

Taiwan

All politics, no privacy

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In the scramble to outdo the competition, one Taiwanese television station recently reported on an alleged case of wife swapping. It solved the problem of having no available footage by broadcasting scenes from an illegal pornographic VCD, with the helpful label 'simulation' overlaid. In a recent news report on a police crackdown on 'girlie' bars another television station gave over six full minutes of air time to the opinions of the establishment's 'public relations ladies', the camera scanning their bare thighs and skimpy tops. So fierce is the battle for viewers, and the accompanying advertising revenue, in Taiwan's crowded television market that it seems there is no limit to the violence, sex, drama or gore. Television cameras have taken to following suspects into police interrogation rooms and accident victims into emergency surgery in hospitals; often resulting in distressingly detailed coverage of brutal or bloody scenes. 'Privacy, what is this?', lamented a Taipei-based journalist. 'I mean people are being filmed in the last moments of their lives while doctors are giving them heart massage, with no permission from anyone.'

In its March 1999 annual report the US-based Committee for the Protection of Journalists concluded that Taiwan boasted the freest press environment in Asia. Twelve years after the lifting of the draconian press restrictions of martial law, newspapers, radio and television stations and magazines are booming in an often raucous media industry. The democratisation of politics is reflected in the democratisation of the media, with radio talk back shows offering new opportunities for ordinary people to have their views heard, as well as directly question members of their government on air. The scrapping of the last of the press laws in 1999, the Publication Law, means anyone in Taiwan can own or publish newspapers

or magazines. There are no limits on foreign ownership in the media, nor is there any form of censorship.

But, at the same time there are signs which suggest freedom of expression is still curtailed by the highly politicised ownership structure of much of the media and by the business interests of media owners themselves. The mere expansion of the number of media outlets does not necessarily imply a positive trend in the industry. So oversupplied have parts of the industry become that competition has pushed the media into a downward spiral of sensationalism and voyeurism. In the race to be first, accuracy and professionalism are being sacrificed, particularly in the popular live-to-air broadcasts in which reporters are on-the-spot without the means to check the facts they are presenting as truth. To protect certain sensitive state information from the voracious appetite of the media, the government is now considering an official secrets act, in the spirit of the controls of the past. Journalists, on the other hand, are campaigning for a freedom of information act as a balance. At the same time the first independent media organisation has been formed and, although it represents a minority of Taiwan's journalists, work is underway on voluntary codes of ethics and standards of professionalism.

Martial law: China's other dictators

In almost half a century under martial law Taiwan's citizens learned to read the fine print. The government issued only 32 newspaper licences nationwide and restricted each publication to between four and twelve pages; thus forcing editors to employ the smallest possible typefaces. Radio, too, was strictly controlled, with frequencies reserved for military and official use, and licences restricted to government agencies or the ruling party. While there was no official limit on the number of magazine licences, new magazines were required to demonstrate that they were promoting the national interest. Operating under these vague guidelines, many magazines were later banned or had specific issues confiscated in lightning swoops by security officials. So too were a number of editors, publishers, writers and printers arrested and jailed on the same grounds. Even more disturbing was the use of journalists by the feared secret police to collect intelligence from within the media; a practice which strained relations between the press and the underground opposition.

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Taiwan was ruled under a martial law decree imposed by the Kuomintang (KMT), or the Nationalist Party of China, from 1949, led by Chiang Kai-shek and his son, Ching-kuo. Chiang, his army and his supporters had fled mainland China after losing the civil war to the forces of the Chinese Communist Party. Arriving on the offshore island, formerly known as Formosa, Chiang suspended civil freedoms and imposed severe restrictions on the press. Taiwan had enjoyed a brief period of freedom with the end of half a century of Japanese colonialism in 1945, but a new authoritarian regime was building in its wake. In the late 1940s and early 1950s Taiwan endured the ‘white terror’ purge of left-wing dissidents and suspected communists or communist sympathisers as the Chiang regime established its dictatorship in direct opposition to the communist victors on the mainland. The last liberal media outlet, the *Free China Review* biweekly, was finally closed down in 1960 after the arrest of its founder, Lei Chen. Lei was himself a senior member of the KMT and had attempted to bring liberal mainland Chinese and local politicians into a China Democratic Party. But, for all its anti-communist rhetoric, the Chiang regime was setting up an authoritarian state—despite his ideological commitment to free market capitalism—employing many of the same political controls used by his communist enemies.

During the martial law period the media was virtually entirely owned and controlled by the KMT, and its allies in the armed forces. The dominant *Central Daily News* was operated by the party itself, and other key publications, such as the *China Times* and the *United Daily News* were each owned by a member of the KMT central standing committee. The only daily newspaper which was relatively independent of the KMT was the non-partisan *Independent Evening Post*, which was operated by a Taiwanese textile group. Only three television stations were permitted

- Taiwan Television, established in 1962 by the Taiwan Provincial Government, which held 49 per cent ownership with the KMT holding 12 per cent
- China Television, established in 1969 with the KMT holding 68 per cent of the shares
- China Television System, opened in 1971 with the Ministry of National Defence holding 76 per cent of its stock and the Ministry of Education, 10 per cent.

Such an ownership pattern served as an effective back-up to restrictive media laws.

With the airwaves virtually owned or controlled by the KMT and their political supporters, the media produced blatantly slanted news programs, serving largely as a propaganda tool for the power élite.

Taiwan's closed political system, however, was increasingly challenged as rapid and successful industrialisation built a better-educated middle class. In the 1950s Taiwan was a poor, agrarian-based society of farmers with little education. By the 1970s, aggressive industrialisation policies had propelled the island state into the ranks of East Asia's economic tigers, alongside South Korea and Singapore. With education and affluence came new pressures for information and openness.

While the government-approved media remained in the hands of the ruling party, the loophole in the restrictions on new magazines was exploited to the limit by opposition activists. Members of the Tangwai movement, a grass roots opposition movement which defined itself outside the all-pervasive KMT, published a whole range of magazines. Most survived only for a couple of editions before being banned, but they served their purpose nonetheless. In the politically turbulent years between 1979 and 1982, 23 out of 28 opposition-linked magazines were shut down. Among the best known of the dissident publications were the monthly magazines, *Taiwan Political Review* (1975), *China Tide* (1976–79), *Our Generation* (1977–79), *The Eighties* and its sister publication, *The Asian* (1979–mid 1980s) and *Formosa* (September to December, 1979). *Formosa* served as the focus for an attempt by opposition figures to form an opposition political group, without specifically breaching martial law regulations banning new political parties. After a major human rights rally in southern Taiwan erupted into a riot, probably due to provocation by the security forces, most of *Formosa's* key staff were arrested in a nationwide crackdown. Eight opposition leaders were sentenced to 15 years in jail for sedition. Many have since been elected as legislators.

In mid 1987 martial law was finally lifted. Chiang Kai-shek was old and ill, and his system of controls overtaken by economic prosperity. In January the next year he died. The lifting of the martial law decree immediately sparked dramatic growth in all sectors of the media. A virtual storm of press exposés of previously taboo issues followed as the

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frustrations, which had built under authoritarian rule, were unleashed. From the limit of 32 dry 12-page newspapers of the past, emerged scores of new dailies, with 367 being published in 1999. Magazines boomed, from almost 1,500 in the early 1970s to close to 6,000 today. Radio stations leaped from 33 to 80 and by the end of 1999 there were 140 cable and satellite TV operators in the market (see tables opposite).

The stranglehold of the KMT declined sharply as new private owners entered the media industry. Directly KMT-owned and managed media outlets fell into an apparently irreversible decline as consumers rejected the newspapers which had served as propaganda mouthpieces. The *China Times* and the *United Daily News*, once controlled by senior KMT members, distanced themselves from party politics to compete with the new market leader, the privately owned *Liberty Times*. However, direct control has been replaced by more subtle political influence. In 1999, the KMT still ruled Taiwan through a multi-party democracy. As such, the main newspapers continued to play an important role in bolstering the government and individual newspapers had aligned themselves with factions within the KMT or the opposition. The result is a press with little pretence to balance, consumed by a public which expects political pressure behind the scenes. 'To get all sides of the story you really have to buy all the newspapers', is a common observation.

In local free-to-air television the power of the KMT is still considerable. It continues to control three of the four wireless TV stations, TTV, CTS and CTV. Appointments to these stations are usually politically motivated and executives often have little professional experience of broadcasting. Numerous surveys of television coverage of election campaigns have shown that the KMT still receives the lion's share of air time; in quality, editorial slant and quantity. The only exception in the TV sector is the Formosa Television Network (FTN), which was formed in 1997 after the Government Information Office granted a fourth wireless TV licence to a consortium led by opposition politicians. Predictably, FTN has been accused of favouring the opposition but the public has also complained that Formosa is not sufficiently anti-KMT, demonstrating that expectations of political interference in the media continue.

The political control of the management of Taiwan's four television stations points to a serious problem for press freedom, regardless of the recent entry of the opposition into the sector. Television is entirely

Media growth in Taiwan, 1950s–1999

Number of newspapers increased ten-fold, 1954–99

	<i>Number of newspapers</i>	<i>Pages per issue</i>
1954–87	31	4–8–12
1988	123	32–40
1989	196	as above
1990	212	as above
1994	303	as above
1998	357	as above
Jan 1999	367	as above

Magazines grew 40 per cent in ten years

	<i>Number of magazines</i>
1951	157
1971	1478
1981	2244
1989	4242
1994	5225
1999	5975

Number of radio stations more than doubled

	<i>Number of radio stations</i>
1950–93	33 total (of which) 20 privately owned 12 state owned 1 KMT owned
Jan 1999	80 (another 65 under construction)

Cable and satellite TV service providers joined the market

	<i>Over the air</i>	<i>Cable TV</i>	<i>Satellite TV</i>
1962	1	0	0
1969	2	0	0
1971	3	0	0
1993	3	Cable TV law passed	
1997	4	~ 140	~ 100
Jan 1999	5	~ 140	~ 100

Note: ~ means approximately.

Source: Government Information Office, Taiwan, ROC.

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controlled by political parties, meaning programming cannot be neutral, nor news and current affairs coverage free from political influence. The major newspapers have adopted clearer editorial positions aligning themselves with political interests and have taken up the interests of different KMT factions in recent years. Under martial law the island's main newsagency, the Central News Agency, was directly controlled by the KMT. It is owned and operated by the KMT to this day. A 1993 survey of readers by National Chengchi University Professor, Huang The-fu, concluded that there this an obvious political identification of readers with individual newspapers, reflecting the political stance of the newspapers. Balance then, can only be discussed in a wider context, in that alternative media outlets now exist, meaning people have a choice to switch off the KMT.

There is also the issue of business influence. Commentators are concerned that the press can be used to promote the commercial interests of its owners directly. In the years of the post-martial law period, the media was filled with dramatic exposés of the former regime, particularly human rights abuses of the Chiang era. Nowadays, business and financial magazines are becoming more and more popular and make up about one-fifth of all publications. Two of the most popular current affairs magazines which had their roots in political commentary—*The Journalist* and *The Global View*—recently announced they would increase their financial and business coverage.

The sources of pressure on journalists to restrict or distort news coverage have now shifted from the heavy-handed influence of the KMT regime to a more subtle mix of both political and economic influences, often combining the purchases of newspapers of other media outlets by politically ambitious leaders of conglomerates, or by the formation of media conglomerates. One consequence is that the quality of news coverage and professional and ethical standards of reporters has come under intense social criticism (senior Taiwanese journalist, Cheryl Lai Shou-lu, 1995).

So much TV, so little news

From the rubble of the tragic 1999 earthquake which killed hundreds of Taiwanese and razed vast swathes of buildings, a small child was plucked.

As in so many tragedies of this scale, this was the miracle people were looking for, that tiny ray of hope in a sea of death and destruction—that magic story for television executives. But as rescue workers pulled him into the open, a swarm of television cameras crushed so forcefully around the boy that he was almost buried again in panic. So disturbing were the images of the media swarm that the Taiwanese government strongly criticised the television coverage of the earthquake. Beyond the real threat to the fragile, little survivor was the reality that television crews were reaching sites ahead of rescue teams and broadcasting live the graphic, gory scenes, with no thoughts of the distress of relatives, the rights of the victims themselves or the impediments they were creating for emergency services. Television stations slammed the government's slow response in reaching the victims, however journalists privately conceded that they did get in the way of legitimate emergency efforts. So shocked were the cable TV operators by the incident that they agreed, for the first time ever, to form pool television crews and to share footage, so that fewer cameras would be on the spot.

The earthquake coverage marked a peak in a rising trend of sensationalism in the media, particularly on television. With party political interests dominating local free-to-air stations, more and more Taiwanese have been turning to cable television, seriously threatening the influence of the local broadcasters. More than 70 cable channels are offered by 140 providers around the island including NHK from Japan, HBO, CNN, Disney, as well as sports, home shopping services, music video channels and talk shows. According to an AC Nielsen survey, cable television subscriptions had reached 79.1 per cent of households by 1998, the highest rate of cable TV viewing in Asia. Recently changes legalising satellite dish receivers have also opened up the way for direct satellite broadcasts.

Of the cable channels four are devoted entirely to news, down from a peak of eight, in a nation of only 22 million people. The local cable TV news operators are attempting to copy a CNN-type 24-hour news format. These news services, however, mainly cover local news which, in itself, is unlikely to provide sufficient material for endless news broadcasts. Increasingly, crimes, fires, gang conflicts, sex, violence and drugs are making TV headlines. President, Lee Teng-hui, recently lamented that the obsession with crime in the cable TV evening news bulletins could have a negative influence on the young generation. But, with so much TV for so

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few viewers, sensationalism is seen as the commercial formula which will attract the largest slice of the market.

Another recent trend has been the introduction of spot-news gathering using satellite technology. This means more and more news is being transmitted unedited live from the scenes of various accidents and disasters. As we know from similar broadcasts in the west, reporters are often underprepared or simply do not know what is happening. As such, this type of reporting frequently features stunned looking journalists discussing conjecture and rumours on air as though they were facts, abandoning the basic journalistic principle of verifying news first. Fires, in particular, are getting more and more air time, simply because they make good pictures. Serious news is being pushed further and further down the news bulletins as viewers are served up a dramatic, but often meaningless, series of shocking images night after night.

The media under control or out of control?

During the long years of martial law only one newspaper offered anything approaching balanced news reporting: *The Independent Morning Post*, and its sister evening edition. The *Post* was owned by the Taiwan Spinning Group, a large textile company which was not directly influenced by the KMT. But, in 1994 the *Post* was bought out by a construction company controlled by a senior KMT politician and businessman, Chen Cheng-chung. Chen wanted to use the respected and popular publication to expand both his business empire and his political clout. He also purchased *The Great News* and *Freedom Times*. Chen's first move as a media magnate was to end editorial autonomy and sack journalists he considered hostile to his new editorial line. The buyout was seen by many supporters of press freedom as a demonstration of the new power of money, that commercial controls in a democratic era could be just as effective as the martial law decrees in determining editorial content.

In September 1994, in the driving rain on the streets of Taipei, hundreds of journalists staged their first-ever demonstration, backed by a full page advertisement purchased in local newspapers calling for editorial autonomy. The advertisement carried more than 1,000 signatures. Following the protest, hundreds of Taiwanese journalists formed the first independent professional association, The Association for Taiwan

Journalists (ATJ). The ATJ now has close to 250 members, but represents only a small minority of working journalists. However, it is a start and is working on a range of issues including editorial autonomy, ethics, self-discipline and working conditions. The most serious problems identified by the ATJ are the politicisation of the media and ethics. 'Members of the public very much expect ownership affiliations to affect the nature of coverage', said one ATJ representative. 'In a sense there is a lack of independent thinking both in society and the media, and a poor understanding of history, which is a legacy of a tightly controlled education system and press restrictions during decades of martial law.' On the issue of ethics the ATJ codes are purely voluntary, but, 'the earthquake case was a start, it shocked people into thinking a bit more about their role'.

Other issues under review by the ATJ are corruption, or the culture of the red envelope, and violence against journalists. A detailed survey of bribes offered to journalists found corruption was petty, but ranged from gifts of cash and watches to reporters attending a press conference called by a chain of beauty salons, to the payment of cash for travel expenses to reporters attending seminars presented by KMT officials and the military. While small in scale these incidents reflect a culture of co-optation—journalists are seen as agents of propaganda, not impartial reporters of facts. During election campaigns in particular, budgets are allocated by political parties for cash gifts and other incentives such as the hosting of 'overseas tours' for journalists covering particular candidates. Journalists refusing to participate in these junkets find they have limited access to the politician in question, or are shunned by their media peers. Another recent and worrying trend has been the infiltration of powerful gangs into local governments, real estate and construction, particularly in provincial areas. Gang control has made the 'monitoring' of local governments, and their decisions on issues such as building permits, by the media more difficult. There have been recent reports of local journalists being beaten or intimidated by members of local gangs.

At the same time legislators are now reviewing drafts of two new laws—one to protect sensitive government information from the media (an official secrets act) and another to open government information formally to the public and the press (a freedom of information act). Every year, for example, the Defence and Foreign Affairs Ministries put up secret budgets, considered highly sensitive by the government because of

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continuing tensions with mainland China. In the free press environment, however, the budgets are on the front pages of the national newspapers the next day. Media commentators believe the government may be able to win the battle for an official secrets act with a trade off, a freedom information act, offering the media wider pastures on which to graze.

Media websites

CCC News, www.cccnews.com/bingif/

Central News Agency, www.cna.com.tw/

China Times, www.chinatimes.com.tw/

Esplanade Newslines, www.ewslines.com/

Min Sheng, www.sinanet.com/minsheng/

Taiwan Economic News, www.news.cens.com/

Taiwan Economic Daily News, www.wlbd.com/twnews/

Taiwan Headline News, www.dailynews.sinanet.com/

Taiwan News, www.dailynews.sinanet.com/

Taiwan Today News Network, www.ttnn.com/cna/