

Traditional Journalism in Transition

Taiwan Media Professionals Construct New Work Roles

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Abstract

Although Taiwan instituted press freedom in 1987, media professionals in the island nation continue to experience a myriad of internal and external pressures in the overcrowded market. Rather than merely conform to unethical industry expectations, some media professionals have reconstructed the rules by which they operate. The purpose of the present study is to explore how Taiwan media professionals have reshaped their work roles to make sense of their workplace realities. Results generated from 20 in-depth interviews indicate that their realities now include Internet-driven media shifts, changed reporter traits, dramatic licence due to stiff competition, departure from conventional news and reporters coping with mandatory coverage. Study participants have reconstructed the rules of the media environment to contend with the new realities.

Keywords

Taiwan journalists, social constructivism, journalist work roles, qualitative research

Introduction

When advertisements disguised as news stories (‘embedded marketing’) appeared in *The China Times*, veteran journalist Dennis Huang resigned from the newspaper in 2010 to protest the practice (Committee to Protect Journalists 2014b; Freedom House 2012; Wang 2012). Despite his resignation and a public campaign to end embedded marketing, the practice continued. News media were not bound by Taiwan’s legal amendment prohibiting embedded marketing in political contexts (Freedom House 2012).

Embedded marketing and other forms of hybrid news are among many issues Taiwan media professionals experience in the workplace today. They also face pressure from political figures about media coverage (for example, Huang 2009); threats of advertising loss for not complying with corporate demands (for example, LaMay 2001); and potential threats to physical safety (for example, Warren 2007; Xu 2005). Rather than examining external factors reshaping media realities (for example, Hackett & Uzelman 2003; Hanitzsch & Mellado 2011), the purpose of the present study is to explore how some media professionals in Taiwan have reshaped their own social realities to make sense of their workplace experiences. Findings from Taiwan could have implications for the roles of reporters in other young democracies (for example, Ray 2012) where similar situations or challenges might exist.

Two factors make Taiwan suitable for the present study. First, the age of the media market could yield insights that an older democracy might not. This island nation has had a free press system for only three decades. Second, the expansiveness and competitiveness of the media market is unlike any other in geographic similarity. Taiwan has seven 24 x 7 news channels, four major nationally circulated newspapers, more than 360 privately owned newspapers, numerous radio stations and satellite television systems that carry 281 channels (Freedom House 2012).

Schudson (2002) contends that media make a daily cultural contribution to society through the active creation of messages, meanings and symbols. However, only a handful of scholars have explored the *raison d'être* of media professional activities from an insider's perspective (for example, Boudana 2010; Domingo 2008; Erzikova & Lowrey 2010; Paulussen & Ugille 2008). We seek to fill this gap in the research by employing social constructivism as a framework to understand how Taiwan media professionals experience their transitioned work roles.

Social constructivists contend that individuals formulate reality by making sense of their experiences. Social constructivism, then, is the process of social interactions by which people understand the world around them (Burlleson 2005). Individuals actively interpret the meaning of their environments and their very existence (Lindlof & Taylor 2011). The meanings they ascribe are always in flux: 'human actors [use] cultural stocks of knowledge to engage an ambiguous and reactive world and to serve their situated, evolving purposes' (Lindlof & Taylor 2011, p. 45). Interactions with others function as checks and balances for new social constructions because social constructions are continually tested in group interactions. It is only through perceived value that constructions are preserved. Constructed reality is connected to traditions, shared networks of understanding and knowledge–power relations (Olsson 2005). Power can shift away from individuals (for example, Creswell 2013), especially when social constructions are co-opted as institutional preferences (Lindlof & Taylor 2011). Low-power individuals must seek out alternative approaches for meaning making (Wood 2005) when experiencing competing social constructions.

In Taiwan, the rules of journalism are articulated through professional journalist organizations. The Association of Taiwan Journalists (ATJ) was founded in 1995 to assist media professionals in the struggle for news freedom, to promote professional ethics, to raise professional standards and to fulfil the responsibilities of the news media as an institution for public interests (ATJ 2013). The ATJ had more than 500 members in Taiwan as of 2004 (ATJ 2013). The Association became a member of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), the world's largest organization of journalists, in 1998. The IFJ promotes international action to defend press freedom and social justice among its estimated 600,000 members in more than 100 countries (IFJ 2014). Such professional organizations seek to elevate the role of media ethics in mitigating the changing nature of journalism in countries like Taiwan.

Despite the codification of standards via professional organizations, news values have been found to be far more complex than any set of rules would suggest (for example, Robie 2012). Schudson (2002) warns against expecting a common set of professional standards for journalists in a particular country. Deuze (2005, p. 458) suggested likewise: 'It is by studying how journalists from all walks of their professional life negotiate the core values that one can see the occupational ideology of journalism at work.' By exploring Taiwan media professionals from their own perspectives rather than through the lens of a predetermined set of guidelines, we will illuminate the dramatically changing realities of historically low-power individuals in the media industry.

Literature Review

Scholars expected the 1987 institution of press freedom in Taiwan to facilitate ethical and professional practice of journalists in the country (Lo et al. 2005). But charges of unprofessionalism (Lee 2003) and frequent criticisms about journalistic practices in the overcrowded media market have occurred instead. Some practices have prompted public outrage and resulted in various calls for media accountability and greater government controls (Xu 2005). Huang (2009) recommended that media abide by a strict set of guidelines to facilitate fair competition among journalists who serve the public interest through democratic ideals. Research on relationship between Taiwan politicians and journalists revealed that media were unaware of their role in democracy (Rawnsley & Gong 2011).

News outlets in Taiwan previously provided comprehensive, independent coverage of China (for example, Committee to Protect Journalists 2014a; Ramzy 2014), including open expression of opinions concerning the Taiwan independence movement (Rampal 1994). Some scholars contended that Taiwan media professionals had continued to serve the public interest. Media openly questioned the government's response to the 1999 earthquake and investigated into housing for the displaced and even faulty construction of buildings (Rawnsley 2000).

As political power in Taiwan has alternated between the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and the Chinese Nationalist Party or Kuomintang (KMT), both parties have continued to exert indirect control over Taiwan media (Huang 2009; Hung 2013). Influencers have been involved in media ownership and personnel decisions, getting government campaign messages into the news and promoting policies that favour certain media capitalists. These ownership concentrations are expected to continue (Warren 2007). The government in Taiwan has purchased or withheld major subsidies to influence advertising, thereby swaying media coverage in their favour (LaMay 2001).

Taiwan media have not adequately addressed social, economic and cultural issues due to various external and internal forces (Lee 2003). Socio-political realities in the Taiwan media industry have pushed some reporters to 'self-censor' (Committee to Protect Journalists 2014b; LaMay 2001).¹ Taiwan media managers who fear losing advertising dollars avoid covering disputes in which big companies are involved (Xu 2005).

The direct involvement of corporate owners co-opted with Chinese interests in editorial decisions and news angles has captured international attention (Cook 2013). Media scholars have also noted such threats for Taiwanese reporters who cover stories that dissatisfy political entities as lawsuits or being temporarily detained for conducting undercover investigations (Xu 2005).

The literature indicates that the expectations for Taiwan media professionals do not necessarily reflect the realities of the overcrowded and highly politicized industry. Much of the communication phenomena in the nation are bound by culture (Lo 2006). Given the evolving nature of the Taiwan media market, we posed the following research question:

RQ: How do Taiwan media professionals construct their work roles in the current environment?

Method

After receiving Institutional Review Board approval, we identified the study participants, Taiwan-based current and former media professionals, through purposive and snowball sampling (Tracy 2013). The inclusion of print, broadcast and online media professionals enabled us to obtain a comprehensive industry perspective. We contacted 30 professionals by telephone or e-mail between April and June 2011. Twenty agreed to participate (Table 1).

We chose in-depth interview as the method of study to enable socially constructed realities to emerge (Creswell 2013). The interview process allows researchers to learn which data are interesting and important (Tracy 2013). More relevant for the present study, Lo (2006) advised scholars conducting Taiwan-based communication research to employ in-depth interview methods to identify important information. The data collection instrument for the present study was a semi-structured interview guide (Daymon & Holloway 2011) to allow for dialogue

Table 1. Study Participants

Participant	Job Description
1.	Online media practitioner/part-time college professor
2.	Senior business magazine editor
3.	Former print/online news reporter
4.	Senior print editor
5.	Print magazine reporter
6.	Former print reporter and editor/college professor
7.	Cable television reporter
8.	Former cable television reporter
9.	Agency staff writer
10.	Current issue talk show regular guest
11.	Current issue talk show regular guest
12.	Cable television producer/former print reporter
13.	Agency staff reporter
14.	Executive officer of a major cable/broadcast company
15.	Freelance multimedia reporter
16.	Vice editor-in-chief of a major newspaper
17.	Cable/broadcast television anchor/editor
18.	Host of television issue talk show
19.	Cable/broadcast television anchor
20.	Cable/ broadcast television anchor

in the direction of study goals (Lindlof & Taylor 2011) and emergent topics (Table 2). Multifaceted data is the typical result of questions in semi-structured interviews (Tracy 2013).

Eighteen face-to-face interviews were held in Taiwan at locations that participants chose. Two interviews took place via video messaging system. Each hour-long interview was conducted in Mandarin and digitally recorded. The recorded interviews were transcribed and translated by a bilingual graduate assistant, and transliterated by the second author.

Since researchers are the instrument in qualitative research (McCracken 1988), we employed thematic analysis to explore interview transcripts. This kind of analysis involves identifying themes through pattern recognition whereby emerging themes become the categories for analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane 2006). We read each interview transcript and wrote paraphrases of participant remarks in the margins alongside relevant text. We met to discuss our initial understandings, and then created conceptual groupings of the data by category (Riessman 2005). We reread our paraphrases and labelled repeated ideas, words and phrases. The labelled sections became themes. Together, we added any final concepts that had not emerged during earlier readings. The categories that emerged from this analysis are identified in the next section with corresponding participant quotes.

Table 2. Interview Guide

Introduction of the interview to all participants.

1. Your full name and current title.
 2. Talk about your media experience.
 3. Your description of Taiwan's working environment, professional development, career and education.
 4. Bias of media professionals, companies and work culture.
 5. Competition among media, media conglomerates in Taiwan, Internet industry.
 6. Management of media companies.
 7. Trend of reporting, issues, impacts of advertisers and audiences/readership.
 8. Political influences and intervention, government policy.
 9. Political parties and their relation with media.
 10. Freedom of the press, any change.
 11. Public radio and television system, public news agency.
 12. Taiwanese media's issues and their competition in the Asia-Pacific region.
 13. News coverage overseas, China in particular.
 14. Agenda selection and impact.
 15. National identification, unification versus independence.
 16. Upcoming national presidential election coverage.
 17. Any topic that might have been missed and participant would like to add.
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Findings

Five major themes emerged from the analysis of interview transcripts: Internet expansion has prompted media shifts; reporter traits have changed substantially; stiff competition fosters dramatic licence; conventional news no longer exists; and reporters cope with mandatory coverage. Details of these themes indicating how study participants have reconstructed the rules of the Taiwan media environment follow.

Internet Expansions Prompted Media Shifts

Study participants said the expansion of the Internet has prompted media shifts. News affecting Taiwan was previously the purview of broadcast and print reporters, according to the participants, but online news reporters now share reporting responsibilities: 'There are so many bloggers in key areas of impact in Taiwan that many issues were recently initiated by bloggers' (Participant 1). Constructed reality is connected to knowledge–power relations, so online media professionals have gained power through information-sharing capabilities.

Citizen perceptions about Internet news have also changed. According to Participant 19, 'a lot of people were not willing to accept the electronic reporter's interview a few years ago'. Citizen reporters were previously viewed as reducing the standards of mainstream media, according to Participant 15. Now, some

Taiwan residents make financial contributions to citizen reporters to ensure the continuation of in-depth news reports via electronic news channels. What it means to be a news resource in Taiwan has changed as a result.

Power has also shifted away from print reporters because of the evaluative means media managers have adopted. The techniques employed for evaluating online coverage have led to erroneous claims of comparative success, as indicated by the following quote: 'Usually there will be a major newsletter that covers news and reports live, but because it is compared to the number of stories online that are clicked, the results are not fair' (Participant 2).

According to the tenets of social constructivism, low-power individuals must seek out alternative approaches for meaning making when experiencing competing social constructions. Some Taiwan print and broadcast media reporters have begun tailoring their strategies to compete on common ground with Internet reporters: they are sensationalizing headlines for the Internet versions of their stories to generate high click-through rates (Participant 2). In doing so, these reporters are formulating a new reality for the conventions of news reporting.

Study participants contend that traditional reporters have lost the status they once had in Taiwan: 'Authority news is no longer [in the hands of] only a few people from the media' (Participant 12). The socially constructed status of online news has shifted power away from traditional reporters and towards citizen reporters. Participant 9 said the influence of traditional media in Taiwan simply cannot match the rise of online media platforms. Study participants have adopted an alternative understanding of their environment to serve their evolving purposes. They have reinterpreted online platforms and citizen journalists as separate entities, thus recasting citizen journalists as low-power individuals. Study participants no longer have to view citizen journalists as a competitive threat.

Two incidents reveal the potential of citizen journalists in Taiwan. In one case, a broadcast station hosted a press conference in which the speaker inadvertently provided inaccurate information. A citizen journalist took to the Internet to quickly correct the story (Participant 9). Another incident involved a crime that a citizen captured on video and covered online:

The most popular news for four or five months was derived from a driving recorder monitor. A man was driving a racing car and behind him was an ambulance carrying a dying old lady to the hospital. He did not let the ambulance by. The video was posted on YouTube. Because the license plate number was visible, users began to search through the Internet to find out the identity of this man. (Participant 12)

Online news audiences have reached a substantial size, as noted by the following participant: 'Though the four media groups have their own websites, most Taiwanese tune into Yahoo's news site, which enjoys 80 percent of Taiwanese online news viewership' (Participant 1). Participant 9 also referenced audience size: 'Facebook, Plurk and Google Plus have their own communities. Many people will see each posting of information. Slowly you will find information will

be spread out because people will share it.' Study participants have also formulated an alternative meaning for the size of the online audience: online reporters might have more *reach* than actual *influence* in the industry. 'Electronic media will not take over traditional media's power' (Participant 9).

Reporter Traits have Changed Substantially

Study participants said reporter traits have changed substantially in the Taiwan media market. The new generation of media professionals in Taiwan is not as prepared as their predecessors, and participants place blame on the education system:

The major problem for communication education in Taiwan is that the Department of Education uses standardized evaluation to assess each and every program, thus requiring each communication program to have faculty with PhDs and to have a certain amount of research output. Therefore, more theoretical classes are offered in colleges while professional training becomes secondary. (Participant 1)

Social constructivism holds that the meanings individuals ascribe to their environments are always in flux. Such is the case with assigning blame in Taiwan. In addition to insufficient educational preparation, Participant 12 attributed unsatisfactory reporter capabilities to a lack of narrative skills, supervision and experience: 'Many people do not know how to tell stories. Without good supervision, a lot of attractive elements are not there...we have a new generation of media practitioners with no experience [in covering issues and beats]' (Participant 12).

Other study participants attributed changed reporter traits to the demographic shift in the media environment triggered by cost-saving downsizing. One major newspaper lured several senior-level editors into early retirement with pension as an incentive, according to Participant 6. The loss in senior-level reporters then led to lower-quality political news: 'There is a great need for this accumulation of experience, I feel terrible that we cannot pass it on' (Participant 6). Executives are younger and senior correspondents are nearly non-existent, according to Participant 10. The majority of the reporters around Taipei are about 30 years old; when they are over 40, they are probably approaching the end of their journalism career (Participant 10).

Participant 17 said individuals of particular generations tend to have common interests, but acknowledged not knowing how such individuals formulate particular values. It is unknown whether changed reporter traits will be sustained as a new reality of the Taiwan media industry. Study participants' constructions about changing demographics would have to be tested in interactions with media professionals and deemed useful for the industry to embrace this new reality.

According to study participants, current Taiwan media professionals have more responsibilities than their predecessors. Participant 6 said a newspaper that previously had one editor per region of Taiwan now has one editor in charge of the entire nation. The tiny foreign correspondence staff at another publication consisted of three foreign editors: 'two Americans and a Canadian' (Participant 13). Likewise, the news agency that employs Participant 9 has five reporters but more than 100 business-side employees: the majority of agency profits come from advertising-heavy trade publications. To make sense of their labour-intensive experiences as media professionals, Taiwan reporters would have to actively interpret the meaning of their workplace experiences.

Stiff Competition Fosters Dramatic Licence

Study participants said that stiff competition in the Taiwan media market has led many reporters to use dramatic licence in their work roles. These reporters have effectively reconstructed what it means to be a media professional. Some news journalists have reinterpreted the experience of news reporting by adopting entertainment media techniques:

*Apple Daily*² has changed Taiwanese viewer habits. It sort of forces news professionals to change their ways of producing news content. In the past, there are certain rules for newscast production. News professionals would not secretly shoot videos without the consent of news makers. Now it is all changed. (Participant 6)

Other reporters disseminate news that has already appeared in other media: 'Everybody just copies each other; the content is all the same. The only difference is that anchors look different and the tag lines/teasers at the bottom of the screen vary from channel to channel' (Participant 12). Participant 4 noted the same phenomenon: 'The news is gradually converging; from newspapers to television, the news is almost always identical.' Conventional understandings of news among Taiwan media professionals appear to have been displaced by the demands of the competitive media market. Participants 6, 7 and 11 said reporters often use material from other media because they do not have time to develop topics on their own. Taiwan reporters must constantly construct new ways to appear competitive and competent with limited resource and time available. 'Reporters have to dig up little things every day to stay ahead of the competition' (Participant 7).

Study participants indicate that some Taiwan media professionals have adopted new techniques to cope with the current environment. Some young reporters copy video and audio from the Internet for news stories, according to Participant 19. Other reporters use popular video downloads and surveillance cameras as news source material: 'What happened on the streets the day before would be broadcast for morning' (Participant 12). By using unconventional news-gathering techniques, these media professionals are reformulating their professional roles.

Study participants said that Taiwan media professionals have had to adapt their understanding of *news* to the constructions that media managers have created. Participant 12 said ‘live news’ has taken on a whole new meaning: ‘Some media’s strategy is to be the first to arrive...the whole point is it must be live even if nothing happens.’ Participants 19 and 20 said likewise about ‘exclusive news’ stories. Exclusives previously had to be public interest stories; now ‘we will call a story an exclusive as long as it is not [recorded] at someone’s home’ (Participant 19). Such stories can be created from something as innocuous as an expired beverage in a store. To locate so-called exclusives, reporters must work holidays, weekends, and handle their own camera work, said Participant 20.

Some reporters were caught up in making up entire news stories: ‘They’re using an anonymous source of news to cover up their own fake stories’ (Participant 6). The above-mentioned circumstances are inconsistent with traditional news constructions; however, social constructivism suggests that dramatic constructions licence as news would be short lived. It is unlikely that fiction would become a primary source of news content in Taiwan because constructions must be deemed accurate and useful in order to survive.

Conventional News No Longer Exists

Study participants suggest that conventional news no longer exists in Taiwan. The methods of news gathering and the content of news stories differ greatly from traditional news norms, according to Participant 8. Taiwan media professionals appear to be reinterpreting their roles in order to understand the media environment.

Some Taiwan media have been active participants in reformulating their workplace roles. Newspapers have become more simplistic and eye-catching in response to sensationalistic tabloids, according to Participant 12. Story headlines on television news have also changed, expanding the traditional doctrine of capturing audience attention within eight seconds. ‘A very provocative subject matter is a way to get the audience’s attention’ (Participant 8). Conventional news no longer has the complexity it once did, according to some study participants. ‘There are specific programs that [previously] reported policies that would be more focused on analysis, but out of every news station there are only a few programs that will do that analysis’ (Participant 8). Labelling the media industry ‘YouTube journalism’, Participant 12 said that hard news has been replaced by feature stories—much of it anecdotal coverage of anti-social behaviour.

Study participants indicate that editorial and advertising has become blurred in some Taiwan news channels. According to Participant 16, the Chinese government has purchased embedded marketing stories in Taiwan newspapers that are designed to be indistinguishable from other news stories. Participant 19 has experienced a similar blurring of news and editorial: news stations that previously required broadcasters to cover up company brand names now might highlight logos during interviews to honour celebrity endorsement deals (Table 3).

Table 3. Terminology of Hybrid News

Covert advertising/Hybrid messages/Promotional news	All texts that have been paid for and published in the form of regular news. Sources (sponsors) are not identified and content can be prepared by either journalists or others (Balasubramanian 1994; Erjavec 2004; Mohan 2011; Štular 2009; Tomažic et al. 2014).
Cross-promotion	Promoting programming content, products (for example, transcripts and videos) or services (for example, websites and hotlines) within newscasts that benefit the news organization or its corporate owner (Wood et al. 2004).
Embedded marketing/Product placement	The practice of planting advertisements into programmes, movies, news stories, literary works, stage performances, etc., wherein no advertisement is expected (Freedom House 2012; Wang 2012).
Envelope/Brown envelope journalism/Red envelope journalism/Sitting allowance	Sources providing money to journalists in order to gain preferred media coverage (Committee to Protect Journalists 2014b; Kasoma 2009; Sinaga & Wu 2007). It is part of the professional culture; but not pushed or coerced by the media organization.
Paid articles	Material more or less resembling journalistic articles, but published with some indication that the article is paid for by a company or institution to get into the paper (Nevinskaitė 2009).
Public relations news	All published news that contains basically unchanged public relations information that appears without citing the source and attempts to promote or protect certain people or organizations (Erjavec 2005).

The role of media professionals in Taiwan has been reconstructed as a market-based rather than a civic-minded profession. ‘At the end of the day, the media industry is a commercial environment’, said Participant 14. ‘You are there to make a profit; you have demands to make money.’ Participant 20 agreed: ‘If you are a commercial television station, you are a business. Bosses are looking at the ratings and looking for profits.’ For Participant 8, using strong words or images to attract ratings is an inevitability of broadcast news; after all, television ratings must be high enough for a station to make money. A commerce-based construction of the Taiwan media industry essentially means that conventional news can no longer exist.

Media Cope with Mandatory Coverage

Study participants said that Taiwan media professionals are sometimes required to cover certain stories or to frame news in a particular way. When media professionals

must write to the exacting standards they are given, existing social constructions have been co-opted as institutional preferences. Power entirely shifts away from media professionals in such situations. Participant 12 said that it is not ideal training for young reporters—especially those with little experience in developing news. After they conduct an interview, for example: ‘Their job is not to come back to write a tremendous amount of facts, but to [frame a story]’ (Participant 12). Media professionals who are new to the industry might not initially understand how to frame messages into predetermined news stories. Social constructivism suggests that these professionals will begin to understand their work roles through ongoing interactions with their colleagues.

Powerful business and political entities have reshaped the environment in which Taiwan media professionals operate. Study participants said that requirements for news stories often come with financial incentives for a given media firm. The Chinese government, for example, has increased its frequency of funding (via different avenues) for Taiwan reporters to travel to the mainland for news in recent years. Reporters who receive such funds are expected to report flattering stories about China (Participant 5). Since social realities are connected to existing traditions, Taiwan media professionals must construct their own realities to make sense of new workplace traditions.

Study participants said that corporate advertisers also greatly influence media operations in Taiwan:

Media begin to not offend advertisers since they are after the revenue. Advertisers who face negative news will skip advertising, or they may have further requirements: Their advertisement must be by positive news that is reported. Eventually, advertisers direct specific media to help them release news. (Participant 1)

Constructivists contend that collective beliefs of a work environment are often determined by those in power. In the above-mentioned scenario, the social constructions of editorial roles have been co-opted by powerful advertisers, corporate interests and government entities, while the rank-and-file reporters often don’t have any clue as to how the direction shifts.

The Chinese government maintains an influence on what stories Taiwan media professionals cover, according to a number of study participants. Twenty-seven years of press freedom is not enough for the martial law era to fully disappear, said Participant 18, especially with the monopoly that KMT maintains in the marketplace. Media professionals know they should not report about the Tiananmen massacre, the Dalai Lama or the Falun Gong (spiritual group)³ (Participant 17). Freelance journalists also face pressure from government entities regarding the news they report. Participant 15 has received several ‘cease and desist’ letters from government attorneys after publishing certain news stories: ‘the letters they send me are unreasonable; I am very careful with my reporting, but they cause a psychological burden’. The KMT has sued Participant 18 multiple times—unsuccessfully thus far—for perceived offences of the KMT cabinet ministers.

According to social constructivists, individuals actively interpret the meaning of their environments and their very existence. Participant 10 interpreted the Taiwan media environment as one that would not change, but offered an alternative interpretation for media professionals: 'If you really do not like this environment, your only choice is to leave this line of business.'

Discussion

It is theoretically and practically essential for scholars to examine how media can live up to industry expectations and serve a democratic society. In the present study, 20 Taiwan media professionals have provided insights about working in a highly competitive but free media environment. The traditional news tenets of being impartial, objective and neutral have been trumped by the demand for media conglomerates to make huge profits, treating news as a commodity. As the literature and various study participants indicate, entire editorial content can be tailored exclusively by the demands of funding sources. The Taiwan media environment appears to serve the purpose of senior-level business managers (or more specifically, owners) rather than individual news workers.

Participant responses indicate that media professionals have had to reframe their understanding of professionalism. Several major news stories in the past few years were found to be false, showing the temptations and competition reporters face. The relevance of media ethics remains significant—even under the present circumstances. It is only through maintaining personal standards that media professionals can navigate the transitioning industry. The industry is not always conducive to serving the public interests. For Taiwan citizens, the existing media environment might hinder public access to vital information that journalists previously uncovered through traditional and independent investigative reporting (for example, Rampal 1994; Rawsley 2000). Public forums to express social, political, economic and cultural views could also be restricted when organizations pay for media coverage (LaMay 2001).

A chasm exists between the functions of professional journalists and journalism education in Taiwan. Previous scholarship has revealed related concerns. When Rawsley and Gong (2011) conducted research on the relationship between Taiwan politicians and journalists, they found that the media were unaware of their role in democracy. New reporters who cannot perform at the level the competitive environment dictates might be unprepared for the workplace. The short-term consequences could be lower-quality news (for example, Lee 2003). In the long term, media firms could end up experiencing a drop in customer satisfaction, viewer ratings and company value. Media corporations might decide to hire advertisers to write, co-write (for example, Kovačič & Erjavec 2010) or ghost-write stories to make up lost market share, or avoid covering stories about advertisers (Xu 2005).

The dramatic licence some Taiwan media professionals have taken in their news stories runs counter to the conventional rules of the profession (ATJ 2013), indicating Xu (2005) might have been right in calling for a new set of guidelines. Self-regulation of the media companies could be introduced, which could be more effective than direct governmental intervention. The media associations in Taiwan, however, lack power.

Adaptive techniques that Taiwan media professionals have employed such as re-airing stories and disseminating low-quality broadcasts might be inevitable in the overcrowded market, but they lend credence to charges of unprofessionalism by Lee (2003). Additionally, these media techniques inhibit plurality of perspectives in Taiwan media casting doubt on the anticipation of professional principles in the newly free media environment (Lo et al. 2005).

Findings from the present study correspond with scholar suggestions that the rift between traditional and emerging media professionals will widen (for example, Domingo 2008; Paulussen & Ugille 2008). Credibility in traditional Taiwan media likely suffered when enterprising online reporters used the Web to correct traditional media mistakes. It is notable, however, that study participants hinted at potential symbiosis between traditional and online media professionals. Some study participants anticipate development of independent online news outlets where Taiwan's National Communication Commission does not govern the Internet, consistent with reporting by the Committee to Protect Journalists (2014b).

Given the fact that Taiwan government has condemned embedded marketing (for example, Freedom House 2012), it was unexpected to find evidence of the practice in the present study. The stance of the ATJ about embedded marketing was clear when its undercover investigation of *The China Times* revealed that the paper had been paid by a press officer in China to cover a visit by governor of Fujian province (Committee to Protect Journalists 2014b).

Like reporters in Europe (Nevinskaitė 2009), Indonesia (Sinaga & Wu 2007), Slovenia (Štular 2009), Zambia and Ghana (Kasoma 2009), some Taiwan reporters are required by the management to report stories that meet sponsors' goals. Unlike journalists in the United Kingdom (Lewis, Williams & Franklin 2008) or Slovenia (for example, Kovačič & Erjavec 2010; Štular 2009), however, study participants did not cite low salaries, economic constraints or travel and gift opportunities as factors in accepting money for media coverage.

The major difference between media professionals in other countries and those in Taiwan is that Taiwan reporters do not have a choice but to accept the task or leave the firm. Taiwan media professionals might need greater accountability (Xu 2005), a more strict set of guidelines (Huang 2009) or regulations to facilitate news in the public interest. In other words, Taiwan press laws and journalists associations need enhanced capabilities.

Conclusion

Our study indicates that some media professionals in the island nation continue to experience a myriad of internal and external pressures in the overcrowded market.

Rather than merely conform to controversial industry expectations, these media professionals have reconstructed the rules by which they operate.

The single-country context of the present study could be considered a limitation. Quantitative investigations of other democratic countries could provide a more comprehensive result. A case study analyzing the influence China has on Taiwan media coverage would extend the focus of the present study to the issue of public diplomacy across borders. Research could yield compelling findings about transnational influence on media output (for example, Melissen 2007).

Another limitation of the present study is the size of the dataset. Future scholars could conduct comparative analysis of interviews with media professionals in more countries to explore the study phenomenon.

Taiwan media realities now include Internet-driven media shifts; changed reporter traits; dramatic licence due to stiff competition; the departure from conventional news; and reporters coping with mandatory coverage. Study participants have reconstructed the rules of the media environment to contend with those new realities. More observations of how the media situation evolves would be of great interest to media scholarship.

Notes

1. Self-censorship is defined as ‘non-externally compelled acts committed by media organizations aiming to avoid offending power holders such as the government, advertisers, and major business corporations’ (Lee & Chan 2009, p. 112). Although this definition appeared in a study about media in Hong Kong, it adequately describes the experience of self-censorship among Taiwan media professionals in the present study.
2. *Apple Daily* is a popular newspaper known for being critical of the Communist Party (Cook 2013), investigative reporting and sometimes, salacious reporting (Freedom House 2013).
3. According to Freedom House (2013), a citizen of Taiwan was held and questioned for two months in 2012. He had previously distributed information about the Falun Gong spiritual group, which is banned in China. Thanks to a campaign by Taiwanese politicians and activists, the man was eventually released.

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