

TAIWAN SYMPOSIUM

The Three-Pronged Approach to Reforming Taiwan's Media under Neoliberalism

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Introduction

The media are a central component of any society and can constitute an important foundation upon which a nation establishes fairness, justice, and diversity. The situation in Taiwan has yet to provide the political and legal conditions for its media to contribute to these important objectives. During the Martial Law period, the media acted as a political “mouth-piece” that enabled an authoritarian regime to consolidate rule in Taiwan. Since the democratic transition of the late 1980s, the media has become a tool for capitalist profit-making, yet the state has still retained an influence. However, a variety of burgeoning social movements have challenged the power of the government and capital in different ways. They have sought to make the media better serve the public interest in terms of cultural diversity, human rights, and environmental protection. They have demanded greater freedom of the press as well as a larger role for public service broadcasting.

Despite political democratization since the late 1980s, neoliberal ideas and the over-optimistic liberalization policies adopted by the government have run counter to the goals pursued by media reform movements. Reform strategies and actions that aim to strengthen the structure of the media are, therefore, a primary focus for future media reform. This assessment for Taiwan is in line with American communications scholar Robert W. McChesney's analysis of media and needed reforms in the United States. Besides writing articles to alert people to the hidden conservatism in various media reform movements, he emphasizes the importance of expanded citizen participation in media reform. He also points out that structural reform is the key to media reform and suggests four starting points:

1. establishing non-profit and non-commercial media;
2. strengthening public broadcasting media;
3. regulating commercial media to serve the public interest; and
4. implementing antitrust measures (McChesney 1999, 305-314).

Structural reform is necessary to solve the problems in the media in Taiwan. But it does not (and should not) negate other forms of media criticism or reform; they should complement one another. Even those who propose structural reform do not think it will rid the media of all its ills, nor do they think that setting up a public broadcasting group will solve all the problems with media in Taiwan. Various other elements are needed, including communications education, awareness among communications professionals and workers, training in media awareness, and public campaigns for improving commercial media.

Historical Context: From State-Run to Capital-Run Media

Media policy under the Nationalist party-state since 1949 can be summed up as follows: First, laws and directives on the media outlined the specific missions and goals that the media had to fulfill. Specifically, Article I of the Broadcasting Act prescribed that broadcasting must promote Chinese culture and national missions (against communism and for Taiwanese Independence), and must defend and publicize government policies. Second, the government reserved the right to punish any infringements of media regulations by administrative decree rather than judicial process. Third, the party-state-military bloc was charged with applying prior censorship to all kinds of programming except the news. Fourth, from the outset, the party-state-military bloc incorporated itself into the management of the media, thereby securing both material and ideological profit from it (Cheng 1988, 39-40). According to media scholar Chin-Chuan Lee (1980), this “bureaucratic-commercial complex” (defined as a historic party-state-military bloc that holds commercial interests) dominated cultural consumption in Taiwan throughout the Martial Law period.

This system was established in the late 1940s and the early 1950s. Although the Nationalist Party, the Kuomintang, took over control of Taiwan in 1945 with the defeat of the Japanese, the first key event in the construction of this bureaucratic commercial complex came in early 1947. After suffering a whole series of abuses under their new rulers on February 28th that year, the Taiwanese rioted, and for several weeks there were all-out confrontations. To get rid of “malcontents” and contain the situation, the Nationalist Party had numerous media owners and journalists arrested or killed. A dozen or so newspapers went bankrupt or stopped publication as a result, and the newspaper sector shrank drastically (Chen & Chu 1987, 35). Then with the declaration of Martial Law in 1948, the Nationalist-backed state media quickly either started or supplanted numerous existing publications with state-run media in order to take control of the press. After final defeat in the 1949 Chinese civil war and its forced retreat to Taiwan, the KMT needed to establish its legitimacy quickly; control of the media and propaganda were central for doing so. The government banned the establishment, management, and circulation of independent newspapers and used the public media as a secondary system of authoritarian control. Through press censorship and all kinds of rules and regulations, such as the Publications Act, Radio and Television Act, and Betrayers Punishment Act, the state not only restricted media development but also played the dual roles of media regulator and manipulator. On the one hand, the government controlled speech and regulated media content and on the other deployed various reward measures to bend the media to its will.

Moreover, the “triple alliance” of the Nationalist Party (KMT), the government, and the military was directly involved in media management and controlled the capital and/or personnel policies of media outlets (Wang 1993, 474-435). During the Martial Law period, 31 newspapers, 33 radio stations, and three individual broadcast TV stations operated in Taiwan. Most of these were owned or directly managed by the KMT government, and the rest were run by businessmen who maintained a good relationship with the KMT. The client-patron relations between the state and its minority elites that dominated the media defined it as an oligopolistic institution (Lee 2003, 36). The three broadcast TV stations had the most influence on the society. *TTV* was funded by the government and Japanese businesses; *CTV* was primarily managed by the KMT, and the military was the biggest shareholder of *CTS*. The boards of these three stations were composed of government officials, military intelligence workers, KMT party members, and businessmen with close ties to the KMT.

However, from the early 1980s onwards, the KMT encountered increasing pressure from both national and international sources, and by the mid-1980s, it quietly started on the path of liberalization. In 1984, when the government announced its policies on economic liberalization and globalization, it gradually began to loosen its control of the media (Chao 1999, 137). In 1987, under pressure from the domestic democratic movement and the U.S., the government lifted Martial Law and opened up opportunities for civilians to participate in decision-making. It also opened up the media market to capital. The abolition of press censorship on January 1, 1988 ended more than 40 years of party-state control over newspapers, and between 1990 and 1994, radio and TV were gradually deregulated. In October 1992, the Government Information Office announced its timetable to make available local-range FM radio frequencies, and in February 1993, 28 medium-strength FM services were released, signaling the first wave of broadcast radio stations open to the public since the freeze on transmission licenses in 1949. The same year, the Legislative Yuan also passed the Cable Broadcasting and Television Act, legalizing cable TV stations. In 1994, the fourth broadcast TV station was launched. By 1995, when then Vice President Lien Chan proposed “competition policy as the principle, assisted by industry policy,” competition had become the central axis of economic policy (Kuang and Chang 2005), and the media industries had been liberalized.

However, media liberalization in Taiwan has thus far produced far from satisfactory results. Not only has it drawn constant criticism, but the public has come to regard the current state of the media as a source of what is wrong with society in Taiwan. Furthermore, despite longtime demands that the triple alliance of the KMT, the government, and the military step down from the three television broadcast stations and lift media censorship, non-governmental organizations have been even more critical of the media that emerged after the end of censorship, which has prompted efforts to establish movements aimed at media reform. A number of different factors have motivated the media reformers. Some were media producers dissatisfied with their working conditions and the limitations imposed on their professionalism; some opposed the sensationalist content of the media; some, after the capital powers took control of the market, have attempted to carve out new channels of speech using new technology; and some social groups have switched to media education in order to cultivate analytical skills among readers, listeners, and viewers. There are also groups formed by communications scholars who directly critique neoliberal thinking and hope to rebuild the media system outside the logic of the market and so-called free competition.

Yet, even as the state relinquished control, media liberalization not only failed to stop manipulation by the triple alliance, it created a new set of problems. Consolidation and cross-ownership of different media became immediately visible in the ownership structure. Cable TV systems came increasingly into the hands of a few conglomerates,¹ and the phenomenon of the media franchise began to emerge. Through legal loopholes, the KMT was able to gradually pass the radio and television media under its control on to business groups that it trusted. This ultimately grew into the pro-China “Want Want Holdings Limited” that has ownership stakes in network TV, satellite TV, newspapers, magazines, and Internet media. At the same time, ostensibly to propel Taiwan towards globalization, the

¹ Some of these corporate conglomerates are mainly media companies, but others built their empires on other unrelated industries such as construction and cement manufacturing.

government opened media ownership to foreign interests. But the government's reluctance to regulate foreign investors enabled local capital to set up subsidiary companies overseas disguised as foreign capital in order to invest in the Taiwanese media. At the same time, international capital has gradually gained more control of media in Taiwan; private equity and international capital, particularly MBK, The Carlyle Group, and Macquarie Bank Limited, have bought into Taiwanese media piecemeal through finance strategies and multi-level stock pyramids. Moreover, while there is no clear evidence of Chinese capital investing in Taiwanese media, Chinese companies are advertising in Taiwan, and some Taiwanese media are leaning toward China, whether for reasons of market profit or political ideology, giving the impression that Chinese capital is quietly invading the Taiwanese media.

Even though Martial Law has ended and the state no longer imposes direct censorship on the press, the diversification of Taiwanese media has not lived up to society's expectation. The government allocates a generous budget to buy off news media with "placement marketing," whereby the media publishes government propaganda adverts in the form of news, which blurs the line between the news and the hidden political propaganda and ideology. Under the newly developed capitalist system, the ruling elite are able to manipulate media legislation and quietly control the media, thus not only continuing the propaganda of the Martial Law period, but also weakening the media's ability to monitor government. At the same time, the media market, liberated from the state's grip, has suppressed new voices with less economic power, especially residents suffering from long-term industrial pollution, farmers whose lands have been expropriated for industrial development, and minority groups based on class, sexual orientation, immigration status, and ethnicity.

This scenario contravenes the principles of equitable access to the media, cultural diversity, and democratic values. However, it is predictable given that the neoliberal state apparatus of Taiwan forms a complex and symbiotic relation with capital, whereby political and commercial powers are intertwined (Lee 2003, 36). Within this environment, media reform movements are pushing for ideals such as professionalism, opposition to government control, and pluralism in choice. The goals and strategies of various media reform groups are distinct but sometimes overlap. Sometimes the groups support and assimilate one another, and sometimes they pursue parallel paths. Among these media reform movements, the movement for public service broadcasting independent of both the state and capital is the most remarkable. Other significant media reform efforts that are taking place in Taiwan are the rise of media content monitoring and alternative media and citizens' journalism.

The Movement for Public Media in Taiwan

At the end of the 1980s, despite (or perhaps because of) the gradual liberalization of the press, reforms in broadcast media were progressing at a much slower pace. The state still had an absolute advantage in terms of shareholding and appointing personnel at the three broadcast TV stations. Political regulations and maneuvering were still active, and the three broadcast stations still behaved as ideological apparatuses of the state. Social and political opposition movements, having experienced unfair coverage in TV news, started applying pressure for changes in broadcast television. A new alliance formed by academics and social activism groups also proposed reform, specifically of broadcast television stations'

performance and ownership structure. In 1995, these “liberal” scholars and social activism groups banded together and organized a march, demanding that the triple alliance give up their shareholdings in the broadcast media to ensure that no particular political party could control the media. Their main agenda, clearly influenced by the thinking about privatization and liberalization that originated in the West in the 1980s, was to privatize the stations through stock offerings and media liberalization.

However, some media scholars and students, including a media reform group called the Solidarity of Communication Students, saw this agenda as problematic. They emphasized that it was also crucial to prevent the corrupt practices that can accompany the release of network television shares into the public domain. They argued that corporate ownership of the party- and state-owned broadcast media was equally (if not more) threatening to the public interest. Once the network TV stations in Taiwan became privatized, even with diversified shareholding, they argued, there would be no guarantee that one major shareholder could not control the entire board. In other words, the broadcast media would simply go from being controlled by the triple alliance to being monopolized by conglomerates, inhibiting the media’s potential to serve the interests of the general public. The Solidarity proposed public broadcasting and the protection of minority groups so that the media managed by the KMT and the government would become public property. However, this proposal did not get support from others within civil society or the government.

Later, witnessing the growing problem of the conglomeration and centralization of the media, some socialist-leaning scholars formed groups such as the Campaign for Media Reform and Taiwan Media Watch. They proposed enlarging the *Public Television Service (PTS)*, which was launched in 1997, unifying existing national broadcast resources following the example of public service broadcasters around the world, especially the U.K.’s *BBC*. They also promoted the integration of network TV, radio stations, and minority channels into a public-owned, independent, diversified, and competitive “Public Broadcast Television Group” and called for increased funding from the government. As a result of widespread efforts from non-governmental organizations, at the beginning of 2006, the Legislative Yuan passed the Act Governing the Public Shares of Network Television with the promise of integrating mostly military-owned *CTS* and minority channels such as *Hakka TV*, *Taiwan Indigenous Television (TITV)*, and the existing *PTS* into the Public Broadcast Television Group.

Unfortunately, this development was little more than a political white-wash, and it weakened the media reform movement. The law was not revised to facilitate an actual integration of the different media, and a lack of stable, long-term funding has created operational difficulties. The Legislative Yuan, controlled by a KMT majority, kept freezing the budget of public media in an attempt to undermine it. Similarly, the political authorities have never relinquished control over the Public Broadcast Television Group. Indeed, the head of government still interferes with the operation of the public media through budgets, personnel appointments, and legal revisions, and social activists are still fighting against such political control. In other words, the formation of the Public Broadcast Television Group has not yet led to a full-fledged and well-functioning public service broadcasting service due to insufficient funding and a lack of institutional guarantees that would ensure political independence and public accountability.

Although the public broadcasting movement has pointed media reform and development in an important direction, certain weaknesses have reduced its efficacy. For the most part, the public broadcasting movement was formed by college professors, students, and media professionals. They have campaigned via letters to the press, speeches on campus, press conferences, electronic newsletters, research, and by lobbying legislators and the executive. While their knowledge, research, and social status make them an obvious choice when the political authorities need someone to consult, these scholars run the risk of becoming co-opted by the state or party for fear that they will no longer be consulted if they advocate for something the ruling establishment deems unacceptable.

Policy analysis and lobbying may have an important role. But linking up with other social forces is crucial to prevent the structural reform movement becoming the struggle of and for an intellectual and cultural elite. Effective media reform requires engaging with the public at the grassroots level, getting to know what citizens view as priorities, and rallying their involvement. Academics do not necessarily see the importance of this work, and the demands of their own institutions often limit their dedication to grassroots campaigning. These factors account for the distance between this media reform group and the public. As a result, the demand for public service broadcasting in Taiwan has lacked and still lacks popular support from ordinary people. Media scholars involved in the campaign for public media should ask the following questions: How can we expand the social foundations of public service broadcasting? What can we do to relate the ideal of public media to grassroots concerns? How can we better communicate with the public in language the public finds easier to understand? The campaign for public media can only succeed when all these questions are properly addressed; until then it will remain an unfinished project.

Citizens' Concern for Media Content

Although the public broadcasting movement addresses some aspects of media liberalization in Taiwan, it does not resolve the problems that result from the commercial media's abusive infringement on minority groups and their lack of equitable access to the media.

Most of the private-owned and market-driven media consider profit-making their top priority. The commercial media market in Taiwan is arguably the most competitive in the world: Taiwan, albeit geographically small, has more than 200 commercial satellite TV channels and nearly 200 radio stations. Eight of the TV channels are 24-hour news channels that broadcast low-cost, low-quality, and homogeneous news items. In this scenario, media management try to survive by appealing to the baser instincts of human fascination with spectacle and the suffering or humiliation of others. Thus commercial media outlets resort to sensationalism, invasion of privacy, and mocking minority groups, all to vie for viewers' attention to boost ratings, while challenging the bottom line of traditional media ethics and lowering production costs. The lack of a coherent policy on media standards has led to inferior programming with unoriginal content that emphasizes bullying and humiliating minority groups. The April 2002 issue of *CommonWealth* ran a special feature titled "The Mentally Disabled Media," which showed that sensationalist media content had become a significant instigator of social disturbances. This problem is clear to many people, and for most media critics is the easiest point of attack.

In light of this phenomenon, many NGOs formed after 1999 began to periodically monitor and critique news, dramas, and variety shows. They published reports based on media content monitoring to provide people with a proper channel for filing complaints; held press conferences to call attention to broadcasts of inappropriate content; and even organized people to protest directly against some media management. Initially, this movement focused on ethical standards, with an emphasis on “sanitizing” media content to protect minors. However, this proved vague and subjective and threatened to jeopardize free speech and suppress social progress. Moreover, although this approach reflects citizens’ impatience with maliciousness in the media, it is only a temporary deterrent. Once one issue has been addressed, another pops up as the media targets another group to offend. The cycle repeats itself like a never-ending game of “Whack a Mole” (Kuang 2004).

Nonetheless, content critiquing is an effective way to arouse public action against the commercial media, generate audience sympathy for exploited minority groups, and draw public attention to media reform. In fact, besides taking a moral stance criticizing sensational content, social movement groups have repeatedly taken action against news coverage that treats minority groups such as immigrants, gay rights activists, the mentally disabled, and indigenous people in a derogatory manner. Most notably, on February 18, 2006, a *United Daily News* (UDN) headline read, “Another Trouble Caused by Mental Illness,” the associated picture and content of which demonstrated discrimination against the mentally disabled. Taiwan Media Watch, along with mental disability advocacy groups, immediately demanded publicly that UDN correct the entry and publicly apologize to the mentally disabled. It also organized a network of bloggers to protest against UDN’s conduct. Within hours, UDN switched the headline to “Another Gas Explosion” on its web site. A few days later, after further pressure from civil groups and dozens of mental patients and their families, UDN admitted the inappropriateness of the news item. The same groups lobbied the Legislative Yuan, which eventually passed Mental Health Law amendments that ban media from using discriminatory terms to describe situations related to the mentally disabled and prohibit inaccurate or misleading information that encourages discrimination. This is the first law in Taiwan that bans discrimination in the media, and it results in fines for offenders.

In July 2005, 67 groups concerned with the media’s moral conduct joined forces to form the Citizens’ Coalition for Media Reform, which emphasizes human rights issues. The coalition stresses citizen-government co-regulation to control media behavior and demands that the media assume responsibility for democratic development through self-discipline. Among all the social activism groups in Taiwan, this coalition was the quickest to mobilize and has the largest membership (Tseng 2006, 164). The composition of this coalition shows an increase in public concern with media reform. It includes not just media reform groups, but also groups concerned with civil rights, children’s advocacy, community issues, healthcare, sexual orientation, the disabled, migrant workers, and immigrants. Clearly, the media under neoliberalism has stimulated widespread discontent among citizens.

The Citizens’ Coalition for Media Reform works to modify the structure of the media system within the National Communications Commission (NCC) and to monitor the content of satellite TV news stations. However, whereas the coalition has limited influence over the NCC, the “dialogue-style monitoring” adopted to communicate with TV stations has proven far more effective in monitoring satellite TV news stations and has been

successful in reducing infringements of human rights of minority groups. In response to long-term monitoring and protest, and to comply with the NCC's licensing requirements, the eight satellite TV news stations formed the News Advisory Committee. More than half of the 29 committee members come from the Coalition, and they represent the full range of its constituent groups. Coalition members demanded that TV stations set up specific guidelines to enforce self-discipline and include minority protection, because previous efforts under the News Self-Discipline Enforcement Guidelines had failed to control standards adequately, and issues of concern to citizen groups, such as a ban on sexual orientation and racial discrimination, were not included (Tseng 2006). The Coalition's demands, however, were at odds with management operations, since the stations were concerned that self-discipline measures would tame their news and result in lower ratings and declining profits. Following heated disputes and ongoing pressure from citizen groups along with some media supervisors' support, all these themes were eventually included. It was also decided that News Self-Discipline Enforcement Guidelines be included in employee training materials for all news stations and that minorities such as indigenous Taiwanese, immigrants, and gay people would be invited to give lectures and have direct dialogue with media workers. In effect, as a result of efforts by the Citizens' Coalition for Media Reform, satellite TV news stations made the first self-discipline guidelines based on human rights in Taiwan. Their News Advisory Committee meets every two months to hold face-to-face dialogue with human rights groups such as the Citizens' Coalition for Media Reform. Together, they conduct internal reviews and discussions relevant to people's complaints. Even though news quality has yet to improve and news media still has not set up a forum on public issues, news coverage infringing on minority rights has become less frequent.

The "dialogue-style monitoring" adopted by the Citizens' Coalition for Media Reform provided the model that citizen groups use to communicate with media management. Furthermore, it has brought the media reform movement into the fold of the media itself. This contrasts with previous efforts by citizen groups, who had adopted an "outsider" strategy of protesting against media through research and studies, press conferences, letter-writing campaigns, monitoring, and reporting of offenses. In contrast, ongoing face-to-face communication exerts direct pressure on media management and forces them to respond to citizen's concerns as they arise. Moreover, the diversity of the "dialogue platform" brought together citizen groups to exert more "up close and personal" pressure on the media. The replacement of "fighting" with "dialoguing" in this media reform strategy enabled the disparate forces to overcome obstacles that had previously hindered actual change.

In sum, monitoring and dialoguing by groups such as the Citizens' Coalition for Media Reform resulted in media being less slanderous towards minority groups, but the prevalent political environment and market structure still limit improvement on key issues such as the accuracy and depth of news coverage, political bias, news placement marketing, and competition for ratings. Moreover, the lack of effective planning and control in communications policy, coupled with structural issues such as a monopolized and distorted market due to over-competition among media, must be solved together. These are fronts media reform movements still must tackle.

The Independent and Alternative Media Movement

The third branch of the media reform movement focuses on allowing social activists, citizens, and minority groups to speak for themselves by creating opportunities for alternative media and channels that facilitate public discussion of diverse social issues ignored by the mainstream commercial media.

The first major expansion of alternative media opportunities in Taiwan occurred in the mid-1980s and was closely related to the emergence of the political opposition movement. At the time, due to the triple alliance's media monopoly, the three TV stations all favored the government and portrayed the new social activism negatively, distorting public understanding of the social and political controversies that were broadcast. Alternative videos, unlicensed cable TV, and underground radio stations provided an outlet for people at the grassroots to voice their opinions. In an attempt to express their frustrations with the political and broadcast systems, many media, political, and cultural workers picked up their camcorders and went out onto the streets, into disaster areas, villages, and factories to record the rolling citizens' movement. They documented a range of topics related to grassroots organizing, including community efforts to provide emergency relief and the activities of environmental, student, farmer, labor, and indigenous rights movements. Some even promoted the ideas of political opposition leaders or showcased local cultures. By recording and circulating images and sounds, they became a tool for resistance: they exploded political myths, broke the state's control of social narratives, and assumed a role in educating and organizing the public. In this way, unlicensed cable systems and underground radio stations broke the KMT's decades-long monopoly on information and media.

But there was also an attempt to build a nationwide cable network and develop systematic connections (Wang 1993, 481). The underground radio stations paid attention to environmental and social issues and voices from minority groups. They permitted activists from environmental, indigenous, worker, women, and gay rights groups to speak through interviews and their own shows on air. Aside from being a political opposition/election campaigner/local culture promoter, underground radio stations also helped bring these social and environmental issues into a front against the powers of capitalism and patriarchy.

From the outset, most alternative media in Taiwan were born out of political reform movements, and they provided an alternative channel for those at the bottom to voice their opinions. On the one hand, with social activism and political opposition joining forces, alternative media became an important outlet of opposition opinions. On the other hand, the diversity and complexity of social issues and activism were further displayed when political opposition spoke up, giving society a chance to understand and care about those at the bottom and any marginalized issues.

After the 1990s and media liberalization, however, many underground radio stations started by government opponents and involved with the political opposition gradually became legal. As these media became mouthpieces for the mainstream political party, the few media that spoke out for minority groups gradually disappeared due to lack of funding.

The rise of the Internet and the availability of digital cameras have created another opportunity for the development of alternative media. More and more Internet users have switched from the role of traditional consumers to citizen journalists who produce media content. Whether as individuals or in a group, they participate in discussions on public

affairs and provide an alternative news viewpoint by producing citizen news (Thurman 2008, 140). The advent of citizen journalists has not only fostered collective cooperation and creation on the Internet, it also has erased the one-way relationship that formerly existed between the media and their audiences. With a camera or a cell phone in hand, people can report anything around the world. In this new productive consumption kind of thinking, an individual goes from being a consumer to become to producer. As Downing (2001) points out, a radical media orientation is necessary for the Internet, because it results from people's participation to create communication and interaction and thus is a force opposing the one-way communication model characteristic of traditional commercial media. In Taiwan, media focusing on topics ranging from environment, culture, labor, and sexual orientation have started showing up on the Internet, enabling ideals excluded by commercial logics to have a voice in cyberspace. These new media outlets not only serve as a channel for alternative opinions and minorities to be heard, but also actively challenge those in power. They never claim to be neutral and even view themselves as instigators of social activism working alongside activist groups. Therefore, police and government think these alternative media workers are in cahoots with demonstrators and call them "fake journalists." The authorities have often tried to restrain them from reporting and providing news coverage, which has led to numerous confrontations.

Some of the alternative media using the Internet as their main channel have used funding from individual donations or academic support, although these financial sources are limited and make survival precarious. There are also individual bloggers or independent reporters who work collaboratively or individually on different topics. Among these independent alternative media workers are environmentalists, students, doctors, retirees, and unemployed workers. But there are also a growing number of mainstream media workers who, unwilling to be mouthpieces for political or commercial powers, have quit their jobs in order to regain their independence and report online. They use digital cameras, the Internet, and features such as repost, resend, threads, bookmarks, or social networking media like Twitter and Facebook to get society involved. Some even use cell phones and Wi-Fi to provide real-time reporting on social activism, challenging the incompetence of the mainstream media's coverage of public affairs.

Take the case of the environmental movement, where alternative media have played an important role in providing information and generating mainstream coverage. Although the environmental movement has been one of the most prominent social movements since the 1980s, the mainstream media do not pay substantial attention to it. Instead of exploring the reasons behind disputes and introducing the voices of residents and environmental groups, most reports focus on scenes of violent conflict. Moreover, in general, the mass media coverage is shaped by the longstanding dominant ideology in Taiwan: economic modernization. As a result, government industrial development projects are rarely questioned in their reports. "Our Island" on *PTS*, an outstanding in-depth weekly program on environmental and ecological issues, is one exception. But in general, it has been the independent online media that provide news coverage on environmental issues. The Taiwan Environmental Information Centre, formed in 2000, is an environmental NGO whose website and e-letter provide a daily compilation of global environmental news and report local environmental events.² Another example is "Local News Network," a website formed

² See: <http://e-info.org.tw/>.

in 2005.³ Focusing on non-industrial, non-urban areas, it is an information platform that covers agricultural, environmental, and cultural news and stories. Another important source of environmental news comes from a veteran environmental journalist who quit her job and became a freelancer in 2008. Her blog “Environmental Report”⁴ reveals flaws in government development projects and attracts a significant number of readers.

The independent online media has also played an active and positive social role in responding to natural disasters resulting from climate change, especially during and in the aftermath of the worst typhoon in recent history. When Typhoon Morakot hit Taiwan in 2009, the exceptionally high rainfall and wind speeds exposed the maladministration and dangerous development of mountainsides, and tragically led to 673 deaths and 26 missing. After the flooding, mainstream media coverage of the disaster areas focused on images of devastation or confrontations between locals and officials and failed to provide essential information on rescue and relief. With the aim of boosting the number of viewers, some news media even went as far as faking news at the victims’ expense. Bloggers and Internet users, in contrast, linked up immediately to work together. Internet users all over Taiwan announced news of local relief efforts online to provide information all around the island. They visited victims’ homes to investigate events and even took on the task of coordinating relief. They drew on Google Maps and other open source software to integrate information, and their organizing and broadcasting skills and efficiency put both the mainstream media and official rescue operation to shame. Eventually their reports became a primary source of information for both mainstream media coverage and official rescue efforts. In the aftermath, as the mainstream media stopped reporting on victims’ lives and official rebuilding operations, bloggers and alternative media workers continued their news reports and even formed *88news.org* to keep issues relating to reconstruction alive.

A similar more recent case that attracted the attention of social activists, government, and the mainstream media was a news report placed on the Internet by an independent citizen journalist, entitled, “When the Excavators Came to the Rice Fields.” The context of this story is the tendency of the Taiwanese government, in the name of economic development, to expropriate farmland, which forces people to move and destroys the environment and agriculture. In 2010, a local government forcibly expropriated farmland to develop a high-tech industrial park. Excavators were ordered to drive into rice fields that were almost ready to harvest. Local roads were blockaded and media coverage was restricted, to the outrage of the farmers. Then an environmentally minded long-time citizen journalist called “Dinosaur” published the story online. Within days, hundreds of thousands of people had expressed their concern, prompting other independent citizen journalists and alternative media to take up and follow the story. They translated it into English, uploaded it to *CNN*’s website, and then the national mainstream media began to report it. The initial report not only allowed farmers and environmentalists to be heard by wider society and the government, but also indirectly stirred thousands of people to participate in the farmers’ demonstration, which took place a month later.

Taiwan enjoys the freest media environment and the loosest media control of any Chinese society in Asia. But its media and society are still insufficiently diverse. Whereas,

³ Local News Network: <http://www.dfund.com.tw/>.

⁴ <http://shuchuan7.blogspot.com/>.

political control and commercialism have squeezed environmental and social issues as well as minority and marginalized groups out of the mainstream media, the Internet provides critical alternative media and citizen journalism a space to grow. Irrespective of the particular goals of these groups, it has cultivated community strength, reported citizens' news, driven social reform, and criticized capitalism. Citizens now have a chance to represent their own struggles.

Undeniably, alternative media play an important part in social activism, and online media offer social activism the growing possibility of spreading the word and mobilizing people. But, social activists should not ignore the inherent material base of Internet activism and succumb to technological optimism. The risk is that participation in media campaigns may harm social activism. People may decide merely to get online to "participate" and "carry out" political action instead of showing up at real events. While this may satisfy a desire for social activism, there is a danger that the real on-the-ground work of social activism may suffer.

Conclusion: Rethinking the Media Reform Movement

This article has addressed three different branches of the media reform movement in Taiwan and the strategies they have adopted in striving for different types of media reform. Having participated in some of these movements, I also have offered critical reflections on the role these movements have played in the long-term process of reclaiming the media for the public interest rather than the vested interests of state and capital. Media liberalization in Taiwan has revealed the crudeness of mainstream and hyper-commercialized media. Despite their limitations, all the three movements have not only exposed the shortcomings of neoliberal media policies, but also give an impetus for the society at large to reform the media.

Up until around 2006, media content monitoring was usually from a consumer's standpoint, responding to the media's inappropriate behavior with monitoring and rejection. Since then Taiwan Media Watch and the Citizens' Coalition for Media Reform have adopted new "dialogue-style monitoring" strategies to have a direct conversation with media management and allow social and minority groups to get involved. But these "dialogue-style monitoring" strategies cannot solve all the problems caused by the market-driven media. Even though the mainstream media have eased up on slanderous reports against minority groups, restrictions imposed by political and market structures remain, leaving many problems unresolved, such as media monopoly, buyouts, and media workers' rights. Moreover, lack of effective planning and control in communications policy, along with the market monopoly and distortion caused by excessive media competition, also need resolution.

The public broadcasting movement has successfully promoted the merger among the *PTS*, the state-owned *CTS*, and other state-run channels into the *Taiwan Broadcasting System (TBS)*. However, the two main political parties constantly intervene in the operation of *TBS* through involvement in personnel decisions and budget control. Civil society obviously needs to focus efforts on preventing such political intervention to guard the independence

and the public-service character of *TBS*. Finally, the alternative media is expected to further flourish thanks to the Internet and video technology. Along with the growth of the number and types of alternative media, several NGOs and the *PTS* also endeavor to train more citizen journalists to report news from grassroots organizations and communities. They not only play an important role in circulating information in social movements, but also provoke mainstream media coverage from time to time.

However, the problems caused by market-driven, hypercommercialized media are varied and complex. Media reform should be part of the wider social reform in pursuit of democracy, freedom, equality, diversity, and environmental and social justice. Therefore, it is crucial to consider how we, the media reformers, can help varied kinds of social groups to speak for themselves in the public domain when we ponder the issues of media diversity and social justice. Furthermore, it is equally important for media reformers in Taiwan to mobilize other sectors and social forces. To have a real impact on media policy, media reformers in Taiwan must strengthen connections with other organized political forces such as labor, civil rights, feminist, and environmental groups. Social activist groups must also appreciate that as long as the media system remains as it is—failing to contribute to of the spirit of democracy and diversity—the influence of other social activisms will be limited (McChesney 2004, 297). McChesney pointedly singles out the importance of the alliance between social activism and media reform; he also reminds citizen groups of the need to regard media reform as their own concern. On the one hand, media reform is advantageous to expanding social activism and protecting minority rights; on the other hand, the two can combine forces to much greater effect. Independent of the primary focus of a progressive social group, its secondary agenda should be media and communication. As numerous authors have emphasized, if the media are not released from the grasp of capital powers, it is more difficult, if not impossible, to push for social reform (Herman & McChesney 1997; McChesney 1999, 2004; Kuang 2008).

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