Treading a fine line: Democratisation and the media in Taiwan

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'I would definitely like to control the media, if I could. But there is no way for me to do that'.

- Arthur Iap, Director General of Taiwan's Government Information Office

The Republic of China on Taiwan (ROC, hereafter Taiwan)[2] experienced one of the most complex and atypical transitions from authoritarian to democratic government. In comparison to others that occurred during the so-called 'Third Wave', Taiwan's democratisation was one of the smoothest, least violent, and most inclusive. Following the presidential election of March 2000, when Chen Shui-bian, representing the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) reversed over fifty years of one-party dominance by the Kuomintang (KMT, the Nationalist Party), Taiwan embarked on what the literature on transitions refers to as the consolidation phase of democratisation.

The remarkable economic modernisation of Taiwan that had started under Japanese occupation (1895-1945) and was thereafter engineered by the KMT (helping the party to justify its authoritarian approach to government) provided the basis for a highly developed mass media in one of the most literate societies in Asia.[3] In this

way, Taiwan's political evolution corresponds to the so-called modernisation model that recognises a close correlation between economic development, the rise of an educated urban middle class, a vibrant media, and democratisation.

Therefore, the role of the media in Taiwan's political evolution should not be underestimated. Since the 1940s, the media made a vital contribution to the process of 'nation-building', a considerable responsibility given the ethnic divisions on the island[4] and the continuous threat of military attack by the communist People's Republic of China (PRC), only one hundred miles away. Hence, economic development, nation-building, and national security provided a convenient justification for authoritarian rule and party-state control of the media, enforced by agencies representing the party (the KMT's Cultural Committee), the provincial government (the Taiwan Garrison Command), and the state (the Government Information Office). These agencies – in reality representing the KMT party-state rather than existing as separate and autonomous government institutions - were responsible for creating and controlling a complex patron-client network in media appointments. For example, newspaper editors were members of the KMT, a system of patronage that placed political appointees in prominent and powerful 'gate-keeping' positions. This of course undermined any professional independence and integrity to which they may have aspired. Government agencies also enjoyed responsibility for guaranteeing the media did not address subjects that were deemed off limits, such as advocating communism or Taiwan's independence from the Republic of China. Hence, such regulations for governing media content that existed were rather arbitrary and reflected the KMT's political agenda. In addition, the 1976 Broadcasting and Television Law gave the Government Information Office the power to instruct media to act as transmission belts for government propaganda and

mobilisation; television and radio stations were required to broadcast in Mandarin Chinese, the language of the mainlanders who had colonised Taiwan after the Second World War (Taiwanese dialect programming was discouraged because of its association with the outlawed independence movement); entertainment programmes were obliged to promote Han Chinese culture; and broadcasts could not under any circumstances challenge or contradict government policy. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the structure and output of Taiwan's television industry is often described as utilitarian. Networks evaded controversy and direct political intervention by steering clear of political subjects, concentrating instead on channelling government information and politically correct entertainment. Audiences merely received information from the leadership according to the linear model of communication that is most appropriate for understanding how the media work in authoritarian political systems.

The press, too, were subject to indirect political interference. Although government censors never inspected newspaper copy before publication, the National Mobilization Law did allow the government to recall and confiscate newspapers after they were published if they had printed anything that conflicted with political or military interests. Such laws were constructed to be as vague and arbitrary as possible, leaving them open to interpretation and applicability and therefore conceding to the government considerable leeway in exercising its jurisdiction over the media. Other laws were more specific. For example, the Publication Law regulated the registration of publications, restricted their ownership to (politically) 'reliable' persons, and limited to 12 the number of pages they could print.

Moreover, the media were strictly prohibited from inquiring into the public and private lives of President Chiang Kai-shek and his family. In this way, the media

reinforced a culture of deference to KMT politicians and therefore helped to legitimise the party's domination of the political system. Further, the media were responsible for transmitting the official ideology as decided by the KMT. This emphasised Han Chinese identity at the expense of Taiwanese identity, even though the Taiwanese comprised the island's majority. In addition, the media were called upon to strengthen Taiwan's commitment to the KMT's eventual return to power over the whole of the Chinese nation following the 'inevitable' defeat of Mao Zedong's communist regime. The penalties for testing the boundaries of what was politically legitimate could be severe: during the 'white terror' of the martial law period between 1950 and 1987, hundreds of reporters, writers and editors were harassed, interrogated and often jailed, while a comprehensive press ban policy in 1951 prevented the further issue of licenses and thus froze until 1987 the number of newspapers at thirty-one.

Inevitably, this political environment limited the media's purpose and performance. They were in no position to fulfil the responsibilities expected of media in more democratic societies - they were denied any opportunity to scrutinise government decisions, question the legitimacy of the government's platform, and ultimately hold the government accountable. Instead, the media were carefully 'advised' by government agencies (especially the Government Information Office) about which stories they could cover and how, so that the media might work towards meeting the regime's primary objectives (economic development and the reunification of China). Hence, the informational role of the media in Taiwan did not extend beyond communicating the government's decisions and mobilising the people around its agenda.

At the same time, a thriving underground media provided a focus for organised and sustained opposition to the KMT-dominated state. In particular,

magazines, not covered by the press ban, provided a voice for politically-marginalised Taiwanese and offered a counter-discourse to that found in the mainstream media. Because the KMT prohibited the formation of political parties that were outside its control, underground publications provided a training ground for activists, eager to learn the arts of political participation, competition, and mobilisation. Therefore, they performed many of the same functions as traditional political parties: they provided the movement with ideological direction, opportunities for patronage, the aggregation of interests, and the recruitment and training of leaders. These media engaged in a style of reporting that was forbidden to the mainstream. They were less deferential to national politicians (including Presidents Chiang Kai-shek and Chiang Ching-kuo) and subjected their public and private lives to scrutiny. The underground media also brought opposition activists to the attention of their audience, familiarising the people with their names and platforms, and turning them into political celebrities in their own right. This proved particularly important for those members of the opposition who stood for election against KMT candidates. These media did, however, remain illegal and therefore underground. This hindered their production and distribution, which in turn limited their value as instruments of popular mobilisation.

In contrast, the media were not as important as instruments of election campaigning for the KMT. Prior to democratisation of the political system, the KMT was the natural party of government and could win elections on the basis of its monopoly on power and, most crucially, on the mobilisation of its local election machinery, especially its strong factional networks. Besides, the 1980 Election and Recall Law prohibited all candidates in elections from using the regular mass media, but did allow the use of party-owned media. This clause clearly benefited the KMT which, as the party of government, owned or controlled most of the island's media

(including all three terrestrial television stations). Had it needed to capitalise on its control over the media to reinforce its own local machinery, the KMT would have found it incredibly easy to do so.

Social liberalisation and political democratisation allowed for the rapid proliferation of media. By mid-2003, there were 174 radio stations (prior to 1993, there were only 33; call-in radio stations were legalised in 1994), four national television stations (compared to three when liberalisation began in 1987), access to hundreds of cable channels[5] including a national public television system (the transmission and reception of cable television broadcasts remained illegal until 1993), and 514 newspapers (31 between 1951 and 1987; 393 in August 1999). Taiwanese now watch more television than any other people in Asia, and despite the transmission of foreign programming imported from around Asia and the United States, programmes which are produced by Taiwan-based companies and offering local news are far more popular than programmes offered by international concerns. Foreign entertainment shows are most popular among Taiwan's younger audiences, but only if they have been tailored for the Taiwan market (including dubbing or subtitling into Mandarin). This is also the case in Taiwan's growing magazine market, where such international titles as *Cosmopolitan*, *Elle* and *Vogue* have launched Chinese editions, though locally produced magazines, such as *Beauty*, *Lady Ann* and *Mademoiselle* remain the leaders in the domestic market.

Ownership patterns have had a significant impact on what the media reports and how, and have made a substantial contribution to the increasing lack of differentiation between the private and public spheres. By 1987, when Taiwan's political and social systems began to feel the effects of elite-driven liberalisation, the KMT had

established a virtual monopoly on information through the legal mainstream media. The party owned four national daily newspapers, the government owned two, and the military five, but in reality there was little separation of ownership due to the overlapping character of party/state/military political authority. Moreover, privately owned newspapers enjoyed close corporate ties with the KMT: the owners of the two newspapers with the highest circulation, *Chung-kuo Shih Pao* (*China Times*) and *Lien-ho Pao* (*United Daily News*) were members of the KMT Central Standing Committee.

The ownership patterns that reinforced KMT control persist, meaning that partisan and government influence is still pervasive. Taiwan Television Enterprise (TTV) belongs to the Taiwan Provincial Government; the China Television Company (CTV) remains a KMT asset (the party owns 50 percent of stock), and the Ministries of Defence and Education still control the Chinese Television System (CTS). However, while ownership may not have changed, editorial control has passed from proprietor to journalist. Political or partisan influence is no longer so prevalent within television that the stations are required to pursue a particular agenda or face censure. Besides, the media are today subject to the laws of market economics rather than arbitrary state regulation. The rapid proliferation of print and broadcast media following liberalisation, and especially the repeal of restrictions on transmitting and receiving cable television broadcasts, have created the conditions for fierce competition for advertising revenue. It is no surprise, therefore, that media have converged on the middle ground, with many programmes and publications now offering sensational exposés of public figures to entice audiences. So called ‘yellow’ or tabloid journalism thrives in Taiwan on a scale never before imagined given the island’s commitment to Chinese ethics of deference and responsibility. The most

recent entrant to Taiwan's newspaper market is *Apple Daily*, run by Hong Kong entrepreneur Jimmy Lai. *Apple Daily*, a tabloid newspaper with a reputation for celebrity gossip, scandal, and crime scene photographs, was first established in Hong Kong and hit Taiwan's news-stands on 2 May 2003 with a circulation of 750,000. It follows the success of Jimmy Lai's first Taiwan venture, *Next Magazine* which is now the island's biggest selling weekly. Despite widespread criticism of its sensationalist tabloid style of reporting, *Apple Daily* has stirred Taiwan's newspaper industry to self reflection. Both the *China Times* and the *United Daily News*, Taiwan's biggest existing broadsheets, have decided to add new sections to their newspapers, use colour print, and cut their news-stand prices by a third. It is still too early to assess the full impact of *Apple Daily* on journalism in Taiwan, but its success in Hong Kong indicates that it will continue to erode the difference between public and private.

Liberal critics of state interference in Taiwan's media claim that market mechanisms are more efficient and concede greater power to the consumer, the ultimate democratic authority. Surveying the government's plans to control the media, one anonymous member of President Chen's Cabinet said: 'The less government interference, the better. If the public dislikes a certain TV channel or radio station which they think is manipulated by a certain party or individual they detest, they simply refuse to watch it or listen to it. It's that darn simple.' The power of the market is clearly demonstrated by the short life of the *Capital Morning Post* (*Shodu Zaopao*) which was established and financed by a prominent DPP politician, Kang Ning-hsiang. The newspaper was forced to close down not because it voiced unpalatable or unpopular political opinions, but because it could not capture an adequate share of the market. In 2000, the Government Information Office informed the *Taiwan Daily News* (*Taiwan Shin Wen Pao*), a military-owned newspaper based in Kaohsiung (in

southern Taiwan) that it may have to close down if it did not make a profit. To turn its fortune around, the publication had to downsize into a local newspaper and make 200 of its staff redundant. Even state-controlled media are not immune to the hidden hand of the market.

In democratic Taiwan, access to the media is essential for the aspiring or established politician. In addition to offering exposure, familiarity, and name recognition, the media provide a platform from which politicians may offer their own opinions while criticising those of their opponents. Taiwan's appetite for politics feeds extensive news coverage which in turn generates free publicity for political actors. Moreover, politicians have profited from the proliferation of cable television and radio channels that are relatively simple and inexpensive to create. Cable television allows politicians to address their own local constituencies (the process known as narrowcasting) free from mediation by journalists. (Subscription rates for cable increased by 5% during the 1996 presidential election campaign, suggesting that voters demand greater access to cable when their interest and involvement in politics is highest). It is not surprising, therefore, that many politicians have become media celebrities by starring in their own television and radio programmes. As of March 2003, fifteen elected politicians hosted or produced television or radio talk shows. The most prolific was the independent legislator, Sisy Chen. Until April 2003, Chen hosted *Sisy's News* on Star TV, in addition to a daily radio talk show, *UFO Dinner*, on UFO Radio. In March 2003, her contract with Star TV was not renewed because, she believes, the station was pressured to drop her by the ruling DPP. Star Group Taiwan Ltd. denied political pressure, claiming that there are already too many political talk-shows on air. Star TV also broadcasts former politician Jaw Shaw-kong's *News Hijacker*, while legislator

May Chin hosts *Lighting the Lamp* on CTS and Shen Chih-hwei (a legislator with the People's First Party, or PFP) is responsible for a daily talk show on Taichung radio. President Chen himself has been criticised for producing a weekly address that is reminiscent of President Roosevelt's fireside chats. The *A-bian Portrait*, lasting just three to five minutes, is funded by the Presidential Office, pre-recorded, and then released to news organisations who can then decide whether or not to use it. While the KMT spokesman, Alex Tsai, described this as 'a move that abuses the media' for Chen's personal publicity (*Taipei Times* online, 20.2.03) the President's office denied any sinister intentions and referred to the programme as a way for President Chen to engage with the people of Taiwan. But Chen Shui-bian is no stranger to celebrity. His Taiwanese nickname, A-Bian, is also a (politically and financially) profitable merchandising brand that referred first to a style of 'Beany' (the *bianmao* is an olive green hat that displays a tag featuring A-bian, a small cute character that represents, but in no sense bears any likeness to Chen Shui-bian) but was subsequently extended to cover everything from T-Shirts to coffee mugs and key rings. One of Chen's posters even pictured Dr Sun Yat-sen, the father of Republican China, wearing a *bianmao* suggesting that he too would endorse Chen. The manufacture of the *bianmao* reflects the growing professionalism in the organisation, design and delivery of election campaigns that are now concerned with selling politicians to an increasingly sceptical public. The *bianmao* is an example of market branding that easily identifies and unites Chen Shui-bian's supporters. Although parties have so far avoided hiring professional political consultants to manage their election campaigns, preferring instead to keep structures of control within the party organisation, they nevertheless have a long history of employing the services of professional advertising companies to help them design their campaign propaganda. Candidates who cannot afford to

engage in the *bianmao*-style of merchandising or refuse to do so out of principle take a severe beating at the polls. In the 2000 presidential election, the independent candidate, Hsu Hsin–liang declined to participate in a campaign organised around gimmicks and merchandise, preferring instead to fight what he described as a clean issue-driven election. Thus, Hsu was denied the intensive media coverage that seeks out the dramatic and the exciting campaign over the kind of dull electioneering that does not make good television. In other words, it is possible to conclude that the election culture and media coverage of the campaign penalised Hsu for being a serious candidate.

Celebrity has also proved important for those smaller and less successful parties that are unable to generate natural news coverage. For example, Wang Chien-shen, a popular and high profile politician who has campaigned for office in every major election below the presidency, decided to run against the stronger candidates in the 1998 Taipei mayoral election, Ma Ying-jeou and Chen Shui-bian. Wang based his decision on the assessment that his candidacy would guarantee free news coverage and therefore publicity for his adopted New Party and its candidates in the Legislative election. Thus Wang designed his campaign to help them rather than to further his own prospects of victory, and to promote the party's platform. Yet Wang became locked in a vicious circle of his own making, and the strategy backfired. Even though he was a political celebrity, Wang could not attract the free news coverage he desired because the media did not consider him a major player in the mayoral election which was routinely presented as a two-horse race between the KMT and the DPP. He also shunned the kind of pro-active campaign strategy that may have generated media interest. His promise to wage a clean campaign devoid of 'vote-buying, free banquets for the public, excessive campaign banners and fliers that litter the city's streets, and

mudslinging that defames his opponents' may have been high principled, but it meant that his campaign lacked the excitement that makes good television. Because neither of the other parties considered him a credible threat, he even escaped the negative campaigning that his opponents suffered. Therefore, Wang sacrificed the kind of visibility he and the New Party so desperately needed.

Chen Shui-bian's election campaign in 2000 adopted what the *Taipei Times* (4.3.2000) referred to as the 'soft sell'. Several of his television advertisements (designed and produced by a professional non-partisan advertising company that has since worked for the KMT) offered a very intimate portrait of Chen Shui-bian and his rise to power. In style, these candidate-focused election advertisements were familiar to observers of developments in British political advertising: Neil and Glenys Kinnock's beach walk; Paddy Ashdown's action man persona; John Major's 'journey home', and in 2001, 'At home with the Blairs'. The story of Chen Shui-bian's journey from humble Taiwanese origins to famous dissident lawyer and eventually mayor of Taipei was complemented by personal endorsements from his school friends, teachers and an assortment of relations, all of whom expressed their confidence that Chen would protect Taiwan's security and maintain peace. The advertisements presented Chen's celebrity and deliberately focused on his personal life over and above his or the DPP's policy platform, and thus inaugurated a new style of election propaganda in Taiwan.

However, the most controversial politician involved with the media exercises his power behind the camera. DPP legislator and member of the party's Central Standing Committee, Trong Chai, is currently chairman of Formosa Television (FTV), a DPP-supporting national television station that was created in 1995 to break the KMT's broadcasting monopoly. When campaigning for the presidency, Chen

Shui-bian declared his intention reform the media to end political influence. His administration did move quickly to remedy defects that it had identified in Taiwan's television industry, which was not unexpected given the DPP's turbulent history with the media and the party's expectation that in a democracy the media should be entirely separate from politics. Chen's immediate reforms were promising: the government announced it would reduce the number of shares it owns in Taiwan's media, and limit the influence in the media that political parties, government agencies and the military enjoyed under the Kuomintang. The aim was nothing less than the complete overhaul of Taiwan's media to guarantee freedom from political bias. The then Director-General of the Government Information Office, Chung Chin, took the initiative and created a committee composed of media professionals and scholars to consider reform: 'Our basic aim is to filter out improper influences, both political and commercial, that may stand in the way of the neutrality of news gathering and presenting,' she told the Education and Culture Committee of Taiwan's parliament, the Legislative Yuan. The reforms that the committee proposed were minimal. The ambition of preventing the government, military and political parties from owning majority shares in media enterprises was originally shelved as too controversial and possibly unconstitutional (would such actions contradict the cherished notion of free speech?), but were finally passed by Taiwan's parliament, the Legislative Yuan. In February 2003, the KMT announced that it would comply with the law and sell its stock holdings (42 percent in CTV, 97 percent in the Broadcasting Corporation of China (BCC), and 7 million shares in TTV). Moreover, the committee favoured further privatisation of television, though this idea was originally criticised for the possibility it might dumb programming down even further to satisfy aspirations for greater profits. However, the Executive Yuan (the highest administrative organ of

government headed by the Premier) liked the idea and endorsed it in modified form to avoid the foreseen pitfalls. The Executive Yuan has discussed privatising one of the state controlled television stations, and turning another into a public corporation that would expand Taiwan's capacity to provide public service television (the government currently owns 25.64% of TTV and 36.25% of CTS). Taiwan's current public service television station was designed as a source of 'quality' cultural programming that was not available on the mainstream channels. In this way, public service broadcasting is encouraged as a way of promoting pluralism and diversity in Taiwan's media, but has so made little contribution to developing a media culture that challenges government and holds its accountable for its activities.

In the current climate of reform, therefore, Trong Chai's position as Chairman of FTV has been the subject of intense media and political scrutiny, and President Chen's ultimatum – that all elected officials should relinquish their media interests by 5 September 2003 – has offered some comfort to his critics. It is estimated that 58 elected officials are now required to choose between their dual roles in politics and the media. The law will not affect the politician television and radio hosts, since it is only intended to prohibit civil servants and political party members from owning, funding or acting as founder, director or manager of media enterprises. However, some legislators would like the government to go further and actually exclude elected politicians from producing or hosting television and radio programmes. For example, the DPP legislator, Julian Kuo, remarked, 'Politicians hosting or producing broadcast shows is just like athletes serving as referees in a single game' (*Taipei Times* online, 20.3.03).

In addition to regulating ownership and management of media, the Government Information Office has also discussed ways of monitoring media output.

To its credit the Government Information Office has proposed the need for a regulatory framework that would allow journalists to carry out their work free from the fear of government interference and retribution. This is not surprising given that President Chen Shui-bian, the DPP, and DPP-leaning media all suffered at the hands of the KMT government that was intent on controlling freedom of speech in Taiwan. So far, however, the plans have made little headway. In June 2002, the Government Information Office reviewed a draft Mass Communications Law designed to 'better *regulate* Taiwan's media' (emphasis added). The mooted Law would 'ban invasions of privacy by the media and prevent the media from violating an individual's "autonomy". It would also more clearly delineate the ratings system for media content and upgrade the level of media regulations from that of executive orders to full legal standing'. In other words, the system is designed to consolidate control over the media, not offer any protection to the media as the foundation of a democratic society. In fact, the Director-General of the Government Information Office, Arthur Iap, said 'while some in the media may view his pursuit of this new law as adversarial and may accuse him of infringing on the freedom of the press, he believes he is doing the right things and will not change his views no matter what criticism he is subjected to' (*Taiwan Headlines,* 6.6.02).

One of the most important strides forward should have been President Chen's stated commitment in 2000 to incorporate the International Bill of Rights into Taiwan's domestic law. All being equal this should have guaranteed freedom of information and communication in Taiwan, thus encouraging journalists to fulfil the role assigned to them in democratic political systems, namely that of holding governments accountable. In fact, the media have continued to suffer many abuses that they experienced under the KMT regime. One of the most urgent challenges that

Taiwan's media face in a democratic environment is the absence of specific laws that define for journalists and regulate classified information. The arbitrary definition of what is and is not allowed confers upon the government and the Government Information Office the same level of extraordinary power over the media enjoyed by their KMT predecessors. For example, Article 21 of the Broadcasting and Television Law forbids television programmes from spreading rumours or presenting material in a way that would disrupt law and order, but fails to provide any specific details or speculate on circumstances when this law might be invoked. Both sides – the media and the government – are still unclear where the boundaries are, what is permissible, and who is responsible if things go wrong. The Chen Shui-bian administration, elected in 2000, has so far failed to demarcate these boundaries, which means that journalists are still subject to frequent abuse and intimidation. They are often under surveillance, their offices searched, their telephones (and those of family and friends) are bugged. For example, in October 2000 members of the Taipei District Prosecutor's Office searched the offices and homes of journalists working for the *China Times Express*. They were searching for information about corruption within the National Security Bureau that had been leaked to the media. Journalists complained that they, and their friends and families, were under close surveillance, and their telephone conversations monitored. The prosecutors justified their action with reference to 'national security'. They claimed the leaked information *could* have included 'highly sensitive state secrets' that threatened the lives of Bureau members. Frequently, the intimidation is non-political and comes from the criminal underworld. Offices of Jimmy Lai's Taiwan enterprise, *Next Magazine* have been searched by prosecutors and vandalised by hired thugs following the magazine's exposure of criminal activity. One of the more insidious forms of intimidation is the threat of libel

suits. In fact, the publisher of the *Taiwan Daily*, Antonio Chiang, once said that his main job was 'to go to court', especially when his newspaper was sued six times in a three month period. Libel laws dating back to the 1930s remain a serious legal risk to Taiwan's media freedom.

One of the most controversial decisions taken by the Government Information Office was its award of NT$950,000 (£16,943) to the Foundation for the Prevention of Public Damage by the Media to fund the regular evaluation of the six mainstream Chinese-language newspapers. This would measure 'justice, objectivity, appropriateness and accuracy', with the results released to the public every two months. Critics of this proposal not only question the methodology – how can justice, and appropriateness be measured? – but also deem the exercise a step backwards that will only damage press freedom. The proposals extend to the broadcast media and the signs are not particularly encouraging: 'Concerned that locally produced TV programmes are becoming increasingly sensationalistic or inaccurate, the Radio and Television Affairs Department of the Government Information Office has decided to begin monitoring and evaluating local programmes. "Because many TV shows have damaged some people's privacy and the sensationalism of some programmes has made audiences uncomfortable, *we have decided to take action and manage TV shows*," said Hong Chong-jan, the new director of the department' (emphasis added). Such management undermines Chen Shui-bian's commitment that 'the government would not suppress the freedom of the press or people's freedom of speech under the pretext of national security considerations', and he urged the media to develop processes of self-regulation.

Part of the reason for wanting to monitor media output is the recognition that deference to political authority has disappeared. As already suggested, the distinction

between public and private was well defined in the period prior to democratisation, leaving Presidents Chiang Kai-shek and Chiang Ching-kuo immune from intense media scrutiny. Now, however, everyone, including the President is fair game, and the private lives of Taiwan's most prominent politicians are open to inspection and (most damaging) speculation. For the Taiwanese, free speech is synonymous with democracy, and this is the root of the problem. The president of one prominent NGO, Taiwan Media Watch, outlined the dilemma: When does freedom of speech end and moral responsibility begin? The apparent lack of media sensitivity in reporting disasters, crime, and personal tragedies suggests that they are incapable of exercising the kind of professional self-discipline and self-regulation called for. 'Any government intervention in the operations of the media is unacceptable because freedom of the press is pivotal in a civilised society. But as the tendency towards indecency looms large in our local TV programming, to expect self-discipline on the part of the media is a difficult option. So the only feasible solution is to allow the public to use its voice to tell the media what they consider to be quality TV programmes.'

Taiwan Media Watch provides a channel for dialogue between viewers and producers, holding the media accountable for their often sensationalist and sometimes outrageous news coverage and tabloid journalism. Taiwan's media give the impression they do not understand the responsibility of free speech. Instead they, along with politicians and voters, incline towards accepting democracy as a handy panacea for all Taiwan's problems and a valuable measure of Taiwan's political evolution. Close examination of any election campaign in Taiwan since martial law was lifted in 1987 reveals the predicament. Candidates, often with the complicity of the media, engage in a style and volume of personalised negative campaigning that

would not be permitted or tolerated in other consolidated democracies. In many of the election campaigns between 1996 and 2002, candidates have been accused, often by anonymous sources, of myriad misdemeanours, including rape, extra-marital affairs, 'black gold' politics (corruption), belonging to the Communist party, spying for the KMT, and betraying Taiwan. This vicious brand of negative campaigning is tolerated as a characteristic of democracy: the electoralism that pervades the Taiwanese political culture accepts negative campaigning as representing freedom of speech which is, after all, a defining feature of any democracy. Moreover, the persistence of vicious and personal negative campaigning is encouraged by both the voting system used and the media's thirst for sensationalism. During interviews on the vicious 1998 mayoral election campaigns, one television news organisation in Taiwan admitted that they are merely responsive to public demand for coverage of negative campaigning, even though there is no reliable evidence that negative campaigning does affect voter behaviour (though in 1998, taped conversations between Kaohsiung mayor Wu Den-yih and his alleged mistress did cost him around 2% of the vote). With hindsight, the *China Times* regretted publishing a negative advertisement that had been paid for by an anonymous source and attacked the reputation of one of the candidates in the 1996 presidential election campaign. Editors at the newspaper insisted that the source would have paid the usual fee charged for advertising, and therefore the *China Times* could not be accused of engaging in election propaganda on behalf of any one candidate. In the 2000 presidential election political corruption, associated most clearly with the KMT, surfaced as a dominant issue and the subject of many advertisements designed to discredit both the KMT's Lien Chan and the independent candidate, James Soong. (DPP-commissioned polls discovered that corruption was a major concern of voters. The creation of a Survey Centre within the DPP machinery

that is designed to track party support rates, issue preferences, and target particular social groups is a significant development in Taiwan's campaign evolution towards professionalism.)

So, Taiwan's voters and politicians labour under the misrepresentation of uncorroborated negative campaigning as representative of free speech. This way of thinking is reinforced by characteristics of Taiwan's political culture that are inextricably linked to the media environment, especially electoralism. Taiwan approach to democracy is largely procedural with an overwhelming emphasis on elections as the only variable for evaluating the quality of the political system. Provided that the Taiwanese have an opportunity to cast their ballot, they seem relatively satisfied that they enjoy democracy. After all, Taiwan has more elections than any other country except the United States and Switzerland.

Beyond elections, the media continue to feed the illusion of popular participation in politics and provide few opportunities for genuine dialogue between political actors and the public. This illusion is demonstrated most clearly by the myriad political call-in television shows that now fill Taiwan's schedules. One hour-long programme on TVBS, *quan-min-kai-jiang-er-yi-ling-ling* ('Everyone Talks at 21:00', ie. 9pm the time it is broadcast) refers to itself as a call-in show even though it gives its viewers only twenty seconds each in the last five minutes of the programme to deliver their opinions on the preceding discussion. Needless to say, this is neither the foundation of genuine debate nor the basis for authentic popular empowerment. However, call-in programmes on cable television do give smaller political parties and independent candidates who lack the financial resources to place advertisements in the mass media an opportunity to present themselves to the electorate for free. For example, some candidates standing for the New Party in the 1995 elections appeared

on more than fifty cable programmes during a two month period prior to election day. In 1994, the KMT even began to organise seminars for its candidates on the strategic use of call-in programmes on cable networks.

In this way, the media have been central to the development of election campaigns in Taiwan. In particular, candidates who can afford to do so use every platform available – press and television advertisements, bill boards, the internet, appearances in interview and call-in shows, and of course photo-opportunities in the news - to sell themselves and their policies to an electorate that is becoming increasingly non-partisan. This is a recent phenomenon and is associated with both Taiwan's democratisation process and the proliferation of the media that accompanied it. Until 1989, candidates standing for election were prohibited from placing advertisements in the press, and only in 1991 could they begin to place advertisements on radio and television, though these were paid for by the Central Election Commission and the length of each advertisement slot was proportional to the number of candidates nominated by each party. These restrictions have not applied to the two open and direct presidential elections that have taken place, though in 1996 all three terrestrial television channels refused to broadcast any tapes supplied by the parties. Only in the 2000 election did the terrestrial channels agree for the first time to broadcast political advertisements other than those funded and approved by the Central Election Commission.

Opinion polls have assumed an importance in Taiwan's elections that is comparable to that in other electoral democracies, and their value is exaggerated by the media who commission their own opinion polls, publish the findings and scrutinise their meaning in minute detail in order to add to the drama of the election. More importantly, the published polls are devoured by the candidates themselves,

fully aware that they must respond to poor findings by changing the tone of their campaign or focus on different issues. The importance of polls is also overestimated by the Election and Recall Law which, believing that they have the power to affect voter behaviour, prohibits individuals, political parties and media from releasing the results of opinion polls in the last ten days of a presidential election campaign. Further, mass media are excluded from citing previously released poll results during this period, with offenders facing fines of up to NT$2.5 million (£44,588). Clearly, Taiwan's political system takes very seriously the potential influence of both opinion polls and the media's reporting of them.

The media play a particularly important role in presidential and mayoral elections that are necessarily candidate-centred; campaigns focus less on the party affiliations and platforms of candidates than on their personal attributes. Moreover, the presidential election is the only competition for national office in Taiwan. Together, these mean that the media have become the most important vehicle for selling candidates to the national constituency, and inevitably reports of campaigns have rounded on the image of the candidates. For example, Lee Teng-hui, the incumbent KMT candidate in the 1996 presidential election was described as 'a photogenic individual, invariably with a smile and a good word. His stature, energy and bearing make him a made-for-media candidate. He projected an aura of self confidence and pleasantness which enlisted voter sympathy.'[6] Lee Teng-hui enjoyed the natural advantages of incumbency; during the campaign, he was able to demonstrate his leadership qualities and stature as an international statesman as television news focused overwhelmingly on the deteriorating relationship with the People's Republic of China. His campaign advertisements were designed to reinforce this perception, showing President Lee mixing with such international luminaries as

George Bush Sr., Nelson Mandela, and Margaret Thatcher. Lee had little competition from the image of the DPP's candidate, Peng Ming-min, described on one occasion as a 'tedious academic'. By way of contrast, the media repeatedly addressed the dull image of Lee's successor as the KMT's presidential candidate in 2000, Lien Chan. Writing in the *Taipei Times*, (19.1.2000) Wang Chien-chuang said: 'Unfortunately, Lien does not have the genetic makeup for popular moves. He does not sound humorous when he tells a joke. He does not sound mean when he condemns others. He sounds awkward when he tries to sell himself. He is like a poker player who can screw up a great hand.' The great hand that Lien Chan discarded was his incumbency as Vice-President and the KMT's reputation as a party with a rich resource base. In turn, the media failed to devote equal attention to the independent candidates Li Ao and Hsu Hsin–liang, describing them as 'minor players' in the election. Neither had done much to attract free media coverage, unlike the independent candidates in the 1996 presidential election. Then, Chen Li-an's 18 day tour of the island was designed to overcome the lack of support from a party machinery, but it did attract free news coverage. Every day during the 1996 campaign, newspapers printed photographs of Chen on the next stage of his tour, shaking hands with Buddhist monks or being offered small donations from children. Such photo opportunities suggested that for all its simplicity, Chen's campaign was sophisticated enough to know how to use the media to their advantage.

However, we should not assume that media coverage and presentation of election campaigns has completely transformed Taiwan's election culture in such a way that traditional strategies of voter mobilisation have been discarded. Rather, the new and the traditional campaign techniques exist and evolve together. For example, boisterous rallies continue to be the preferred method of mobilising supporters which,

when televised or reported in the news, project a national image of strength and unity and allow candidates to reach beyond the core supporters who attend such events. Politicians must still canvass votes by meeting the electorate in person, but this is no longer an intimate appeal for support; candidates are now shadowed by growing numbers of television crews and reporters that have been assigned to cover the activities of a particular ticket. The personal approach to campaigning is appropriate and expected, but the media magnifies its significance. In other words, the defining characteristics of the pre–democratisation campaign environment have survived the transition process, but have adapted to meet the demands of the electronic mass media. Election campaigns are still designed around traditional structures of communication, socialisation and mobilisation that define the community, usually through strong personal networks and relationships, and have been a commanding tradition in Taiwan's election process since the 1950s. For instance, politicians often attend religious and civil ceremonies, such as weddings and funerals to strengthen their grassroots relationship with voters. Hence, a full appreciation of Taiwan's election culture requires us to observe methods of mobilisation that occur away from the media spotlight, such as the importance of courting local factions that can deliver a specific number of votes in return for particular rewards.

Computer-based communications media are having the same revolutionary effect in Taiwan as elsewhere (internet usage increased from 600,000 in 1996 to 6 million in 2000). Yet the internet was less important in the 2001 mayoral elections than in the 1998 or 2000 elections when candidates designed their own websites. In previous elections, candidates seemed to be moving towards embracing the innovative campaign techniques offered by the information revolution, allowing for new methods of interaction between politicians and voters. For example, in 2000 Chen Shui–bian

invited surfers to email him with suggestions of who should be in his Cabinet. Chen's website included a comprehensive biography of the candidate, a list of his most notable political achievements, photographs and regular progress reports on the campaign, all in simplified and complex Chinese characters and in English. Chen's supporters could even donate funds to his campaign over the internet.

In contrast, candidates in the 2001 election reverted to more traditional forms of campaigning, devoting less time and expense to designing websites. One reason for this may be the level of the election. Perhaps websites are less useful to candidates in small constituencies where voting behaviour is determined more by personal connection and patron-client relationships than other forms of campaigning and persuasion. This is suggested by the resurfacing of candidate web-sites in the 2002 mayoral elections. These had their own chat rooms, together with 'rich visual effects such as flash and phat-animated designs to attract visitor's attention'. The websites also gave details of press releases, the campaign schedules of the candidates, and the platforms they were promoting. The website of Taipei mayor Ma Ying-jeou included downloadable songs and video clips of the candidate jogging, swimming and engaging in other forms of exercise 'to convey to the public an image that's full of energy'. The site of his DPP rival for the Taipei mayoralty, Lee Ying-yuan, included interactive games and live video footage of his campaign rallies. Clearly the internet is a new public space that both allows for and encourages a more innovative and exciting style of campaigning, and also contributes to the erosion of any distinction between private and public. The internet gives voters more opportunities to interact with candidates than any other communications medium. However, the value of the internet in election campaigns is limited by voters having to actively seek out this information (unlike other media in which campaign news and information are easily

available but relatively passive), and so voters who do visit these websites tend to already support the candidate. In this way, campaign websites are merely preaching to the converted, and thus validate the 'reinforcement theory' of election campaigning.

Taiwan's democratic political development was dependent in part on the media, together with excellent educational system that nurtured one of the most literate societies in Asia. Despite severe government control that intruded on and restricted their professional responsibilities, there can be little doubt that Taiwan's various media industries benefited from considerable investment and attention. Structural problems persist: politically-sensitive issues of ownership have yet to be resolved, while journalists are still unclear about what is and is not permissible in a political system that guarantees free speech. One of the most fundamental changes has been in the style of journalism. A noticeable decline in deference to authority, prompted by democracy, media pluralism, and the rising power of market over state forces, has encouraged the growth of tabloid journalism in both print media and television. The media are intruding ever more enthusiastically on the private lives of politicians who are now considered fair game. After all, if politicians subject each other to the most vicious form of negative campaigning imaginable, how can we query the media's involvement in exposing political scandals?

The SARS epidemic of 2003 was a particularly testing time for Taiwan's news media, and the debate over where to draw the line between the public's right to know and journalistic sensationalism continued long after the World Health Organisation removed Taiwan from its list of SARS-affected areas. One poll discovered that 65% of 1,093 respondents thought SARS-related news reports were 'overly sensational. Another 30% described them as unnecessarily and intolerably repetitive. It seems that

accurate information was difficult to come by, and that the competitive 24 hour news environment made speed of reporting more important. Industry insiders claim that conduct associated with professional journalism, such as double checking the facts and the reliability of sources, was sacrificed. In particular, there was a notable absence from television screens of journalists with any background or training in health-related news. All media are now desperately trying to learn from their experience of the SARS crisis. However, such problems are not culturally-specific; British and American media are faced with similar criticisms of their coverage of the 2003 war against Iraq. Few reporters on the front line have military expertise, while the British government and the BBC are embroiled in a volatile dispute about the reliability of sources. Perhaps Taiwan's experience during the SARS outbreak demonstrates that its media are, after all, simply responding to the challenges of democratic society. It is a steep learning curve for all concerned.

NOTES

[1] Many thanks to Ming-Yeh Rawnsley for helping in the preparation of this article.

[2] The Republic of China refers to the political system that governs Taiwan and, until recently claimed sovereignty over the territory of the People's Republic of China. Taiwan referred to the island itself, a contested terrain that governments on both sides of the Taiwan Strait agreed was a province of China. However, it is now more usual to refer simply to Taiwan.

[3] By 1994, Taiwan's literacy rate had increased to 94 percent, a 34 percent jump from 1952 when less than 60% of people older than 15 could read and write. At the end of 2000, the national literacy rate stood at 95.55%. Literacy continues to increase as school enrolment remains high and the proportion of the older illiterate generation is disappearing.

[4] The main ethnic division is that of 'mainlanders' (those who retreated to Taiwan with Chiang Kai-shek and the KMT after 1949 following the victory of the Communists in the Chinese civil war) and

'Taiwanese' (ethnically Chinese whose families had migrated to the island since the 17th Century). This division is not clear-cut, however; the Taiwanese themselves were divided according to the province from which they originated and does not account for the aboriginal population that were the first inhabitants of the island.

[5] With a cable penetration rate of 82%, Taiwan is the most heavily saturated pay-TV market in the world, surpassing even the United States and Japan.

[6] T. Bellows, 'The March 1996 Elections in the Republic of China', American Journal of Chinese Studies (1997).