capacity and, in addition, A continuous stream of scandals from Chen Shui-bian and his family and advisers, the internet community was full of attacks on Chen. In fact its support of Ma was the strongest of the media sectors.



Among radio stations, there was not much change in editorial stance or political support compared to prior to the lifting of martial law. Several of the stations with large followings such as BCC, UFO Radio, and News98 all supported Ma, while many more small and underground stations supported the DDP; though there were only a small number of stations supporting the KMT, they were much larger and more influential than those supporting the DDP.<sup>7</sup>

Several underground radio stations played a major role in an especially ugly incident in the 2008 campaign. A novel published in 2006, *"The Assassination of Ma"* predicted that the presidential candidate Ma Ying-jeou would be shot three times when campaigning in Kaohsiung on the last Saturday of 2008, and at the end of 2007, Taiwan TV reported that a famous American commentator predicted Ma would be assassinated. These imaginary claims and rumors were widely discussed in the media, and their validity was rarely questioned. They were reported purely to increase circulation. Other eye-catching news and commentary, such as "if Ma gets elected, Taiwan will be sold out" (to China); or "if the DPP is reelected, war will break out across the Taiwan Strait," were also often promoted, leaving citizens with little objective information or perspective on which to base their opinions.

Generally, Taiwan's media quality did not improve along with the arrival of press freedom. To the contrary, its performance became increasingly poor under the environment of free market competition and serious political conflict to the extent of becoming a proxy for the political parties.

### **How Can Taiwan Cope with the Current Disorientation of the Media?**

There is no doubt that the performance of the media in Taiwan's transition to democracy has been disappointing. However, how does one critique the development of the media in a democracy that is only 20 years old? Perhaps America's experience can be a comparison. The U.S. media certainly had a long period of development with both ups and downs. The type of sensational political reporting currently seen in Taiwan has also occurred in the U.S.: the Hearst Group and the Pulitzer Group affected U.S. policy toward Cuba in 1898, for example, and played an important role in President William McKinley's decision to declare war on Spain.

Around the beginning of the 20th century, journalism in the U.S. became a more professional field, following occupations like medical doctors, lawyers, and teachers.

---

<sup>7</sup> An interesting development is that a number of pro-DPP television and radio stations were deeply involved in the party's presidential primary. SET (San Lih) was a strong supporter of the eventual DPP candidate, Frank Hsieh, while FTV (Min Shih) supported Yu Shyi-Kun; other stations mostly stood on the sideline. This phenomenon perhaps reflects the heritage of Dangwai factions in the pro-DPP media noted earlier.

How did this happen? An important development was the establishment of formal training programs for journalists. According to Robert McChesney, professor of communication at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, “Savvy publishers understood that they needed to have their journalism appear neutral and unbiased—notions entirely foreign to the journalism of the republic’s first century—or their businesses would be far less profitable. They would sacrifice their explicit political power to lock in their economic position. Publishers pushed for the establishment of formal schools of journalism to train a cadre of professional editors and reporters. None of these schools existed in 1900; by 1920, all the major schools such as Columbia, Northwestern, Missouri, and Indiana were in full swing.”<sup>8</sup>

Self-organized professional societies also began to appear, such as the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE), which was established in 1923 ostensibly to “protect the purity” of the editors from the influence of politics and business (via the publishers). Newspaper publishers were represented by the American Newspaper Publishers Association (ANPA). Journalists were supposed to follow the professional codes of ethics formulated by the ANPA. However, McChesney notes, “of course, this was never a formal contract; journalistic autonomy existed purely at the whim of publishers, who still held all the legal and economic power.”

In Taiwan, training for journalism at the college level has been in existence for over 50 years, and over seventy institutions of higher learning offer journalism and media-related courses. Every year, more than ten thousand students receive bachelors, masters, or doctoral degrees in journalism. However, media professionals frequently complain that journalism education in these institutions is too theoretical and that new graduates freshly out of school often do not know anything about the practical operation of the media. But in return, journalism education establishments have criticized the performance of the media—if not altogether denying the value of the media in society, in its current environment. Negative public perceptions of the media have increased to the point that many people attribute Taiwan’s current disorderly politics almost entirely to the media.

Taiwan’s main media oversight organizations also have been established for many years, but until recently engaged in practices close to censorship. The earliest organization, called the National Press Council of the R.O.C., was established in the 1950s. While it claimed it was an independent organization, it actually conducted examinations of the media that were essentially precursors to censorship. With the arrival of democracy in Taiwan and the reduction of government interference in the media, the National Press Council of the R.O.C. was reorganized in 2001 as “The National Press Self-Governing Council of the R.O.C.” Its membership included the cream of the crop from Taiwan’s media industry, including television and newspaper journalists. It was referred to as a “media boss club,” and was in fact not terrifically focused on journalistic

---

<sup>8</sup> Robert W. McChesney, “Journalism, Democracy, . . . and Class Struggle,” *Monthly Review*, Vol. 52, No. 6 (November 2000), <http://www.monthlyreview.org/1100rwm.htm>; accessed July 10, 2009.

codes of ethics or the development of professionalism. The National Press Self-Governing Council of the R.O.C still exists, but its impact on the media is hard to see.

The most important organization for professional journalists is the Association of Taiwan Journalists (ATJ), which was established in 1995. It advocates “obtaining press freedom, improving professional standards, and protecting the independence of journalists.” While these objectives are in alignment with the needs of society, the organization has not been able to obtain the support of publishers, which reduces its ultimate effectiveness.

In short, the problem with the media in Taiwan is that there has not been much time – only 20 years of fewer – for professional journalism to develop in the new democratic atmosphere. There are no doubt many ways in which Taiwan can benefit from America’s experience as time goes on.

In his book, *The Problem of the Media*, Robert McChesney writes that “A democratic media system—or a democratic solution to the problem of the media—would necessitate a large, well-funded, structurally pluralistic, and diverse nonprofit and noncommercial media sector, as well as a more competitive and decentralized commercial sector.”<sup>9</sup> His general thesis is impossible to disagree with, but it might be too idealistic.

In Taiwan, many have recognized the need for a healthy public television system. As early as the 1980s, Taiwan’s government began developing plans to create a public television station. After more than 10 years of preparation, the Taiwan Public Television Service (PTS) began operating, but the organization’s budget and manpower were insufficient. From 1999 through 2007, public interest groups constantly lobbied the government to expand the public service. In 2006, PTS merged with the previously government-owned Chinese Television System (CTS) and formed the Taiwan Broadcasting System (TBS). In January of 2007, three other television channels (Hakka TV, Indigenous TV, and Taiwan Macroview TV) joined the group. TBS had a yearly budget of NT\$4 billion (about US\$130 million), which included commercials, sponsorship, and donations. Compared with its counterparts in Western Europe, Japan, South Korea and Australia, however, TBS is still in its infancy; its scale and impact are very limited.

In order to improve Taiwan's media environment, a first step would be to emphasize transparency, which eventually might lead to a new order for the industry. A database of the many variables related to the media and its economic/business model, such as sales volumes of newspapers and magazines, TV viewer ratings, advertising rates and volumes, should be established and maintained. These data are fundamental, but currently are not often available to the public. Media outlets should be required to disclose this information to the public. The data could be used by an independent non-partisan agency,

---

<sup>9</sup> Robert W. McChesney, *The Problem of the Media: U.S. Communication Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, Monthly Review Press, 2004.

like the NCC, to provide the public and educational establishments with the means to analyze and monitor media behavior.

In such a system, the media would establish another organization to jointly decide what kind of data and ratings would be used by the industry. The organization should require that media outlets pay into an “industry fund” to finance important works for common interests, such as further training of personnel, self-regulation and quality enhancement. This is a first step toward Taiwan’s media becoming a respectable and profitable industry of high quality—an indispensable element of a democratic society.

## **Conclusion**

The relationship between the media and democratization is an important yet mysterious issue. The media is not the only factor in explaining the current contentious state of Taiwan's democracy and politics, but it plays a key role.

During the 38-year martial law era, the KMT practiced authoritarian rule—suppressing dissidents, dominating all resources, and setting the norms of morality. It deprived people of the right to participate in politics and silenced the critical voice of the media. This was the background behind the rise and development of Taiwan’s guerrilla media.

The alternative media played an important role in the history of Taiwan's democratization, ultimately breaking the ban on new newspapers and publicly challenging authority. Yet the liberalization of the media has not improved the industry’s performance, and has not benefitted Taiwan’s democratic consolidation. Taiwan’s media became unprincipled and untrustworthy because of its involvement in political struggles and the fierce competition in the marketplace, and effective and respected oversight mechanisms are not in place. The public interest became the main loser.

In a normal democratic environment, the media should be a self-disciplined body without outside intervention. But past experiences tell us that when professional norms collide with commercial demands, the latter usually wins out. To achieve self-discipline, the media requires institutionalized complementary control measures. Carefully designed rules to inform the public of the role of the media must be established so that players can follow the rules and compete fairly with each other in the market, yet also conform to the public interest and serve democracy.