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In defense of democracy: Taiwan's independent media

Trinity A. Price

Independent media in the Republic of China (Taiwan) is targeted by the unification efforts of the People's Republic of China (China). Taiwan's independent media is faced with propaganda, censorship, and disinformation attacks by China that aim to endanger its autonomy as a democracy. This article discusses relevant laws that protect speech and press freedoms as well as Taiwan's current defenses against disinformation that provide a framework for future resistance to unification.

Introduction

The Republic of China (Taiwan, ROC) actively maintains its governing autonomy in its cross-strait relations with the People's Republic of China (China, PRC). Taiwan's self-governance, proudly upheld through constitutional protections and democratic institutions, establishes the foundations for this independence and supports efforts of resistance. China continually pursues what it calls "re-unification" with Taiwan, creating tensions in vital sectors, including efforts to dismantle the independent media. Taiwan, however, continues to combat China's efforts through its democratic constitution and laws.

China's unification agenda has historical roots dating back to the Chinese Civil War (1927–1949), which established Taiwan's separate governance from mainland China. After the war, and then four decades of martial law, Taiwan's independent media emerged. A new and distinct pathway for media would follow. As a free press evolved, however, China's reunification agenda increasingly targeted Taiwan's media.

This article showcases how under democracy, Taiwan's democratically protected media, free and independent from governmental control, faces existential threats from China's systematic campaign of propaganda, censorship, and disinformation. Essential aspects of Taiwan's democracy, like freedom of speech and of the press, are challenged by Beijing's multipronged assault. Taiwan's innovative safeguards include constitutional protections for freedom of publication supported by legislative frameworks that encompass press freedoms. Analysis of Taiwan's ability to combat disinformation through law highlights promising countermeasures against propaganda and censorship—suggesting that even

against an authoritarian superpower, a young democracy's media institutions can develop effective resistance.

Background

During the Chinese Civil War, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) fought the Nationalist Party, Kuomintang (KMT), for control of China. In 1949, facing defeat, the KMT's leader, Chiang Kai-shek, ordered the KMT (including its army and followers) to flee to Taiwan, where martial law was then enacted (Kagan, 1982). The KMT opposed communist ideals, and, under authoritarian rule, Chiang Kai-shek wanted to ensure Taiwan's ideals aligned with the KMT instead of the now ruling party of the mainland. With martial law in effect, strict censorship was imposed and the Government Information Office controlled media regulation, leaving Taiwanese citizens no legal ability to influence media coverage (Skrzypczak, 2019). Martial law continued until 1987, and with its ending, the number of media outlets in Taiwan experienced an uptick thanks to less regulation by governmental authority. A competitive media landscape developed that further aligned with Taiwan's emergence as an independent democracy separate from authoritarian rule and China.

Taiwan's media landscape

Contemporary Taiwan has numerous media outlets that provide citizens with diverse content. Like most media outlets in the mid to late 1990s and early 2000s, print media (newspapers, magazines, etc.) was an essential part of the circulation of news, both factual and entertainment. By 2013, the top four print media outlets produced in Taiwan were *Apple Daily* (pro-independence; circulation, 380,000), *China Times* (pro-unification; 100,000), *Liberty*

Times (pro-independence; 622,781), and *United Daily News* (pro-unification; 150,000) (Hsu, 2014). These circulation data reveal that pro-independence print media reached significantly more readers than pro-unification publications. Broadcasting and radio also grew in Taiwan. As of 2025, there are 19 24-hour news channels. Such outlets attest to Taiwan's competitive broadcasting market and the numerous sources through which citizens can engage with news.

Media consumption patterns in Taiwan have evolved since the early 2000s, with changes in both offline and online media usage. According to a study of 2011 Taiwanese citizens by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (Lin, 2024), the top five offline media outlets (with weekly usage) are TVBS News (39%), Eastern Broadcasting Network (31%), Sanlih E-Television (SET) News (27%), Formosa TV News (24%), and Taiwan Television News (22%). Online, the top five media outlets are Yahoo News (44%), ETtoday (36%), TVBS News (28%), EBC News (22%), and SET News (20%). Social media is now included in the category of online media due to its impact on the way news is disseminated to citizens globally. Online media in Taiwan includes social media platforms, such as YouTube, Line, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook Messenger. YouTube is the most popular social media platform for news in Taiwan, with 46% usage among those surveyed (Lin, 2024). This diverse ecosystem of media outlets and their widespread usage reflect and reinforce Taiwan's commitment to democracy, freedom of speech, and freedom of the press.

Democracy, freedom of speech, and freedom of the press

When analyzing the relationship between media and governance systems, understanding the principles of democracy and their implications for media is beneficial. The United Nations (2021) definition of democracy includes “respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, freedom of association, freedom of expression and opinion, the holding of periodic free and fair elections by universal suffrage and by secret ballot as the expression of the will of the people, a pluralistic system of political parties and organizations, and free, independent and pluralistic media.” Specifically, a free, independent, and pluralistic media plays an important role by providing an outlet for diverse opinions that strengthen the democratization process. Media is then a mechanism to ensure public access to that diverse information, aiding in the development of personal political ide-

als and civic engagement processes like elections. Upholding a free, independent, and pluralistic media must then necessitate freedom of speech and of the press.

Freedom of speech is manifested in Article 11 of Taiwan's Constitution (originally adopted in 1947): “The people shall have freedom of speech, teaching, writing and publication” (Ministry of Justice, 2024). Since its inception, Article 11's application, specifically its connection to matters involving media, has transitioned with Taiwan's democratic evolution, which created justifications for what is protected under freedom of speech and press freedoms. Press autonomy is fundamental to a functioning media ecosystem and to journalists, enabling reporting and public information dissemination without governmental interference. Journalists play a pivotal role in transmitting fact-checked material that allows the public to be informed, make decisions, and reach personal conclusions on societal topics. For political matters, in particular, journalism's ability to act as an unadulterated source—free from governmental control—is essential to democracy. Taiwan's Constitution has enabled freedom of speech and of publication for its citizens, but China and the CCP attempt to dismantle those freedoms in pursuit of unification. Such actions are equivalent to attacks on Taiwan's desired form of governance, democracy.

In contrast, China operates under a one-party (CCP) authoritarian government. China's Constitution does include language guaranteeing freedom of speech and of the press, but in practice the government suppresses those rights. Freedom of speech and of the press are outlined in Article 35 of China's Constitution: “Citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, of association, of procession and of demonstration” (Congressional-Executive Commission on China, 2010). Despite these theoretical protections, the government uses several methods of censorship, like blocking online content and platforms that do not align with the CCP party's political interests. Journalists are also legally accused of “espionage,” “subversion,” or “picking quarrels and provoking trouble,” the three so-called pocket crimes, based on content that may not appear in support of the CCP party (Xu & Albert, 2017).

According to the standards of democracy outlined by the UN, the essential element—a free, independent, and pluralistic media—is missing, even with freedom of speech and of the press labeled in the constitution. The stark contrast in how and whether freedom of speech and of the press are upheld reveals

the fundamental governance difference between Taiwan and China. Unification between the ROC and PRC would translate to loss of freedoms, restricting democracy in the ROC.

The CCP reunification agenda

China pursues unification through systematic promotion of a pro-unification agenda across Taiwan's media markets. Segments of the media in Taiwan face illegal interference in the form of pro-unification ads and advertorials from Chinese entities. This interference has compromised the quality of information citizens receive and undermines journalistic integrity, leading journalists and citizens to look to Taiwan's press freedoms and laws (discussed later) that protect them from outside interference. China's ongoing interference in Taiwan's media is a threat to Taiwan's democratic society and its independent media.

As Taiwan's democracy has grown, so too has China's interference in media. China's efforts to undermine Taiwan's independent media have evolved over time, with documented evidence emerging in the 2000s of a media warfare strategy. Kerry K. Gershaneck (2021) of National Chengchi University defines media warfare as "using public opinion as a weapon by propagandizing and coercion through various forms of media to weaken the adversary's will to fight while ensuring strength of will and unity on one's own side" (p. 66). President Hu Jintao is a prominent example of a Chinese leader who engaged in media warfare against Taiwan. On August 12, 2004, at the Central People's Broadcasting Station's fiftieth anniversary of its first broadcast to Taiwan, then President Hu Jintao announced new goals for the CCP's unification strategy: 1) entering the island, 2) entering the household, and 3) entering the mind (Huang, 2017). This explicitly articulated strategy aligns with Gershaneck's concept of media warfare, demonstrating the CCP's deliberate use of coercion and propaganda to influence Taiwanese citizens and strengthen support for unification. In short, media warfare affects the kind of information the public receives as well as their views about Taiwan as an independent democracy. China's agenda to weaken Taiwan's independent media persists, calling into question the effectiveness of measures to protect Taiwan from China's reunification agenda.

Press freedom and governing laws

While freedom of publication is fundamental to press freedoms, interpretations of those freedoms vary. Wu and Lambert (2016) maintain that press

freedom "encompasses a country's legal environment, political pressure, and economic factors" (p. 36). In theory, press freedom exists in Taiwan, but interpretations of press freedoms can be driven by personalized views and the changing dynamics of these aspects within Taiwan's society. The vulnerability and strength of press independence then become debatable when powerful individuals expand their media ownership—such as Tsai Eng-meng's controversial 2008 acquisition of the China Times Media Group (discussed later)—while supporting political endeavors that oppose freedom of speech or of the press in Taiwan.

Within Taiwan's legal framework, scholars, journalists, and lawmakers point to six key laws that aim to protect press freedoms (Table 1), of which several should counter Beijing's interference in Taiwan's media. Three laws—the Radio and Television Act, Satellite Broadcasting Act, and Cable Radio and Television Act—are used to defend press freedoms in Taiwan in general. The other three—the National Security Act, Anti-Infiltration Act, and Acts Governing Relations Between the People of the Taiwan Area and the Mainland Area (also known as the Cross-Strait Act)—are utilized for limiting China's infringement on Taiwan's press freedoms. Sean Quirk (2021) notes that the Anti-Infiltration Act "forbids the receipt of funding, instructions, or donations from these 'external forces' to mobilize public rallies for election campaign activities, lobby government officials, or disrupt social order" (p. 554). With China actively pursuing its reunification agenda through propaganda, censorship, and disinformation, these challenges require robust legal countermeasures. A detailed analysis of how these threats affect Taiwan's media is pivotal to understanding attacks on democracy and how laws can protect freedom of speech and of the press.

Propaganda, censorship, and disinformation

Propaganda, censorship, and disinformation have infiltrated Taiwan's media via various channels, including media privatization, a particularly effective mechanism. Privatization is a business tool China uses to promote pro-unification rhetoric directly using Taiwan's media. Tsai Eng-meng, wealthy owner of the prominent food supplier Want Want, is an example. Tsai acquired the China Times Media Group in 2008, sparking controversy due to his alleged sympathies for the CCP and its pro-unification agenda. Note that in a democracy, opposing viewpoints—including those critical of democracy itself—are permitted in

Table 1
Taiwan’s legal framework protecting press freedoms

Law	Press freedom–related content
Radio and Television Act	Article 5-1: The government and political parties, as well as foundations established with endowments provided by them, and those commissioned by them, may not directly or indirectly invest in privately operated radio/ television businesses.
Satellite Broadcasting Act	Article 5: The government and political parties, as well as foundations established with their endowments, and those commissioned by them, shall not directly or indirectly invest in satellite broadcasting businesses. Unless otherwise provided by law, the government and political parties shall not provide endowments for the establishment of a satellite broadcasting business. Article 31: A satellite broadcasting business and the branch office or agent of a foreign satellite broadcasting business shall not have any one of the following actions: 1. To broadcast a program or advertisement that is financed, produced or sponsored by the government and is related to persons planning to participate in (a) campaign.
Cable Radio and Television Act	Article 10: The government, political parties, and foundations established with their endowments, and those commissioned by them, may not directly or indirectly invest in private system operators.
National Security Act	Article 2-1: Any person may not engage in the following acts for a foreign country, Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, foreign hostile forces, or various organizations, institutions, or groups established or substantially controlled by them or the persons dispatched by such organizations, institutions, or groups: 1. Initiating, funding, hosting, manipulating, directing or developing an organization.
Cross-Strait Act	Article 34: The goods, services or any other matters of the Mainland Area permitted in accordance with this Act may have their advertisement broadcast or published, or any other promotion activity thereof in the Taiwan Area. The content of the advertisement and activity referred to in the preceding paragraph shall not have...Any political propaganda for the Chinese Communist Party.
Anti-Infiltration Act	Article 1: This act is intended to prevent the infiltration and intervention of foreign hostile forces, to ensure national security and social stability, and to safeguard the sovereignty and liberal democratic constitutional order of the Republic of China.

Source: Ministry of Justice, 2024.

media under freedom of speech and press protections. However, Tsai’s case raised concerns due to his alleged connections with Chinese entities involved in illegal propaganda activities. Given that Taiwan, a young democracy, is still seeking to maintain its independence from China, it is also concerning to have a prominent media investor like Tsai (born in Taiwan) appear to embrace suppressing freedom of speech and of the press.

Tsai’s pro-unification stance became evident through his public statements regarding the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, which signaled alignment with China’s suppression of the press (Hsu, 2014). Tiananmen Square protestors in Beijing, advocating for reforms that included press freedoms, were met with extreme force from the Chinese military.

Many sources report that the number of deaths is unknown, with some estimates as high as 2600 (Lucas, 2009). An article from *The Washington Post* reports Tsai making the claim, “The fact that the man wasn’t killed (tank man) ... showed that reports of a massacre were not true: ‘I realized that not that many people could really have died ’” (Higgins, 2012). A prominent business owner acquiring an already pro-unification media outlet and then denying that lives were lost among protestors seeking press freedoms in China demonstrates pro-unification support that constitutes a substantial risk to Taiwan’s press and democratic norms. Investors like Tsai make it possible for China’s reunification agenda to remain prominent in Taiwan’s civil discourse. Thanks to Tsai, the financial leverage of China Times Media Group’s network and print me-

dia outlets was established, paving the way for future circulation of pro-unification propaganda and a means for censorship.

Censorship—journalists and media outlets

Media privatization creates fertile ground for censorship, particularly for journalists working for outlets with pro-CCP ownership. Some journalists may be in favor of pro-unification and the CCP agenda and rhetoric, but the way that much of this information is distributed has been traced to illegal and propaganda-related methods. The role of journalists as impartial actors in Taiwan's independent media then comes into question. Not all journalists may face censorship, but those who work with media outlets whose content involves politics or who have ties to the mainland can be susceptible.

A prominent reason journalists may be subjected to censorship is money paid by Chinese entities to media outlets in exchange for editorial control, essentially telling them what to say. Scholars have pointed to policies like the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) between China and Taiwan that enable censorship connected to financial incentives. By providing opportunities for Taiwanese investors and entrepreneurs to make business deals with China, the ECFA created a structure for China's reunification agenda, ultimately resulting in media censorship—as exemplified in Tsai's case. According to Huang (2017), the ECFA “required both sides to open up their service industries such as tourism, printing, print advertising services, computer and Internet service, finance, and retail services” (p. 35). This opening of services not only bolstered pro-unification messaging but also compromised pro-independence media outlets seeking market expansion in China. As media businesses sought to deepen ties with China, they entertained censorship requests; critiques of the Chinese government fell. Diminished criticism and acceptance of censorship undermine media pluralism and threaten media independence.

An example of media self-censorship for economic gain along these lines is SET, a pro-Taiwan television channel that hosted a show called *Big Talk News*, known for criticizing Beijing's government. Seeking to establish markets for their dramas in China, SET put a halt to the talk show (Huang, 2017). SET later brought it back in the wake of unexpected financial losses that came with the show ending. The significance of the action by the channel lies in how censorship, in the quest for opening Chinese markets, temporarily took away an important source of information for Taiwanese citizens that was not influenced

by China's agenda (Huang, 2023). A vibrant element of Taiwan's pluralistic media, SET nonetheless appeared willing to cede its position as an outlet that contributed to the media diversity necessary to enhance democracy. SET is just one example of a media company succumbing to censorship, with journalists reporting multiple similar scenarios of corporate financial interests driving content suppression. Related pressures also provoke self-censorship among journalists.

The combination of pro-unification media ownership, like Tsai's acquisition of China Times Media Group, and economic policies like ECFA has fostered an environment where censorship and self-censorship thrive. Journalists whose goal is to inform the public through factual reporting are now at risk of not being able to do so because of the business interests of media companies with close ties to China. For journalists assigned to political beats at these outlets, the daily reality of censorship directly impedes their ability to support democratic processes.

Propaganda and illegal content

Beyond censorship in Taiwan's media, pro-unification outlets have engaged in illegal practices by accepting paid advertorials from the Chinese government—often containing propaganda—and publishing illegal embedded advertisements. Propaganda is defined as “deliberately biased or misleading information to promote a political cause or point of view” (Office of American Spaces, n.d). Advertorials are ads that take on the look of editorial articles but are actually just another form of advertisement. Embedded advertisements are subtle promotions of ads. Both forms of ads share a common element: illegal actions by China and its affiliated Taiwanese media outlets interfering with Taiwan's democratic institutions. Examples of the illegal actions can be found in *The China Times* and *United Daily News*, which accept embedded ads sponsored and/or affiliated with China governmental promoters of tourism and investment in China (Huang, 2023). With the promotional content of the ads, it may seem that the topics are not an issue; but the fact that the ads were illegal because they come from Chinese entities signals their propaganda efforts. For advertorials, the content is not clearly marked as coming from the Chinese state, but illegal publishing is exposed thanks to whistleblowing by anonymous journalists who have worked for these outlets (Datt & Huang, 2022).

The question remains: What can be done about China infringing on Taiwan's press freedom and its goals of censorship and promoting CCP political pro-

paganda in Taiwan's media? A number of journalists, politicians, and lawmakers would direct attention back to the laws in place. These laws (discussed previously) provide mechanisms for Taiwan to protect its democracy against China's media manipulation tactics, as demonstrated by Taiwan's efforts against disinformation.

Combating disinformation—existing solutions

When disinformation appears in Taiwan's media, existing laws help safeguard Taiwan's democratic principles, including press freedoms. The spread of disinformation in Taiwan's media became a prominent concern during the most recent elections in 2018 and 2020 (research for the 2024 election is ongoing). Like political propaganda, disinformation also shows up in distinctively political contexts. Taiwan defines disinformation with the overarching characteristics of “1) false information, 2) motivated by malice, and 3) harmful to organizations, individuals, or social order” (Quirk, 2021, p. 550). Based on their definitions, both propaganda and disinformation threaten democratic processes by circulating information that is neither truthful nor intended to serve the public good. China, in employing propaganda and disinformation, seeks to further dismantle Taiwan's independence and promote unification. In response, the Taiwanese government and regulatory bodies that keep checks on media through the legal framework have successfully been able to track and penalize unreliable sources of disinformation.

One notable example of Taiwan's successful resistance against disinformation involves regulatory action against CTiTv, an ex-broadcast network owned by the Want Want China Times Media Group. Due to multiple violations under the Satellite Broadcasting Act, the National Communications Commission refused to reinstate the license of the network. One fine, which totaled NT\$1 million (US\$32,420), resulted from a political talk show on the network that interviewed a farmer claiming, “the price of pomelo was so low last year that 2 million tonnes of the fruit had to be dumped into the Zengwen Reservoir.” The comment was not fact-checked, yet evidence suggests that it “severely disrupted the agricultural market” (Shan, 2019). This example demonstrates the effectiveness of the laws that are in place in ensuring media accuracy and truthfulness. In the context of China's attempts at infiltrating Taiwan's media, Taiwan has shown that it can oppose disinformation with rigorous fact-checking at both local and international levels.

Taiwan government's successful strategies against disinformation during elections provide a promising foundation for addressing propaganda and censorship more broadly. If propaganda and censorship fueled by China's motives for reunification meet strict resistance from Taiwan, the continued predominance of freedom of speech and of the press is likely. Taiwan would then be able to maintain its independent government apart from China. Aaron Huang (2024) outlines Taiwan's comprehensive approach for combating disinformation through five strategies “1) systemically monitoring traditional media and social media, 2) debunking falsehoods by using truthful information-spreading strategies, 3) raising awareness of sharp power through a public health metaphor, 4) creating and enforcing laws to punish sharp power actors, and 5) collaborating with social media and messaging apps as well as their users” (p. 129).

The fourth strategy in Huang's framework emphasizes the importance of laws to counter disinformation. Indeed, the Anti-Infiltration Act initiated in 2019 was a direct response to the disinformation taking place in the 2018 election. The other strategies highlight the importance of public communication and enhanced monitoring efforts to ensure detection and prevention of disinformation. With these resistance principles, Taiwan has a structure to combat the CCP reunification agenda. By continuing public communication initiatives and enhancing monitoring efforts, Taiwan can resist attempts to diminish its independent governance.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the historical tactics China has used in hopes of dismantling Taiwan's independent media through propaganda, censorship, and disinformation will persist. Taiwan's ability to maintain its independence and remain distanced from China's goal of unification currently lies within its legal framework of press protections. While measures are in place to defend independence, Taiwan will need to continually be proactive in countering attacks. China will find new avenues to bypass these laws, and Taiwan must find new avenues of defense. These may take the form of creating more laws, amending other laws, new investigative measures, or new regulations not yet considered. The media influences the beliefs and societal order of a governing body, so if Taiwan's media fails against the attacks of China, its democracy will follow. Taiwan's government so far has withstood pressure for unification with China, and it is in the best interest of the self-governed body to persevere with diligent work toward these defensive measures. Democracy must prevail for Taiwan to exist.

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