

# 6 Journalists in Taiwan

## Marketplace Challenges in a Free Media System

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### Introduction

The threat to journalistic freedom and practice has been a constant concern in human history, and the usual suspects often come from political arenas (Schudson, 2002; Warren, 2007). However, that history for Taiwan is more recent. Press freedom was nonexistent after the end of World War II due to martial law imposed by the Chinese Nationalist Party, the Kuomintang (KMT). Nationalist authorities aimed to use the island as a base to fight the Communists across the Taiwan Straits, thus imposing authoritarian rule between 1949 and 1987. In the wake of mass protests in 1987, the KMT lifted the ban on press freedom and political parties (Ching-Lung, 2009). As of 2017, Taiwan was ranked “free” by Freedom House (2017) and Reporters without Borders [Reporters sans Frontières, or RSF] (2017).

The massive size and competitiveness of Taiwan’s media market is unlike any other in the Asia-Pacific region. Taiwan has seven 24/7 cable television news channels and 56 cable channel operators airing 277 cable channels, plus 2,000 newspapers—360 of them privately owned—and 4,400 magazines (Freedom House, 2016; Hsu, 2014; Rickards, 2016).

Taiwan’s professional journalists represent a unique subset of the profession: their press freedom remains irrevocably linked to their historical and geographic proximity to China. And while the World Press Freedom Index ranks Taiwan the freest press system in Asia, the Asia-Pacific region is the third-worst violator overall (Reporters without Borders, 2017).

Taiwanese journalists continue to face pressure from political figures (Ching-Lung, 2009) and interference from public officials. For example:

In July 2015, Taipei police arrested three reporters who had followed student demonstrators into Taiwan’s Ministry of Education complex; they were released the same day. Police maintained that the reporters had trespassed because they did not obtain permission from relevant authorities to enter the ministry’s premises. However, Mayor Ko claimed that police had infringed on press freedom, and apologized for the incident.

(Freedom House, 2016, p. 9)

Private owners with political connections have “altered editorial lines or dismissed key staff after acquiring previously independent outlets” (Karlekar & Dunham, 2014, p. 1). Evidence of management intervention surfaced in the *Washington Post* when Tsai Eng-Meng, a Chinese billionaire owner of media firms in Taiwan, was asked about firing an editor who had published an article criticizing Mainland China’s leading negotiator on future reunification. Tsai said journalists “need to think carefully before they write” and avoid “insults that cause offense” (Higgins, 2012, p. 9).

Political power in Taiwan has alternated between the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and the KMT, but both parties have exerted indirect control over the media (Ching-Lung, 2009). Political interests have been directly involved in media ownership, regulations, and personnel decisions (Liu et al., 2016), as well as in orchestrating government campaign messages in the news.

Professional organizations seek to maintain journalistic standards. The Association of Taiwan Journalists (ATJ) promotes professional ethics, assists journalists in crisis, and advances the responsibility of the media as a public-interest institution (Association of Taiwan Journalists, 2013). In the wake of numerous media missteps covering politics, the ATJ has called for greater self-discipline and sought commonly acceptable rules so journalists can compete fairly and act in the public interest by serving democracy (Ching-Lung, 2009).

## **Statement of the Problem**

Journalists’ compromised practices significantly violate ethics principles, such as professional autonomy and societal harm (Plaisance, 2009). Thus, this study explores how professional journalists define their occupational role in the contemporary media market. “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” (Deuze, 2005, p. 458). Given the evolving nature of the Taiwan media market and changing role of journalists, we pose this guiding research question: How do Taiwanese journalists define their occupational role in a free media system where ethics can be compromised?

## **Method**

Scholars who have employed the interview method have uncovered valuable, nuanced perspectives from Taiwanese journalists’ perspectives (Hsu, 2014; Voltmer & Wasserman, 2014). The authors developed an interview guide, a list of questions for study participants (Patton, 2002). To comprehensively explore the Taiwan media marketplace, the authors identified journalists with professional work experience.

By using snowball sample recruiting, in which they asked participants meeting study parameters to recommend peers with similar profiles (Tracy, 2013), they contacted 30 news professionals in print, broadcast, and online media by telephone or e-mail between April and June 2011. Twenty professionals agreed to participate (Table 6.1).

The authors conducted in-person, individual interviews at each participant's workplace. All participants read and signed an informed consent statement assuring confidentiality. Participants agreed to have their interviews digitally recorded. Because the interviews were conducted in Mandarin, a bilingual graduate assistant transcribed and translated the interviews. The second author transliterated the transcripts, "replacing or complementing the words or meanings of one language with meanings of another as sometimes the exact equivalence or exact meaning might not exist" (Regbi, Naidoo, & Pilkington, 2010, p. 18).

To analyze the transcripts, the authors employed thematic analysis, gathering documents of individuals' self-reported experiences, grouping transcripts by categories, and organizing them based on meanings (Creswell, 2012; Riessman, 2005). They read each transcript individually, highlighting repeated ideas, words, and phrases. They reviewed highlighted passages to create broad conceptual groupings of concepts. Subsequently, the authors discussed how they grouped transcript text. After reviewing their separate conceptual groupings and notes, they combined their findings into categories (Riessman, 2005). They then labeled transcript texts according to the new categories.

*Table 6.1 Study Participants*

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Job Description</i>
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	News agency staff writer
10	Current issues talk show regular guest
11	Current issues talk show regular guest
12	Cable television producer/former print reporter
13	News agency staff reporter
14	Executive officer of a major cable/broadcast company
15	Freelance multi-media reporter
16	Vice editor-in-chief of a major newspaper
17	Cable/broadcast TV anchor/editor
18	Host of TV issues talk show
19	Cable/broadcast TV anchor
20	Cable/ broadcast TV anchor

During the next stage of analysis, the authors discussed the contexts of the interviews according to participants (Creswell, 2012). Their discussion revealed that journalists experience external, internal, and market-based obstructions to press freedom and ethical practice. After considering the categories in context, they refined the categories into themes.

## Findings

The study's participants define their occupational role through six distinctive themes: (1) internet expansion has transformed the media; (2) reporter traits have changed substantially; (3) competitive market lowers news standards; (4) government pressure shapes media coverage; (5) market impediments diminish press freedom; and (6) journalists resist press freedom restrictions. Excerpts illustrating these themes follow.

### *Internet Expansion Has Transformed the Media*

The internet has transformed the media industry for journalists and news consumers. News affecting Taiwan was previously the purview primarily of broadcast and print reporters. Their marketplace domination has changed because online news reporters now share reporting responsibilities.

Some participants have noticed citizens' views regarding internet news has improved. According to Participant 19, "a lot of people were not willing to accept the electronic reporter's interviews a few years ago." People previously expressed concern about the potential for poor-quality internet news, said Participant 15, but an influx of in-depth reports via electronic news channels suggests some such fears were unfounded: Citizens now make direct financial contributions to online journalists on the topics they deem meaningful or significant.

Participants contend that traditional mainstream reporters have lost their former status: "News of authority is no longer [in the hands of] only a few people from the media," said Participant 12. According to Participant 9, the influence of traditional media cannot match that of online media platforms sometimes.

Journalists say e-mail, social media, websites, and search engines are equally popular choices for staying up-to-date (PRNewswire Association, 2016). Public access and usage suggests comparable online interest. Eighty-eight percent of the population has internet access (Freedom House, 2016). Thirty-five million visitors access the online portal *Apple Daily*, Taiwan's second-largest newspaper (Rickards, 2016).

Techniques employed for measuring views of online stories have led to flawed claims of success. Broadcast reporters previously praised for their ability to cover major news stories live find their perceived quality

diminished in a marketplace that assigns quantifiable value. Online news that viewers can access multiple times will always exceed viewership of a single-aired live report (Participant 2). At least one participant suggests that online journalists might have more *reach* than actual *influence* compared to traditional mainstream journalists. “Electronic media will not take traditional media’s power” (Participant 9). Traditional newspapers have thus far led the transition from print to digital multimedia, according to Rickards (2016). Major newspapers have improved web portals, focused on mobile platforms, and begun offering videos and live broadcasts online.

### ***Reporter Traits Have Changed Substantially***

Members of the new generation of professional journalists enter the profession with less professional training than their predecessors, and participants blame Taiwan’s 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 Ph.D.s and to have a certain amount of research output. Therefore, more theoretical classes are offered in colleges while professional training becomes secondary.

(Participant 1)

A chasm exists between the functions of professional journalists and journalism education. Reporters who cannot perform at the level the competitive environment dictates might be unprepared for the workplace. Participant 12 attributed 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].”

Other participants attributed changed reporter traits to the demographic shift among journalists triggered by cost-saving downsizing. One major newspaper lured several senior-level editors into early retirement with pensions as an incentive, according to Participant 6. The loss in senior-level professionals led to lower-quality political news coverage: “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 nonexistent, according to Participant 10. Most reporters working around Taipei are about 30; when they are over 40, they are probably approaching the end of their journalism career (Participant 10).

Workload is also a factor for professionals whose responsibilities exceed those of their predecessors. Participant 6 said a newspaper with

one editor per region previously now has one editor in charge of the entire country. The international desk at another publication consisted of only three foreign correspondents: “two Americans and a Canadian” (Participant 13).

Several participants said their news outlets use material from other media because they lack time or resources to explore, investigate, and develop topics on their own. “Everybody just copies each other; the content is all the same. The only difference is that anchors look different and the tag lines at the bottom of the screen vary from channel to channel” (Participant 12).

Journalists are expected to exercise their professional roles as “rational beings with moral duties” (Plaisance, 2009, p. 137), which is literally impossible in Taiwan’s market-driven environment.

### *Competitive Market Lowers News Standards*

Participants suggest that some journalists have adopted new techniques to cope with the current environment. Some young reporters, for instance, 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 [the] morning” (Participant 12).

Although Taiwanese journalists have not always fully embraced their role in a democracy (Rawnsley & Gong, 2011), journalists in this study acknowledged the importance of ethically minded media working in service of the public interest. They constantly struggle to retain their professional ideals for journalists. Lowered news standards run counter to the conventional rules of the profession (Association for Taiwan Journalists, 2013).

Reporters have reconstructed the meanings of *live* and *exclusive* stories: “Some media’s strategy is to be the first to arrive...The whole point is it must be live—even if nothing happens,” Participant 12 said. Reporters have also changed the meaning of exclusives, which previously had to be public interest stories. Now “we will call a story an exclusive as long as it is not [recorded] at a [reporter’s] home” (Participant 19). Such stories may originate from something as innocuous as an expired beverage in a store. To generate so-called exclusives, reporters work in holidays, weekends, and handle their own camera work (Participant 20).

Stiff competition in the media market leads many reporters to reinterpret news reporting by adopting entertainment media techniques. Newspapers have become more simplistic and eye-catching in response to tabloids, according to Participant 12. Magazines and newspapers place sensational stories upfront in their publications—what Participant 12 called a fast-food technique—to boost circulation. Readers might never read public affairs stories because they are located behind celebrity interviews.

Conventional stories no longer have the complexity they once did, according to some participants. “There are specific programs that [previously] reported policies that would be more focused on analysis, but of all news stations, only a few programs will pursue that type of analysis” (Participant 8). Labelling the media industry “YouTube journalism,” Participant 12 said features about antisocial behaviors have replaced hard news.

Participant 18 noticed an immediate industry-wide change when *Apple Daily* launched in 2003. Most Taiwan newspapers at the time were printed all in black-and-white; *Apple Daily* used splashy visuals, enlarged images, photographs, and bright colors. In response, other major newspapers began using color and reduced their prices (Rawnsley & Rawnsley, 2012). Despite a salacious reporting approach, *Apple Daily* has developed a reputation for objective investigative reporting (Cook, 2013; Rickards, 2016). It currently ranks second in circulation nationally, behind the *Liberty Times* with an average daily readership of 2.45 million.

### *Government Pressure Shapes Media Coverage*

The Chinese government maintains an influence on what stories journalists in Taiwan cover, sometimes exerting that influence through financial incentives. The Chinese government has in recent years increased its frequency of funding for Taiwanese reporters to travel to the Mainland to cover news stories. In exchange, China expects reporters who receive such funds to report positive stories about the Mainland (Participant 5).

Sociopolitical realities of the Taiwan media market shape the ways journalists function (Cheung, 2017; Committee to Protect Journalists, 2014; Hsu, 2014). As journalists renegotiate their professional roles in democratic Taiwan, lingering mistrust remains between them and their interview sources (Rawnsley & Gong, 2011). Participant 9 recounted what happened when political talk shows openly criticized Taiwan’s ruling party. Campaign officials conducted public opinion polls whose results indicated that talk show viewers disagreed with media criticism of the ruling party. Participant 9, however, doubted the veracity of those findings because polling data was not made available publicly.

Officials and legislators use an assortment of political resources to intervene the media marketplace. Taiwan’s Government Information Office has used journalism awards “to establish and exemplify its journalistic preferences and thus control news production” (Huang, 2013, p. 436).

Journalists understand how important it is to comply with government requests. Participant 10 said, “Journalists who anger the ruling party may not be promoted.” Some government pressure occurs during elections. Participants said such guidelines include their social media profiles as well. “Colleagues who are blogging or on Facebook or other social networks must speak with caution and be very careful during the election campaign cycle” (Participant 14).

Political parties have media budgets to promote their candidates; some even provide incentives to media that then assign a designated broadcasting team to travel with the favored candidates to ensure extensive, constant—and likely favorable—coverage.

Participants noted how difficult it is to report about issues relevant to China. Participant 7, a cable television reporter, said interviewing sources from China requires extensive initial discussions so China can gather sufficient background information before agreeing to allow an interview. That includes requiring reporters to provide profiles of their media companies, detailed information about the interview's purpose, article titles, and exactly when or where the story will air or appear.

In 2015, high-profile political commentator Clara Chou was sued for defamation by the eventual KMT presidential candidate for questioning the authenticity of the candidate's master's degree. A former Taiwan president also sued Chou in 2015 for alleging he accepted political donations from a scandal-ridden business conglomerate (Freedom House, 2016). Freelancers also face tremendous pressure from governmental entities regarding the news they report. Participant 15 received several "cease and desist" letters from government attorneys after publishing stories. "The letters they send me are unreasonable. I am very careful with my reporting, but they cause a psychological burden." The KMT has also sued Participant 18 multiple times, alternately claiming that a television talk show spread falsehoods or damaged the party's reputation.

### *Market Impediments Diminish Press Freedom*

Journalists now serve a dual role, according to Participant 7, a cable television reporter: maximizing profit for the company while also serving the public interest. The news agency that employs Participant 9 employs only five reporters but 100 business-side employees.

A revenue-driven media operation might abandon its social responsibility role to inform, investigate, and uncover important issues, treating news simply as a commodity (Foundation for Excellent Journalism, 2017; Hamilton, 2006). McManus (1994) recommended a proactive media approach when he posited the market-based model of commercial news production. His lofty ideas included educating journalists as professionals, appealing to media executives' social conscience, adopting new technologies, and reshaping public demands and media choices.

Journalists understand the vast influence of business decisions. When sensationalized headlines for online stories generate high click-through rates, they enable marketing departments to use artificially boosted viewer ratings that attract advertising revenue (Participant 2).

Considerable negative consequences exist for those who do not adhere to market-driven expectations. Advertisers could demand that their ads appear beside positive articles about their companies, according to



Participant 1. Worse, companies could simply stop advertising if a media outlet runs stories that do not cast them in a positive light (e.g., LaMay, 2001).

Several advertisers already direct media outlets to report on company information on their behalf under the guise of news, thus limiting journalistic autonomy. Participant 19 experienced a similar blurring of advertising and editorial content. News stations that previously required broadcasters to cover up company brand names now might highlight their logos to honor celebrity endorsement deals during interviews. Substantial financial incentives from advertisers have effectively integrated the editorial and sales sides of media firms.

The Foundation for Excellent Journalism is a nongovernmental organization established in response to requests for independent assessments. Its Foundation for Excellent Journalism Award (2017) was created in part to reverse the media commercialization trend in favor of independent journalism. Consistent support from media executives and/or nonprofit entities that are conscientious about the news media's social responsibilities could reduce impediments to press freedom and foster the ethical practice of journalism. The ideal business model would facilitate dissemination of public-interest stories by challenging obstacles to reporting. Taiwan's case may shed new light on scenarios where business interests could compromise media ethics.

### *Journalists Resist Press Freedom Restrictions*

Journalists rarely disagree overtly with their companies' policies, according to Participant 8, and they are acutely aware that the risks of speaking out are substantial. Some reporters have adopted *self-censorship* (Freedom House, 2016; Rickards, 2016), "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).<sup>1</sup>

Thanks to vocal criticism from journalists, the Taipei City Police Department was unable to establish designated "press zones" at illegal demonstrations. Taipei's mayor also abandoned a proposal to require journalists to wear identifying vests while covering demonstrations (Freedom House, 2016).

Reporters face considerable resistance when speaking openly about the principles of media ethics. Participant 13 noted that reporter associations working to expand press freedom have faced accusations of politically motivated dishonesty. Additionally, those accusing the reporter associations managed to refocus public attention on unprofessionalism among some disreputable reporters. With powerful interest groups and citizens speaking against them, journalists had less independence than they did prior to speaking out about press freedom.

Only through maintaining high professional standards can journalists navigate Taiwan's evolving media industry. Individual cases indicate seasoned journalists have been able to independently report stories unfettered. Many well-known but disappointed veteran journalists have left mainstream media firms to create blogs or websites, but few can sustain themselves financially that way. The cloak of online anonymity grants some journalists press freedom they would not have offline. Citizen reporters, for example, launched their own investigations to expose the truth about government officials hiding money, according to Participant 5.

Online media consumers, many of whom hold different interests than their mainstream media counterparts, have indirectly influenced press freedom. Millions of seemingly spontaneous voices contribute to the marketplace of ideas on the internet, forcing politicians to respond to issues they might not otherwise have addressed in the mainstream media.

## Conclusion

Taiwan's Constitution (Article 11) specifically addresses press freedom and political freedom. Nevertheless, journalists have had to redefine their occupational role in the contemporary media market where business interests sometimes trump journalism tenets. The workplace challenges journalists continue to face are a reflection of Taiwan's semi-laissez-faire media policy.

This study should serve as a wake-up call for media practitioners in all young democracies grappling with obstacles to journalistic standards. Although press freedom and independent media operation are embraced, China's restriction and policies often impede the norm of journalism across the Straits. Stories from Taiwanese journalists who cover the Mainland are bound to be incomplete and lack impartiality due to China's self-serving guidelines. Unfortunately, Taiwan's rating as the freest press in Asia is more indicative of worsening situations elsewhere than actual improvements on the island (Reporters without Borders, 2017).

## Note

- 1 Although this definition appeared in a study about media in Hong Kong, it accurately describes the experience of self-censorship among Taiwanese journalists.

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