



Media Reform in South Korea and Taiwan: Progress and Obstacles

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Freedom of the press undoubtedly is one of the pillars of a modern democratic state. Economic and political pressures are often cited as the prime obstacles to a free media environment. With democratisation these negative factors are believed to be minimised to such an extent that media outlets reflect the opinion of the majority of people. However, even in countries that are generally considered democratic there seems to be a discrepancy between the ideal situation and reality. Silvio Berlusconi's media and money driven campaign to wipe out anything that has to do with a free and fair media environment in Italy is a good example here. His counterpart Thaksin Shinawatra follows his steps closely in Thailand, one of South East Asia's new democracies. While the situation in these two nation-states can be described as going from bad to worse, things seem to be different in East Asia. Over the last two decades, South Korea and Taiwan emerged as the region's most vibrant democracies. Both countries officially abandoned authoritarianism in 1987. The number of newspapers and magazines increased significantly in the following years. New radio and television stations went into operation. International organisations, such as Freedom House, consider the media in these countries to be "free." Nevertheless, civil groups and political leaders would like to see some reforms that would eventually lead to an even freer media environment.

South Korea

June 1987 was a turning point in South Korea's political development: Over a million people took part in the "grand peace march" of June 26 forcing the Chun regime to accept an 8-point democratisation package, which also called for active promotion of press freedom, that is total autonomy of Korea's media from state interference. Meeting the requests of a powerful opposition movement, the government began to refrain from direct political interference and subsequent media policies led to a liberalisation and deregulation of Korea's media. Despite these efforts pro-democracy activists demanded further reforms in response to several harmful changes in Korea's media environment. Seoul National University professor Seung-Mock Yang says that there have

been three major trends in the 1990s leading to a less free media in Korea and causing concerns among progressive intellectuals:

First, political institutions that controlled the media during the period of military dictatorship have been rapidly replaced by capital. Although the media had been freed from government intervention, in many ways it still bore the imprint of the authoritarian era: concentrated ownership, an opaque style of management, and association with vested interests that stood to lose from political reforms urged by progressives. Consequently, the slogan of the press reform movement shifted from “freedom from the government” to “freedom from proprietors.”

Second, the global trend of media-centred election campaigning has also reached South Korea. Although the usage of mass media by political parties and candidates is severely restricted during the election campaign period, mass media itself has turned out to play a decisive role in determining election outcomes. This political media warfare is entirely controlled by South Korea’s largest daily newspapers: the *Chosun Ilbo*, *Joong An Ilbo* and the *Dong-a Ilbo*. These three media outlets mainly represent conservative interests. Korean media experts and other intellectuals refer to them as the “unelected power.”

Third, the liberalisation of the Korean media led to a sharp decline in quality due to severe market competition. Media experts and civil groups have frequently criticised the Korean media for its sensationalism and commercialism. Various movements such as the 1993 “turn off your TV” initiative have been the consequences.

When Kim Dae-Jung was elected president in 1997, Korea not only entered a new stage in its democratisation process (since it was for the first time that an opposition candidate had been elected president) but also entered a new era of media reform. The amendment of the Broadcasting Act at the beginning of 2000 was widely considered a significant step towards a freer media environment. The amendments drastically reduced the government’s direct influence on Korea’s broadcasting media. The media reform movement, led by progressive civic groups and journalists’ associations, saw in the newspaper monopoly (about 65 percent) of the big three dailies a major threat to a free media environment and asked the government to address this issue. Supporters of the movement argued that the three dailies gained their market position due to unfair business practises, and that a monopolisation of the print media is counterproductive to the establishment of a free Korean media environment. Kim Dae-Jung’s government noticed that the only meaningful way to reduce the influence of the “Big Three” was to ask the Fair Trade Commission

(FTC) and the National Tax Service (NTS) to look into the financial transactions of Korea's media outlets. In June 2001, these government agencies released the findings of their investigations. The owners and executives of the Three Big were subsequently detained and indicted for tax evasion and embezzlement. The government's tax audit strategy widened the gap between the progressive and conservative camps. The first saw in the tax audit the first step towards a less corrupt and politically controlled media; the latter considered the government's strategy as a politically motivated crackdown.

Taiwan

Liberalisation brought about a sharp increase in the number of media outlets and increased competition to such an extent that the quality of Taiwan's media reporting could be described as going from bad to worse. Although media observers have criticised Taiwan's media for its sensationalism and commercialism, Taiwan's media has so far failed to be self-critical and to set guidelines for its media industry. The absurdity and primitiveness of Taiwan's media industry can be best illustrated by referring to two cases that made headlines and big profits in Taiwan. The first case happened in 1997, when Pai Hsiao-yen, the only child of popular TV host and actress Pai Ping-ping, was kidnapped. The kidnappers demanded a US\$ 5 million ransom. Pai Ping-ping was informed about the drop-off location. However, the kidnappers did not show up, since Pai Ping-ping had been followed by local media. She obviously thought to be in the midst of producing another episode of her rather absurd soap opera, and by doing so endangering the life of her daughter. Although several drop-off locations were subsequently made known to Pai, the kidnappers never showed up. They were probably aware of the presence of media reporters. At the end of April that year, Pai Hsiao-yen's body was finally found in a ditch. The whole case became a real Taiwan-style soap opera, when one of the three kidnappers was surrounded by police and he ended up singing the children's song "Two Tigers" with a TV anchorman. A more recent case is a weekly magazine's free VCD featuring a popular politician while having sex with her lover. The magazine thought it to be a marvelous idea to install secretly a wireless camera in the politician's apartment and let the public see what politicians do in their free time. Taiwan is a democracy after all. This is press freedom in action. One of Taiwan's once most respected weekly magazine, the Journalist, thought it to be worthwhile claiming that the incumbent vice-president had made a phone call to the magazine gossiping that the president had had an extramarital affair. The court found that the opposite was true.

The irresponsibility and sensationalism of Taiwan's media could also

be seen during the outbreak of the Chinese pneumonia (SARS), when newspapers frequently reported about SARS cases in companies, residential areas and public buildings. It was proved later that the reports were faked by journalists causing severe damage to businesses and problems to individuals. The quality of the media was one of the prime concerns of the Government Information Office when its director announced plans to set up a media review committee that would evaluate the content of media reports and publish the results periodically. The opposition and the media industry claimed that the government's plans would mean censorship. As a matter of fact the agency's proposal never mentioned any sanctions or other regulatory measures if media outlets failed to comply with certain standards. The proposed committee should have been a watchdog only. Numerous debates followed. The media industry carefully misled the public into believing that the proposed committee would de-facto be a media control institution exercising the right of censor. The president finally intervened by saying that Taiwan would need a media watchdog to ensure the quality of media reports, but that such an institution should not be under the control of the government. It will, however, be difficult to set up such a privately funded watchdog organization. Thus, no quality control in sight.

Incumbent president Chen Shui-bian of the Democratic Progressive Party has since his inauguration in Mai 2000 focused on a media reform. But his major concern has always been the media's independence from politics rather than its quality. Maybe he noticed that the first would be easier to achieve than the latter. Several organizations, such as the Democratic Cable Television Alliance, often complained, however, that the reform process was too slow. At the beginning of this year, the ruling party made public its draft of several amendments to Taiwan's media laws. The new laws should prevent public and party officials from holding positions in TV and radio stations. Moreover, it should also make it illegal for them to own shares of any company related to Taiwan's broadcasting media. According to government statistics, more than sixty leading parliamentarians and chief executives of local governments have senior management positions in either radio or television stations. All parties would be affected by the new laws. To show its sincerity, the ruling party demanded its members to either resign from positions held in Taiwan's broadcasting media or quit their job as legislators. The reform proposed by the ruling party was supported by the opposition and several public officials decided to give up management positions in the media industry. The amendments can be seen as a positive development in Taiwan's media industry—maybe the only one in recent years.

The media reform in Taiwan differs from the South Korean one in several ways:

- a) There is no united and strong enough media reform movement to cause changes in Taiwan's media industry. While in South Korea the media reform movement has been supported by various types of organizations including such run by journalists, the movement has been highly segmented and not supported by the public because people in general do not think that Taiwan's media industry lacks professionalism and standards.
- b) President Kim of South Korea targeted the country's largest newspapers in an attempt to minimize their influence on Korean politics. In Taiwan, the role of politicians in the media industry was questioned and subsequently became the target of a media reform there.
- c) A consensus was found between the ruling party and the opposition on amendments to Taiwan's media laws; whereas in South Korea the media reform widened the gap between the progressive and the conservative camps.

In both countries a similar problem occurred in the reform process, the government was confronted with the rather awkward situation that conservative groups saw in the government's attempts a violation of press freedom. This poses the question whether governments in newly democratized countries have no choice but let media be controlled by market forces only.

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